



# **5 Cheat Codes to Winning at Life**

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# Introduction

# Introduction

Welcome, Player One, to a strategy guide for the game known as life.

As you've undoubtedly discovered, life can be quite difficult. The simple fact you are human means you've already faced unexpected challenges and extended periods of frustration. Even if that was just you and your mom spending 62 hours in labor to get you here.

Though, it's more likely that you're a bit older and have struggled with self-doubt, felt overwhelmed, and on more than one occasion realized you're out of toilet paper when it's far too late.

Yes, life is hard.

Life is big and complex. It's the largest open-world game known to date. We all begin with different settings and are dumped into a bewildering array of environments that can either give us advantages or disadvantages.

Because most people have trouble conceptualizing life, they therefore assume they have no control over it. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Life's game design is actually surprisingly simple. It is guided by a few basic principles that deliver seemingly random outcomes to its players. And it is the job of this ebook to help you make sense of that randomness:

**Cheat Code 1: Get Good at Feeling Bad:** Life is a never-ending stream of challenges that must be confronted and surmounted. This first section of the ebook shows you that having endless problems thrown at you is a good thing, for problems are what give our lives meaning.

**Cheat Code 2: Reset Your Mind:** This section is designed to give you surprising insights into the fundamental principles of how each and every one of our human brains work, so you can better manage your psychological health and win at life.

**Cheat Code 3: Manage Your Emotions:** Here, I will help you understand how to manage your emotions. This life skill is one of the most under-developed credentials out there. We all have emotions, and barely any of us know what to do with them. This guide will help you change that.

**Cheat Code 4: Achieve More by Doing Less:** This is a counterintuitive framework for improving your life with one simple idea: slow the fuck down so you can focus on what's important.

**And finally, Cheat Code 5: Don't Die Alone.** The people you allow into your life are one of the most important determinants of how you play this often lonely game called Life. This section of the ebook helps you understand how, just like life itself, all relationships have beginnings and ends. This is how to not fuck things up with the people you care about.

Ultimately, this ebook guide is designed to help you navigate through this shitstorm of a life with a little less pain and frustration than before you read it. I say just a *little less* because of course it's not humanly possible to eliminate all the burdens of life. In fact, in doing so, you'd only be inviting death. And we're not here for that.

Let's begin.

# **Cheat Code 1**

**Get Good at Feeling Bad**

## Cheat Code 1: Get Good at Feeling Bad

It's no secret that there's a growing "mental health" crisis. Rates of anxiety and depression are at all-time highs. Stress levels are through the roof. Suicide rates have been climbing in most countries. And what's worse, people are starting to experience anxiety disorders and depression at younger and younger ages.

Put another way, we are becoming less psychologically resilient as a culture. The word "crisis" used to be reserved for at least a million people dying—usually in a gulag or concentration camp. Now the word "crisis" gets thrown around like a football at Thanksgiving.

Everything's in crisis. Everyone's having a fucking crisis. Timmy got an F on his term paper. It's a crisis! Call his parents! Call his grandparents! Dig up his great-grandparents! His confidence is in crisis. His self-esteem is in crisis. Hurry, sign him up for an app that tells him how beautiful his smile is!

Our aversion to pain and struggle in any capacity has become so ingrained in everything we do that it's compromising our ability to learn, grow, and function as healthy and stable adults.

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***You don't build psychological resilience by feeling good all the time. You build psychological resilience by getting better at feeling bad.***

This point strikes me as so obvious that I'm still regularly stunned when I come across books, courses, and articles that take someone who has a crack-like addiction to receiving empty validation and then just sell them more empty validation. Timmy's problem isn't that he's sad that he got an F. His problem is that he's too busy feeling sorry for himself to fucking study for once.

But you're not Timmy. You know better. You know that to win at life, you must get good at feeling *all* the feels—take anger and sadness and make them useful and productive, experience failure and self-loathing and use them to improve yourself. It's turning lemons into a fucking pina colada. It's taking a paint can full of shit and rolling a perfect bowling strike with it. When you are sufficiently resilient, you become unstoppable.

It seems this is an ancient skill, a forgotten art. But fear not my intrepid shit-can bowlers, for I shall walk you through a few of the best ways to harness this wisdom.

## **1. Care About Something Other Than Yourself**

On August 1st, 1966, Charles Whitman, a former marine suffering from a complete mental breakdown climbed to the top of the 27-floor University of Texas tower in Austin, Texas with a sniper rifle, and began firing on civilians on the street below.

Over the next 96 minutes, he shot 45 people. Some died instantly. But many were left out in the blazing 100-degree (40 degree celsius) Texas sun for hours before medical personnel could get to them.

A college freshman named John Fox had been playing chess with his friend that afternoon when the shooting began. Thinking the shots were fireworks left over from the Fourth of July, he went outside to see what was going on. Soon, he found himself pinned behind cover, fearing for his life.

Minutes dragged on like hours. Terror and heat engulfed the city. John started having a panic attack. He became dizzy, his vision went blurry. He had trouble breathing. Desperate, he crawled underneath a bush to keep cool and hopefully calm himself down.

Then, he looked out across the mall—the large extended walkway in front of the tower—where half a dozen victims were lying on the sizzling concrete.



[“UT Tower”](#) by [Eric Borja](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#). Cropped from original.

That's when he saw Claire Wilson, a pregnant woman who had been shot. What's more, from his new vantage point, he could tell that she was still alive and moving. But barely.

At that moment, something came over John. Just as quickly as the panic and anxiety had consumed his body, something else did. “I just knew I had to do something,” he said. It was courage.

John collected himself, got up from underneath the bush, sprinted out onto the mall, and while putting himself directly in the sniper's line of sight, he and another student managed to carry Claire to safety, saving her life.

There are countless examples of heroism like this in the world. But what I love about this story is that it presents a nice dichotomy:

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***When we are focused on ourselves in a crisis, we become overwhelmed and we panic. When we are focused on others, we rise above our fear and act.***

A lot of what drives people's anxiety today is the constant rumination and focus on the self. We get a new job cleaning toilets. It's not the most glamorous job in the world but it's going to pay our way through med school. Then we wonder if people will judge us for our new job. Then we wonder if we should be worried about people judging us for our new job. But if we don't worry, then would we be insensitive? So, maybe we should care. But what if we're now overthinking whether or not we should care? And what if we're overthinking that we're overthinking? And what if our overthinking is making us care too much and—agh!!! Quick, where's the valium?

When we are anxious, we become obsessed with preventing pain. Instead, we should be *preparing* for pain. Guess what? Little Timmy is going to get an F some day. Every child fucks up one way or another. The question is, are you going to be prepared to help him learn from his mistakes? Or are you going to be one of those parents leaving angry voicemails for his teacher?

The way we orient ourselves towards preparation for pain rather than prevention is to simply have a larger goal in life than feelings or pain. If you make your career the top priority in your life, then you don't fucking care if people judge you for leaving this job or that. If you make your child's maturity your chief mission, then a failed paper can help you on that mission rather than hinder you.

The easiest way to overcome that anxiety is not to get rid of risk, it's simply to make the risks worth something. Find some cause, some mission, some deeper purpose to your actions.

As Friedrich Nietzsche put it, “He who has a ‘why’ to live can bear almost any ‘how.’”

On that smoldering day in Austin, Texas, John Fox didn't get rid of the risk of being shot. Rather, he merely found something worth getting shot for. And that's what gave him the courage to move.

## 2. Focus Only on What You Can Control

I've got some good news and some bad news.

The bad news is that you pretty much control *nothing* that goes on in your life. You can't control what other people say or do or believe. You can't control your genetics, the circumstances you were born into, or whether your mom was depressed and your dad was an alcoholic when you were growing up.

You can't control the weather, the year you were born, the cultural values you inherit or the people you grow up around. You can't control almost anything that happens to you—freak car accidents, lightning strikes, flash floods, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, solar flares, or meteor strikes.

You cannot fully control whether or not you contract cancer, diabetes, lupus, Alzheimer's, or Hashimoto's. You can't control whether your kid dies, your sister dies, your friend dies, your friend's friend dies, or that guy you slept with in college dies in a freak ice fishing accident.

You can't control how people feel about you, what they hear about you, how they think about you, the way they see you, hear you, smell you, or even touch you.

You cannot fully control basically anything that goes on in this crazy ass world around you.

But here's the good news. The one thing you do control is far more important than all the others.

**“ You control your thoughts. You can always control your thoughts.**

The Buddha once said that when you get struck by an arrow, you are injured twice. The first injury is the physical injury, the arrow piercing your skin causing you to bleed. But the second arrow is our beliefs and thoughts around the injury. We decide that we didn't deserve to get struck by the arrow. We think about how much we wish we didn't get struck by the arrow. We wish the arrow had never happened. And for those thoughts, we suffer.

This second injury is purely mental. And it is optional.



Psychologists often talk about something called “pain catastrophizing.” Pain catastrophizing is when someone takes something small—like someone disagreeing with their point of view—and blows it up in their mind to the point where they believe their whole life is over. I’m sure you’re familiar with it, because in the age of social media people do it all the fucking time.

There are a few reasons people can be motivated to catastrophize. The first reason is simply that they’ve become so coddled and lazy and have nothing meaningful happening that the slightest inconvenience strikes them as a legitimate crisis. This is the explanation I explored in the second half of my book, *Everything Is F\*cked: A Book About Hope*.

But there are other reasons we catastrophize. One reason is that we can be socially rewarded for it via sympathy, attention, and a sense of importance. Many argue that social media has created a “victimhood culture” where people are emotionally rewarded for their grievances. Therefore, people unconsciously try to be as aggrieved as possible.

Catastrophizing can even be adopted as our identity—look at us, we’re that person who always has sOmeThInG cRaZyyy going on! That’s how our family knows us. That’s how our co-workers know us. That’s how we know ourselves. And, like any identity, we become attached to it and protect it. It provides us a sense of security and knowing.

The problem is that catastrophizing fucks us all up. It’s making Buddha’s second arrow far larger and more painful than the first. When the Buddha’s point was that there is no second arrow—that it’s invented in our minds—we’re like, “No thanks, check out how many likes I can get on Facebook if I turn this into the biggest fucking brouhaha the world has ever seen!”

One thing I try to remind myself is that there is nothing in this life that I have suffered that millions (billions?) of other people have not also suffered and survived before me. Pain catastrophizing, much like obsessive rumination, conceals a narcissistic core. It operates on the assumption that your experiences are singular and special, that no one could possibly understand the pain and hardship you’ve endured, that somehow the world has conspired against you and only you.

You cannot control your pain. But you can control how you think about your pain. You can control whether you believe your pain is insurmountable or whether it’s a trifle. You can control whether you think you will never recover and be the same again, or whether you think you will bounce back fine.



***Because pain is inevitable, but suffering is only in the mind.***

### **3. Practice Inward Optimism, Outward Pessimism**

Marcus Aurelius, the great philosopher-king who ruled at the height of the Roman Empire, wrote of his daily routine, “When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I will deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous and surly.”

Well, put that in your morning gratitude journal and smoke it!

Marcus Aurelius is one of the most well-known Stoics. Unlike a lot of modern focus on happiness and optimism, the Stoics believed that one should practice visualizing the worst possible outcome of a situation as a way to mentally prepare yourself for hardship. The thinking went that if you could be comfortable with the worst, then everything else would be a pleasant surprise.



It turns out that there is some wisdom to this. While it is important to be optimistic about the things you control, being optimistic about the world outside of your control often just sets you up to suffer that much more when things don't go your way.

Another way to think about this is that it's best to be pessimistic about the actions of the world around you, but optimistic in your own ability to surmount those obstacles—outward pessimist, inward optimist.

An extreme example of this happened during the Vietnam War. Admiral James Stockdale was captured as a prisoner of war and taken to the infamous P.O.W. camp, "The Hanoi Hotel" in Vietnam. There, along with his fellow prisoners, he was chained, tortured, and forced into slave labor for many years.

Reflecting back, Stockdale later said that he never expected to escape. He didn't expect to be released or liberated any time soon. He expected to be there for many, many years.

Meanwhile, the soldiers around him remained optimistic and hopeful. They always believed that their liberation was right around the corner. Then when it didn't come, they were grief-stricken. As Stockdale later put it:

"The optimists were the ones who died. The optimists were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out of here by Christmas.' Then Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' Then Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving. And then Christmas again."

In the end, those prisoners didn't die from the torture or hardship, Stockdale said, "They died of broken hearts." They lost hope.

Meanwhile, Stockdale accepted his fate. He planned to be in prison for the long haul. And he decided, if he was stuck there, he might as well make the most of it. Over the next eight years, he developed coded communications, covert intelligence networks, and methods for smuggling supplies in and out of prisoners' cells. He'd later win the Medal of Honor for his courage.

"I never lost faith... I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into a defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."

He continued:

"This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality."

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**Those who are prepared for pain are the most resilient in the face of pain. Those who expect challenges are the most ready to face challenges.**

Therefore, an optimal mindset towards life is a dual-sided approach: an outward pessimist—"Life is fucking hard and the world is shit"—but internal optimist—"yet I can handle it, and I'll be better for it."

This seems to be the magical combination that wins at life.

## 4. Find Your Inner Masochist

The sick and twisted truth about human nature is that as much as we crave feeling good all the time, there's a small part of us that kind of *likes* the pain and struggle.

***“This is because the process of overcoming pain and struggle makes us feel as though we have lived meaningfully.***

The most important and defining moments in our lives are often also the most unpleasant: near-death experiences, lost loved ones, divorces and break-ups, winning an excruciating battle, or excelling through a nerve-wracking ordeal. It's through the hardship that we grow and change and later look back and become incredibly grateful for what we went through.

When I think about the most resilient people I've ever known, what strikes me about them is that they don't just invite struggle into their lives, they adopt an identity around their struggles. They allow themselves to be defined by their struggles.



Looking back, I think this is something I managed to do in my own life around work. I remember when I first started my business in 2008, I would work twelve, fourteen, sixteen-hour days. I remember I used to fall asleep in bed with my laptop on my stomach at night, and then wake up the next morning and immediately pick up my work where I left off.

Originally, I worked these insane hours out of pure terror and necessity. I was broke. The economy was in the toilet. I had nowhere to go. I lived on a friend's couch and then later was supported by my girlfriend. Most months I couldn't help out with rent. Some weeks I could hardly even feed myself. But I was determined that if I failed, it would not be because I didn't try.

It sucked, but as time went on, these insane work marathons began to feel normal. Then I realized that I had unintentionally developed a kind of superpower that I've had ever since.

I remember a few years later, staying with some friends in a coworking house at the beach, realizing that I was up before anyone in the morning and the last to close my laptop at night. I would work through weekends and holidays without knowing they were weekends and holidays. With time, it became something that I took pride in, a facet of my identity that I enjoyed indulging. I was the guy who would outwork anybody, who was tireless, who would fall asleep at the keyboard.

Now, obviously there are downsides to workaholism. But these days it's something I've learned to turn on and off, like a switch. It's there when I need it. And I'm still proud of it. I still get a sick pleasure out of it. To this day, I'm strangely proud when I cordon off an entire day in my weekend to work. Nobody knows. Nobody cares. But I know, and I care. And it makes me feel good.

It's my little piece of masochism. The voice inside myself that says, "Yeah, choke me, bitch! Fucking choke me!" as I sit down for a six-hour work sprint on a Sunday afternoon.

We've all got that masochistic voice for something. Athletes find it in testing their physical threshold. Scientists find it in obsessively analyzing data. Soldiers and police have it for putting themselves in harm's way for the sake of others.

Where is it for you? In what way are you secretly a masochist? What pain do you get a sick pleasure out of? And how can you leverage that to benefit you when the challenges come?

## 5. Never Suffer Alone

Everyone knows that the first lesson of investing is to diversify. You don't want to put all your money into Apple because if Tim Cook goes bonkers and decides to release iToothpaste, then your retirement savings are screwed.

Instead, you're supposed to spread out your investments across dozens or even hundreds of investment vehicles. That way if something unexpected happens—\*cough\* like a pandemic \*cough\*—not all your money goes down the same toilet.

You can kinda think of human relationships the same way. Each of us is forced to be invested in ourselves. If good things happen to us, we feel good. If bad things happen to us, we feel bad.

But as we go through life, we can also build relationships with others. Building relationships is like investing a small percentage of our happiness in this other person, and receiving an investment of some of their happiness in us in return. This allows us to diversify our happiness across many people in many different aspects of life. And this diversification makes our own emotional health more resilient when difficulties in life come.



You want a strong network of relationships because when life comes along and knocks you on your ass—and trust me, it will knock you on your ass—you want an emotional safety net of people who can step in and share a bit of the emotional burden with you.

You want people who will listen and care and sit there and drink eight beers with you even though they know they're going to feel like ass in the morning. You want people who will call and call again, even when you're being a dickhead and wallowing in your own self-pity.

Because no matter how big of a badass you think you are, none of us can stand up forever on our own. As human beings, we are evolved to be somewhat emotionally dependent on each other, to rely on each other and need each other, especially in our most trying times.

If you are currently suffering, the most valuable thing you can do is reach out and connect with someone, talk about your problems, and share your pain. It's the most necessary ingredient to coping with any sort of psychological trauma.

And if life is fucking great and you're kicking ass right now—awesome! But use this time to build those connections, to share in the ass-kicking goodness, to diversify your emotional investments and create that support network. Because the good times never last. And the next time a crash comes, the last thing you want is to be down in the hole, all alone.

But more on having strong relationships as a cheat code later.

# **Cheat Code 2**

**Reset Your Mind**

## Cheat Code 2: Reset Your Mind

In the meantime, let's stay on diversification. It turns out—as you're about to see in the following true story about a man who wishes to die—that diversification is key not only to being a resilient motherfucker, but also to having a well-functioning mind.

This is where you begin the journey to mastering Cheat Code #2 and resetting your mind. Ready or not, here it comes.

### 1. Diversify Your Identity

Say what you will about Tony Robbins (opinions range from him being a complete hack to the second coming of Jesus Christ; my opinion is somewhere in the middle) but his seminars are never dull. The same way a teenage girl might find herself glued to an America's Next Top Model marathon, you'd also be hooked if you stumbled upon a Robbins seminar on television. The guy knows how to market helping people.

For the uninitiated, Robbins' seminars have a portion where people in the audience stand up and address their personal issues with Tony one-on-one, in a kind of private counseling session... in front of 2,000 other people. Tony manhandles their emotional worlds, reshaping their realities in front of your eyes, all to thunderous applause. Whether it's genuine or not, it's never boring, and it's usually educational.

In one seminar, a middle-aged man in the audience stood up and confessed that he was suicidal. He then shared his story: he was a finance guy, a very good finance guy. He made a fortune and not only that, but his friends and family members gave him their savings to manage and he made them fortunes as well. His entire life he had been successful and made a lot of people a lot of money.

And then one day he lost it all.

When prodded by Robbins, his reasoning for wanting to kill himself was that his life insurance policy would pay enough to support his wife and children after he was gone, whereas if he stayed alive, his family would be saddled with debt and left broke. When Robbins threw out the obvious point that while his kids would grow up with financial stability, they wouldn't have a father, the man calmly asserted, "Yes, exactly. That's the idea."

What immediately strikes you is this man's dumbfounding belief that his kids need financial stability more than a living father. And it'd be easy to discount him as a loony for that and be on our merry way.

But if we take a moment and empathize with him and dig a bit deeper into his motivation, we discover something important about his self-perception: This man perceives the value of his own life to be nothing more than financial.

He has no sense of value in himself as a father, husband, friend, companion, not to mention any other skills or hobbies. It's not just that he thinks his kids would be better off with money than with him, it's that he believes his *only* value as a person is his ability to make money.

This man had never emotionally invested himself or identified with his roles as a father, a husband, a friend, a colleague—he had invested all of his identity (and time and effort) in making money and becoming rich. Then once his wealth vanished, so did his entire sense of self.

**“Whether consciously or unconsciously, we all choose what's important to us. We choose the measuring sticks with which we measure success and our self-worth”**

Common measuring sticks people often choose include: being professionally successful, being highly educated, making a lot of money, being an excellent father/husband, being pious and faithful in a chosen religion, being socially and/or sexually popular and desired, being physically attractive or beautiful, and on and on.

Whatever we choose to judge our self-worth by, be it how big of a fan we are for our favorite sports team or making more money than any of our friends or getting more attention from the opposite sex, we are choosing in which way we want to receive validation to feel good about ourselves. Like a mural, whatever you choose to value and receive validation from conglomerates into your overall identity.

In the case of the man in Robbins' seminar, he lived an entire life that reinforced his identity as a man who could make money. He worked 100 hour weeks for decades. He made millions. Everyone knew him as the man who could make money and he did. Many of them knew him and liked him because he could make money.

This constant reinforcement and lack of diversity in his life eventually warped his self-perception away from being a father, a husband, a friend, a role model, and instead he became a walking bank account. That's all that came to matter to him and his identity. He had nothing else going for him because he never invested in any other aspects of his relationships. And when the money went, so did his self-worth along with it.



Many years ago, the thought of my business going under terrified me. I stayed up entire nights worrying about if a new web page would make me money or not. When they didn't I would lose sleep again trying to figure out why.

Ironically, now that I'm successful in business, my identity isn't as invested in it, and if it failed tomorrow I don't think I'd be as devastated now as I would have been then. Why? Because I've diversified my identity. I'm a husband, an author, a Youtuber, a podcaster. I have a wide array of friends of varying lifestyles. If my business crashed, it would surely suck and be stressful—the livelihood of my employees depends on it—but I imagine emotionally I would hold up much better.

What do you care about? I mean, what do you *really* care about? Invest yourself in a wide range of areas. If you like music, start attending concerts or learn an instrument. Don't just travel as a vacation, but invest in learning about the cultures. Learn a new language. Make time for old friends. Pick up new hobbies. Get competitive in something. Expand yourself beyond your work and your relationships. Go out for no other reason than to be with your friends. Learn how to dance. Take some time off work. Attend a meditation retreat.



***And don't just do something else, but care about it, invest yourself in it.***

Lest you become like our finance guru at a Tony Robbins seminar. Because chances are, Superhero Robbins is not going to be around to save you.

## **2. Things Are Never As Bad As They Seem**

I remember, back in 2008, walking into my manager's office at the investment bank I worked at for all of three weeks and proudly declaring that I quit. I had just come up with an idea for an internet business that I thought was going to earn me a full-time income within a few months. (It would go on to make about \$400... total.)

I remember that summer, working tirelessly on my friend's futon, watching my bank account fall deeper and deeper into the red, having idea after idea fall flat, being utterly convinced that I had just ruined my life.

I remember that next winter, while being supported by a (very patient) girlfriend, coming up with an idea for a video platform, teaching myself how to code it, and actually believing I was going to be a millionaire within a year. (Spoiler alert: I wasn't.)

I remember in 2009 the first time someone plagiarized me, thinking that my whole career was over. I was too dumb and broke to pursue any sort of legal threat. And I falsely believed that any good idea I came up with, someone with more money and more industry clout could simply steal it and profit off of it more than I ever could.

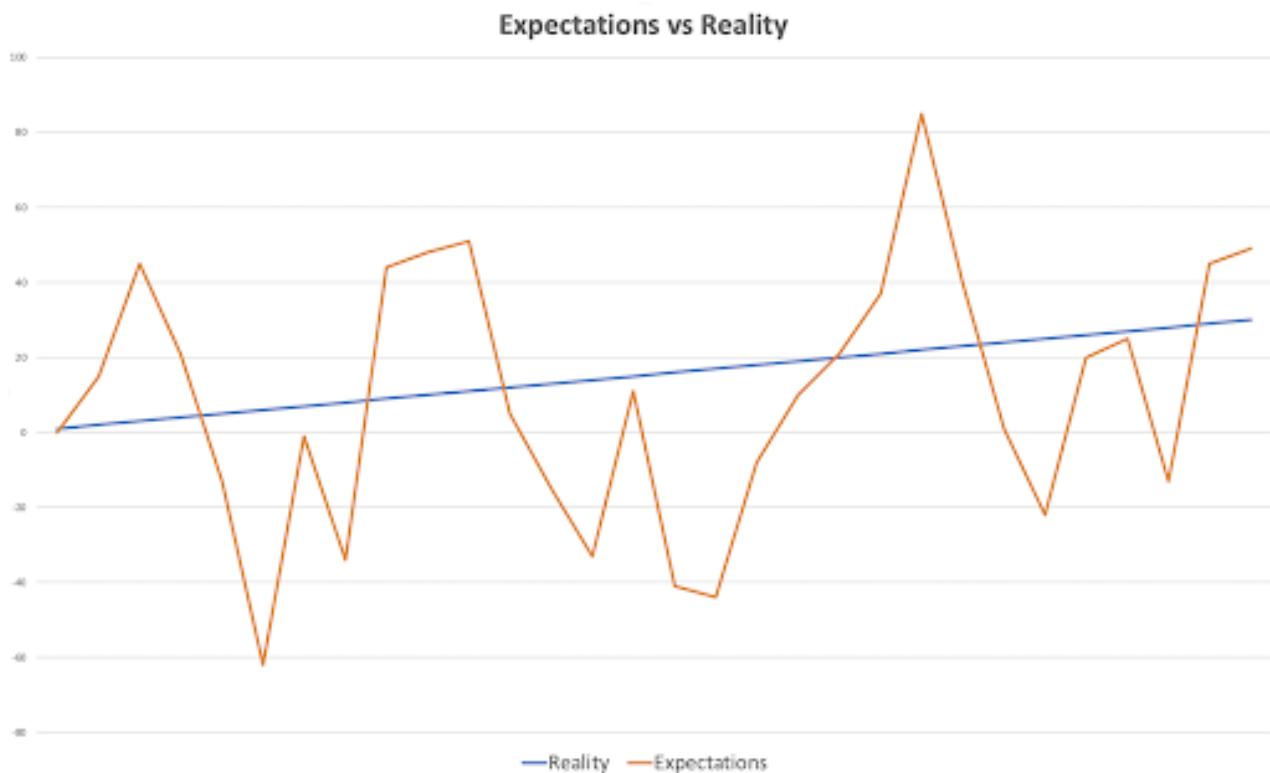
I remember the next year, finally producing my first successful product and earning enough money to move out of my mom's house for the second time, at age 26. It wasn't enough to live off of in the US, but it was enough to live off of in Latin America, which is where I headed. In my mind, I was living the dream and nothing would ever be the same.

I remember how within three months I got homesick and flew home, wondering what the fuck I had just killed myself working the past three years for.

Looking back, I lived those years on an emotional rollercoaster. One month, I was up, thinking I was the next Steve Jobs. Two months later, I was pretty sure I was going to end up flipping burgers for the rest of my life. Then, some new spark of inspiration would come, a couple of things would go my way, and I was back to imagining myself as the internet King Midas, everything I typed turning to digital gold.

Those times were turbulent and stressful. Yet, what's funny looking back, is that if you look at my actual progress, it was quite linear. In 2008, I made close to nothing. In 2009, I made about double what I made in 2008. And in 2010, I finally made enough to support myself (in Argentina).

If you graphed my expectations at the time versus reality, it would have looked something like this:



It took me a few years to recognize this pattern playing out in my life. And after a particularly dramatic month, I wrote a note to myself and put it on my desktop. It said:

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***Things are rarely as bad as you think they are; but they are rarely as good as you think they are, as well.***

This sentence became a kind of mantra for me. And I found it applied to many other areas of my life.

- People I thought were mega-rad and “the coolest person I’d ever met” rarely were, actually. To my consistent disappointment, they were flawed, faulty human beings.
- People I thought were terrible people, scum of the earth, also usually weren’t. They had a number of redeeming qualities if you took the time to get to know them.

- Women I dated who I thought I was going to fall madly in love with, I usually didn't. In fact, I got myself into trouble a few times vastly overestimating my connection with someone and diving in head first.
- Fights with family and friends that I thought irrevocably separated us from each other and would cause us to never trust or love each other again usually blew over within a month or two and everyone apologized and hugged it out.
- Things that went wrong on my travels—lost luggage, forgetting a beloved possession, wasting money on the wrong ticket, all things that I thought had ruined my trip—turned out to often be blessings in disguise.

Consistently, in each arena of life, things were rarely as bad as I thought—but they were rarely as good as I thought as well.

## Lopsided Delusion

If you think about it, there's a logic to this mantra: if we overestimate our positive emotions, then it would make sense that we overestimate our negative emotions as well.

Yet, I've found that many people seem to only overestimate in one direction, thus causing them to become emotionally "lopsided."

- **People who understand that things are rarely as bad as they seem, but don't understand that things are rarely as good as they seem.** These are the delusionally positive people that I often warn about in my books. The inability to be realistic about the positive experiences interferes with their decision-making and sets them up for failure. These people often become "addicted" to their delusions of grandeur and are always in need of some great vision to attach themselves to.
- **People who understand that things are rarely as good as they seem, but don't understand that things are rarely as bad as they seem.** These people are bad at parties. They are unbearably cynical and their skewed attitude is both a cause and an effect of depression. These people suffer because they are incapable of fully appreciating what's in front of them and/or they are constantly paranoid about how the latest threat is going to cause an end to life as we know it.

Obviously, the key is to be able to hold both realizations in our minds simultaneously. If our minds are poor at accurately predicting the effects of an event on our happiness, then they must also be inaccurate at predicting the effects on our unhappiness.

But people often avoid accepting both sides of this realization because they become attached to their lopsided views and make it part of their identities.

The delusionally positive person has identified as that person who is always doing something world-changing and, therefore, is hesitant to relinquish the idea that their actions are cosmically special.

The delusionally negative person has identified as that person who is always upset with the world and thinks everything is shit and nothing is ever going to get better, therefore they are hesitant to embrace the idea that things aren't as bad as they seem.

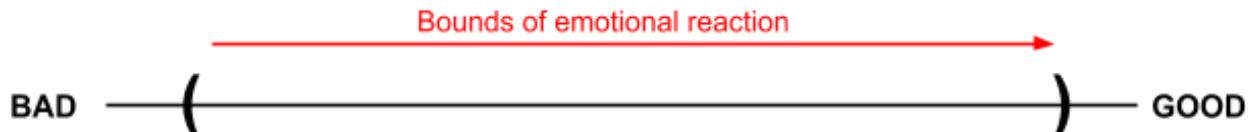
There's a satisfaction that comes with these lopsided mindsets. They make us feel special and different and subtly superior to others—as we convince ourselves that we are accurately seeing how good/bad things are and everyone else is mistaken.

But the truth is we're all mistaken. It's just that we hate admitting that about ourselves.

### No “Good” or “Bad,” Just “This”

Imagine our emotional reactions as occurring on a spectrum, bad on the left, good on the right.

This is what being delusional on both sides looks like:



Now, here's a lopsided negative person:



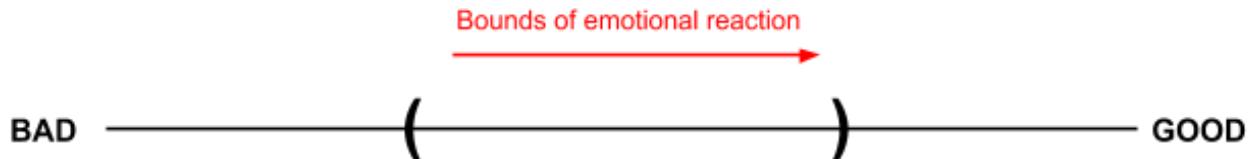
Their emotional range is limited on the positive side but overactive on the negative.

Similarly, here's the lopsided positive person:



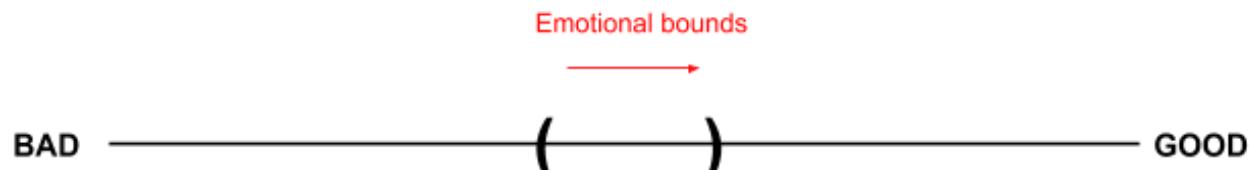
Their range is limited on the negative but full on the positive.

Now, here's our emotionally skeptical range—never too high, never too low:



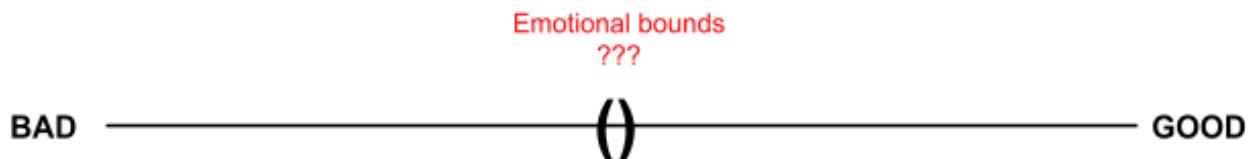
I suppose what I'm arguing for here is to bring in the bounds of the range of your emotional intensity to both positive and negative events. To understand that good things, while good, rarely effect permanent change in one's self or in the world, and similarly, bad things, while bad, rarely doom us to a life of misery or failure.

Okay, that sounds nice. But what if we bring this range in further?



This might be a person who is pretty much always even-keel. Nothing phases them too much, good or bad. There's a lot to be said about people like this, although it can also be healthy for them to learn to let loose a little bit at times, depending on the situation.

But what if we bring the range in even further? What if we bring the range in so tightly that the range is effectively zero?



You could call this “The Buddhist Argument”—to attach absolutely no value to any positive or negative feelings—to see them all as infinitely meaningful and therefore equally meaningless.

A lot of people who first get into Buddhism confront this “zero spectrum” argument and are turned off by the idea. They imagine that it will turn them into a boring, robotic, automaton.

But, actually, the result is quite the opposite. The Buddhist Argument isn't to get rid of all emotional reactions, it's simply to get rid of the meaning we attach to our emotional reactions.

It's the recognition that every event is both infinitely positive and infinitely negative. It acknowledges that all beauty and creativity requires destruction and that all destruction can potentially result in beauty and creativity. There's no possibility of one without the other.

And rather than experiencing a lack of joy or excitement, supposedly those who are able to achieve the “zero spectrum” nature of enlightenment will experience a boundless joy and beauty in every tiny experience, regardless of its apparent character.

So, in summary: less drama, more Buddha.

### 3. Let Go of the Need to Be Right

Ray Dalio is one of the richest men you've probably never heard of. But before he got rich, he went flat broke because of how right he *thought* he was.

In the early 1980s, Dalio was on the warpath, warning everyone and their financially unstable uncle that the stock market was about to crash and burn like it was 1929 all over again. Instead, starting in 1982, stocks went on an eight-year bull run and returned one of their best performances in history.

Dalio went completely broke betting against the market. And, more importantly, he had to avoid a lot of Manhattan cocktail parties for a while.

But after wiping the egg off his face, he realized it wasn't necessarily his bad hypotheses or incorrect economic analyses that made him lose every penny he had. Because, in the end, it turned out he was right. The economy *did* crash... eight years after he said it would.

No, it was his unrelenting belief in himself that he was right that made him go broke and look like a complete idiot.



Ray Dalio. Image: Wikipedia.

Dalio vowed to never let his ego overrun his decision making like this ever again. Today, he constantly analyzes even his most basic assumptions about the world and tries to poke holes in his own theories. He demands his employees—even his interns—give him brutally honest feedback about his views to try to prove him wrong.

He realized that he'd rather be challenged and proven wrong about his beliefs than cling to them in a desperate attempt to show the world he was "right."

He's now been an investor for over 50 years and has amassed a fortune in the tens of billions of dollars. Dalio's company, Bridgewater Associates, is one of the world's largest hedge funds and has consistently beat the market in good times and bad for decades now.

Anyone can survive a bad idea, a stupid mistake, or dumb risk or twelve as long as *you don't cling to the need to be right about your beliefs*.

The fact is, you, me, and everyone on the planet are almost certainly wrong about... well, pretty much everything. And we can never be 100% sure we're right about anything.

We can only learn from our observations and hopefully be a little less wrong.

Talking about being wrong, I've got a question for you. How many times in your life have you *felt* you were so right about something you jumped in with both feet and landed in a stinking pile of shit?

Cheat Code #3 is all about not doing that. We're going to dig into what emotions actually are and learn how we can manage them so we don't ruin our lives... like Lisa Nowak did.

# **Cheat Code 3**

## **Manage Your Emotions**

## Cheat Code 3: Manage Your Emotions

An astronaut is probably the most difficult job to land on the planet. Of tens of thousands of applications, NASA selects roughly half a dozen each decade. The application process is rigorous and highly demanding. You have to be a total badass to qualify. You have to have deep expertise in science and engineering. You need at least 1,000 hours of piloting experience. You have to be physically fit and strong. And, most of all, you have to be a smart motherfucker.

Lisa Nowak was all of these things. She had a masters degree in aeronautical engineering and had studied postgraduate astrophysics at the U.S. Naval Academy. She flew air missions for the U.S. Navy in the Pacific for over five years. And in 1996, she was one of the fortunate few to be selected to become an astronaut.

Clearly, she was smart as hell. But in 2007, after discovering that her lover was seeing another woman, Lisa drove 15 hours straight, in a diaper, from Houston to Orlando, in order to confront her boyfriend's new squeeze in an airport parking lot. Lisa packed zip ties, pepper spray, and large garbage bags and had some vague-but-not-really-thought-through plan to kidnap the woman. But before she could even get the woman out of her car, Lisa had an emotional breakdown, resulting in her quickly being arrested.

Every endeavor in life requires you to make decisions. And if you let your emotions consistently dictate what you do, you likely won't get very far. Hell, even one emotional mess-up—cue Lisa and her 15-hour kidnapping crusade—can wreck your entire career.

Cheat Code #3 will help you understand your emotions and how to manage them so you won't run off the rails like Lisa.

But first, what the fuck are emotions anyways?

### What Emotions Actually Are

Experiencing an emotion is kind of like going through high school: when you're in it, nothing feels more important. But when it's over, you're left wondering what the fuck that was all about.

Over the years, I've made a habit of criticizing our overreliance on our emotions. But the truth is, emotions *do* matter. They are incredibly important. They are just not important in the ways that we think they are.

Emotions serve a purpose: they are your brain's way of telling you something good or bad is happening in your life. They are feedback. Aaaaaand that's about it.

No cosmic significance of the universe telling you to go back to school. No fate trying to teach you a lesson. No wings of destiny carrying you away from your relationship. That's all shit made up in your head.



***Your emotions are simply feedback mechanisms designed to let you know whether things are going well or not.***

That's it. What you then do with that information is an entirely different matter (and *far* more important, as we'll see).

Emotions are a means to an end. They are here to help us achieve our goals and find a sense of purpose. They are not the purpose themselves. And that's where people get messed up. Most people mistake their emotions as the goals. That is, a lot of people think that their emotions are all that is important.

They're not.

Emotions are just these things that... happen. And then they're gone. And then another emotion comes along. And then it's gone, too.

## **What the Fuck to Do With Emotions**

Believe it or not, psychologists spend a lot of time coming up with lists of emotions and arguing which one is better. If you've ever wondered what psychologists do with their time, you wouldn't have guessed "publishing thousands of pages arguing about whether 'regret' is an emotion or not." But, there ya go.

Despite experiencing them every minute of every day, psychologists still haven't even settled what qualifies as an "emotion" and what doesn't.

So, for this cheat code, I've taken the simplest and most important emotions—the emotions that pretty much everybody agrees are emotions—and given basic pointers on how to manage them when they arise.

One key point before we begin: we are not trying to get rid of bad emotions and create good emotions. Not only is that impossible, but it often backfires.

Every emotion exists for a reason. Every emotion benefits us in some way. Our job—and the road to emotional maturity—is to simply learn how to manage each emotion, so that we can benefit from it.

This is important with negative emotions because negative emotions aren't fun. So, you better be getting something out of them.

But, surprisingly, getting the benefits of positive emotion is often complicated as well. So, let's start with the most popular emotion, that of happiness.

## Happiness



***Happiness has little to do with what path we choose in life and everything to do with how much control we take of our lives in getting there.***

Ah, the holy grail of human experience, the obsession and desire of every living person: happiness. I've written a lot about happiness over the years. And yes, even though I'm including it in this list of emotions, I believe you could argue that happiness itself is not an emotion.

Rather, happiness is a lack of other emotions. Happiness is kind of our default state—it's a lack of desire for change or disruption.

Pretty much every other emotion—especially every negative emotion—is predicated on something either changing in the past or something we'd like to change in the future. Anger desires to right the perceived wrong. Sadness desires to go back to a time before a loss. Guilt is a desire for self-punishment. Love is the desire for someone to flourish. Shame is a desire to escape the self.

Happiness is just... being.

People get so caught up in chasing the emotion they call “happiness” that they don’t take the time to, you know, just be happy. I mean, think about it, if you are chasing something, then you are desiring to change something... and if you’re desiring to change something, then you are, by definition, not happy!

So, instead of trying to define what happiness is, I’ve found it more useful to define happiness in terms of what it is *not*.

For instance, happiness is not pleasure. Pleasure is what we chase and fixate on to try to numb ourselves from the pain, boredom, and disappointment that are all just a part of life. If you want to feel pleasure, there are plenty of drugs you can go shoot up. Then come back and tell me if you’re really happy.

Similarly, happiness isn’t positivity. It’s not some divine, perpetual state of awesomeness you magically achieve once you’ve figured out all “43 Secrets of Being Happy” or whatever.

There might be some general principles you can use to have more happiness in your life, but there’s no tried and true formula. You won’t *finally* be happy if only you can get that promotion, meet that special someone, travel the world and the seven seas, have children, retire to the Hamptons, etc. Sure, each of these may make happiness more likely in your case, but they themselves are not happiness.

Everyone assumes their happiness is determined by where they’re going and can only be achieved once they get there. But research shows, time and time again, that happiness has little to do with what path we choose in life and everything to do with how much control we take of our lives in getting there.

## Sadness

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***Sadness is a sense that we have lost out on something. In this way, sadness—and especially inexplicable sadness—is an opportunity to clarify our values. And that's a good thing.***

Most people think sadness is the emotional equivalent of failure. They think something is terribly wrong with them if they get down on themselves for any reason.

Sadness, however, is simply our mind's way of telling us we lost something or someone important to us. We get sad after a breakup, after someone dies, after we lose a job, after someone rejects us, after we don't get invited to the St. Patty's Day parade. Whatever.

Sadness is a sense that we have lost out on something. In this way, sadness—and especially inexplicable sadness—is an opportunity to clarify our values. And that's a good thing.

I like to think of sadness as an invitation to self-inquiry. Try to dig into what you felt you lost. What was it about the relationship that felt so important to you? What was it about what your friend said that bummed you out so much? What did it rub up against in your self-perception that made you sensitive?

Developing this habit is incredibly important because we all tend to become sad for no apparent reason from time to time. The truth is that there actually is something in our life that is getting us down but we simply aren't aware of what it is.

Your sadness is an indicator for lack. Therefore it is a call to action to understand that lack and replace it in some way.

## Anger

“

**People who struggle with anger tend to feel a lack of control in other, more important areas of their lives. But rather than address those areas, they get angry at small stupid things that they do have power over.**

When something threatens us (that is, when there's a possibility for loss), our instinct is what's called the “fight or flight response.” Anger is the “fight” and fear is the “flight” (we'll cover fear below).

Anger generally occurs when we feel threatened and we feel empowered to react to that threat.

A simple example: imagine if an obnoxious eight-year-old slaps you up the side of the head and says he is going to kill you. Yeah, seriously... what a little shithead.

If you're like me and this happens, you get pissed off. Why? Because it's an eight-year-old! How dare he?! Time to put him in his place. You react with anger and retaliate by punishing him.

Now, imagine if Hulk Hogan smacks you upside the head and says he's going to break you in two. That's right, you piss yourself. Then you run. You run, far away.



In the case of the eight-year-old, you feel empowered to effect change. Therefore, you get angry. Anger motivates us to right perceived wrongs in the world. In the case of Hulk Hogan, you're just kinda fucked, so you become afraid.

Anger isn't necessarily a "bad" emotion. In fact, anger does a lot of good for us and the world.

If someone is physically threatening you, anger can be used to deter them from violence. If someone is emotionally threatening you, anger can be used to set a strong boundary around how you'll tolerate being treated. If someone is breaking the rules or hurting others, anger can motivate us to stand up and correct that injustice.

But like all emotions, anger can easily be misplaced, too. If we respond with anger to a perceived threat in our lives that's not an actual threat, well, things can get ugly.

Maybe you lose your shit at the pimply-faced kid behind the counter at Wendy's for giving you six spicy nuggets when you obviously ordered the 10-piece—DON'T THEY TEACH YOU KIDS ANYTHING IN SCHOOL???

When really, your anger is just the deeper subtext for the lack of control you feel for the rest of your life. People who struggle with anger tend to feel a lack of control in other, more important areas of their lives. But rather than address those areas, they get angry at small stupid things that they do have power over. So, basically, you don't know how to handle your ex-husband not speaking to you anymore, so you take it out on some poor kid making minimum wage on his weekends.

The key to anger is to leverage it in productive ways. You can scream at the kid at Wendy's. Or you can get pissed off and clean the garage.

Maybe that sounds weird, but it's not much of a leap. I remember one of the first times I got dumped. At first, I was hurt and sad.

Then I got angry.

But because I was afraid to confront my ex with my anger, I decided that I'd channel that anger in another way: I'd make myself so amazing that she would look back at dumping me as the dumbest thing she had ever done in her life.

That's right, my sudden burst of self-improvement was largely motivated by revenge. Next thing you know, I was in the gym at 6 AM, studying and acing all my tests, buying new clothes, and taking care of myself.

The moral of the story is that anger can be incredibly useful. It's all in how you interpret that anger.

## Fear

“

***As a rule, I've learned that the more afraid I am of something, the more I should probably act on it.***

Fear falls into the “flight” part of our fight-or-flight response. Fear is a healthy emotion when it alerts us to a genuine threat or protects us from potential dangers. Fear also keeps us vigilant when we’re around people who are acting erratically or who are just “off” in some way. It’s best to avoid these people and move on.

But fear often gets misdirected as well. Sometimes we’re afraid of things that aren’t real threats. Sometimes we have fears that are left over from our childhood that linger with us as adults and mess us up. Sometimes our fears are so abstract we hardly notice they’re there.

We stay in bad relationships because we fear being alone. We don’t quit our jobs because we fear the embarrassment of doing something different. We don’t tell a family member or good friend a hard truth they need to hear because we fear they might get upset with us.

A lot of people want to know how to “get over” these types of fears.

But if you’re paying attention, you should be seeing a pattern here: addressing emotional issues is not about figuring out how to avoid experiencing those emotions. Rather, it’s about adapting to each emotion so that you can benefit from them.

In the case of fear, it’s a bellwether of when important moments in your life are arising. Generally speaking, we fear uncertainty and change in our lives. Coincidentally, the most important things we ever do generate a lot of uncertainty and change in life. Therefore, fear correlates pretty well with importance.

Therefore, as a rule, I’ve learned that the more afraid I am of something, the more I should probably act on it.

Whether that's taking a risk in business, broaching a difficult conversation, or challenging myself to do something that terrifies me (like go on TV or speak in front of thousands of people), the fear is always proportional to the payoff. The bigger the fear, the bigger the potential payoff.

Learning to do things you are afraid of doing is, of course, a skill that is practiced. Our natural inclination is to run away and avoid our fear. But the truth is that the fear doesn't go away. You don't ever stop being afraid. It just gets buried beneath distraction and compulsion.

At some point, we must all confront our fears. There are strategies to help you manage your fear as you practice doing the actions instead. But ultimately, fear is a fundamental part of our life and always will be.

## Shame

**“Shame has a tendency to make us self-obsessed. So the best way to counteract shame is to focus on helping others. And the best place to start is to help others in the area where you feel ashamed.**

Shame is like the police officer of the emotional world. In its best moments, it enforces social norms, prevents us from doing horribly embarrassing or humiliating things, from hurting ourselves or others, and it generally keeps the peace.

In its worst moments, it abuses us, beats us down, and extorts our peace of mind and dignity from us.

Shame is the social fuck-up deterrent. You don't poop your pants because you would be mortified by shame. You don't steal money from your grandmother because you'd die of the shame and guilt if she ever found out. Shame keeps us from doing a lot of stupid, awful shit.

But much like fear, the vast majority of the shame we experience is created between our own two ears. And like fear, we pick up a lot of our irrational feelings of shame from our childhood.

But whereas fear is generated from our personal sense of safety, shame is more social. If we were rejected and bullied when we were young, then we will likely retain high levels of shame around certain social behaviors when we get older.

Ultimately, shame is the rejection of yourself. It's you deciding that you are a terrible or awful person for various reasons. And sometimes, those reasons hold weight (like pooping your pants). But when we are ashamed of completely normal experiences and behaviors (like, say, asking someone on a date and being rejected), then we turn into neurotic headcases.

The odd thing with shame is that even though it causes us to chastise ourselves, it also makes us strangely narcissistic. People who harbor great amounts of shame have a distorted view of themselves, believing that what they've suffered and been through is so great and unique that no one else would understand. They develop irrational beliefs, like believing that no one else has ever been rejected on a date before. It's a subtle but pernicious form of narcissism.

Shame tends to make us self-obsessed. The best way to counteract shame is to focus on helping others, and the best place to start is to help others in the area where you feel ashamed. If you have a deep sense of shame around sex or intimacy, then sharing your story with others will not only normalize your experiences, but it will normalize theirs.

As the saying goes, sunlight is the best disinfectant. Sharing what we feel ashamed about through vulnerability, we turn our shame into strength, and our fears into power.



**Real, unconditional love is messy. It's appreciating someone not despite their flaws and shortcomings, but because of them.**

I started with an emotion that's not really an emotion (happiness) and I'll end on an emotion that's not really an emotion too: love.

I know, I know—love “conquers all.” Love is the “cure” for all of society’s ill. And all we really need is “love.”

Well, please excuse me while I ruin whatever fantasy you’ve held about love up to this point and be the first to tell you this: love is great, but love doesn’t really solve anything.

People “fall in love” all the time and think that’s all they have to do to make a relationship work. Then, when the love runs out, they figure there just wasn’t enough there to begin with, so they have to find it—more of it, actually—somewhere else.

This isn’t love, this is romance. And romance is quite different from genuine, unconditional love.

Love is when we experience an unequivocal joy for the gains of someone else. Love is when we look at someone (including ourselves) and genuinely wish only good things for them and experience joy when good things happen for them.

Now, that sounds great. What most people don’t get is that love—real, unconditional love—is messy. It’s appreciating someone not despite their flaws and shortcomings, but because of them. It’s respecting and supporting each other without the expectation of some sort of payoff or benefit to yourself. It’s understanding that to love someone, you may not always like them, or even want to be around them.

Love, it turns out, is quite a complicated emotion. But love is what adds meaning to our lives. It's what gives us a sense of purpose. It's what makes life worth living. And therefore, despite its complications, it is king of the emotional mountain.

We'll see more of love in Cheat Code #5, but in the meantime there's one more thing you need to know about emotions.

## We're All Downers

You'll notice that the emotions I've just covered skew heavily towards the negative. Actually, all of them, even love and happiness, charge a hefty toll of slogging through emotional mud and shit.

Psychologists debate much when it comes to emotions. But one thing they do not debate: we have more negative emotions than we do positive. We also experience negative emotions more intensely and put more importance on them.

So, it's not me who is a downer. We're all kind of downers. And nature made us this way.

We feel negative emotions more acutely because our species didn't evolve to be happy, we evolved to survive. Our ancestors paid more attention to scary, dangerous things and therefore didn't get eaten or killed by scary, dangerous things. Thus, evolutionarily speaking, negative emotions are more valuable to us as a species than emotions that make us sing and dance and vomit rainbows all day long.

You might conclude that this paints a fairly bleak picture of life. But once we accept that suffering is just part of life—or even, that suffering *is* life—we can then begin to choose better forms of suffering. We can start to look at negative experiences as the building blocks for a better life with better forms of suffering. We can grow through pain and even find the pain that we kind of enjoy. (Remember Cheat Code #1?)

Because happiness and joy and even love are not about getting rid of your pain, they are about coming to appreciate your pain, of finding the best in your pain. It's only through that marriage between pleasure and pain, gain and loss, happiness, and heartbreak, that we find true emotional mastery.

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Congratulations! You're more than halfway through and that much closer to winning at life with my not-so-gentle guidance.

So far in this ebook, you've learned how to get good at feeling bad, reset your mind, and manage your emotions. Now it's time to actually get shit done. Onto Cheat Code #4.

# **Cheat Code 4**

**Achieve More by Doing Less**

## Cheat Code 4: Achieve More by Doing Less

One of the keys to unlocking the higher levels in the game of life is not giving a fuck about more; it's giving a fuck about less, giving a fuck about what is true and immediate and important.

In the age of abundance, our issue is not scarcity, it's having too much. Whereas all the previous generations were striving to make more, do more, meet more, know more—we must strive to do less. To narrow our focus and care for our attention as a precious resource that can be swiftly taken from us.

Find the few people that matter, the few endeavors that matter, the few causes that matter, and focus most of your energy into them.

Let's begin.

### 1. Leverage Laziness

Let's pretend you love Indian food. You love it more than your spouse and your kids. You love it so much you'd bathe in mango chutney if you could afford that much mango chutney.

Now, let's say you go out to your favorite Indian spot and engorge yourself. We're talking on the order of 4,000 to 5,000 calories in one sitting. Like Monty Python in "The Meaning of Life" type gluttony.

Imagine you roll yourself out of the restaurant, and then someone comes up and offers you some fresh samosas and chutney (or maybe a thin mint). How would you feel?

We've all been in that state where we overeat a food we like and then the mere thought of that food for the following week makes us nauseous and we question the meaning of our own existence.

But then, a week later, Indian food doesn't sound so bad. And then about another week or two later, you're all geared up to go back and stuff yourself blind all over again.

Your brain works the same way with productivity.

See, solving problems is like food for your mind. It makes your mind happy. It makes it feel important and worthy and capable—all things directly linked to happiness.

But solving problems is to your mind as food is to your stomach. It needs a variety of stimulation and too much of one kind will cause it to get sick and tired.

Cue leisure time. You need to give your mind a break from the repetition of doing the same thing in order to let it recuperate and get excited about whatever it is you spend your time doing.

And what's amazing is that this leisure time—this ability to distract one's brain away from problem-solving and work—actually makes your brain far more effective upon returning to work.

I know, I know—it's crazy, but weekends and vacation really do exist for a reason.



When I started my business in 2008, I was a bona fide work-a-holic. I was pulling 14/15-hour days and rarely taking days off. And although I traveled constantly, I rarely took “vacations” per se. It was more like, “hey, that beach looks like a really beautiful place to check my email for the next two hours.”

It wasn’t until I met my wife (who had a steady 9-5) that she put her (high-heeled) foot down and was like, “Hey fucknuts, put the laptop away and spend some time with me at the beach.”

I, of course, was horrified. It was like asking someone to leave the house without their right arm.

“But what about my emails?” I stammered.

I spent that first night in a fetal position, shaking. I had dreams where my website was hacked and my identity stolen and there was nothing I could do. I imagined the web servers spontaneously bursting into flames at the same time my bank accounts were being drained.

None of that happened, of course.

In fact, what happened was the complete opposite. Sitting there on that beach for five days, with no phone, no computer, no electronics—just me and a wonderful woman and my thoughts, I began to see my own work more clearly than I had ever seen it before. It was as if I had spent five years huddling over my business, scrutinizing and obsessing over every part and detail, and then hopping into a hot air balloon, and gliding so high above that I could see the whole thing with more perspective than I ever had before.

And it was on that beach that I came up with two ideas that would change my life.

The first was changing my website to [markmanson.net](http://markmanson.net). Within six months, traffic increased 5-fold and my income 3-fold. The site would soon be read by millions of people, shared in over 100 countries, and get me published in some of the most prestigious publications around the world. And this would all happen while doing fewer hours of work than I had been doing before.

Whereas I had spent years trying to grow my website through sheer willpower and time commitment, it was by letting go of what was not working that my business took off without even needing me in it half the time.

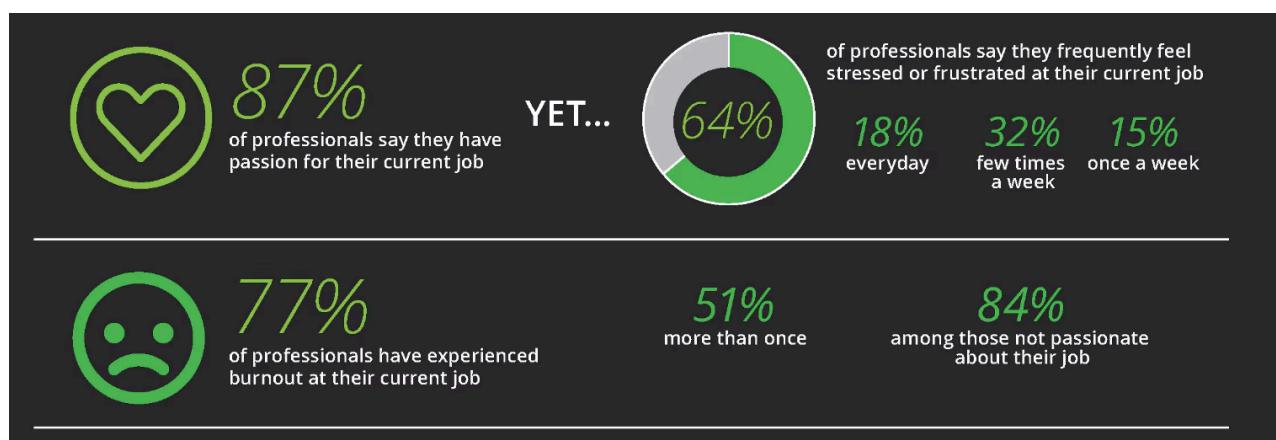
The other idea I had on that beach was my book. And, well look how that turned out.

The point is, people think productivity is about smashing as many hours as you can, but it doesn't work like that. The cheat code is in balance, not least to avoid burnout.

In fact, did you know that despite choosing our hours, working where we want, and taking meetings in our underwear, people are suffering burnout more than ever? More on that next.

## 2. Learn to Say No to Shit That Interferes With Your Main Objective

In a Deloitte survey, 77% of workers said they'd experienced burnout in their current job—yet, this is despite the majority also saying they're passionate about it.

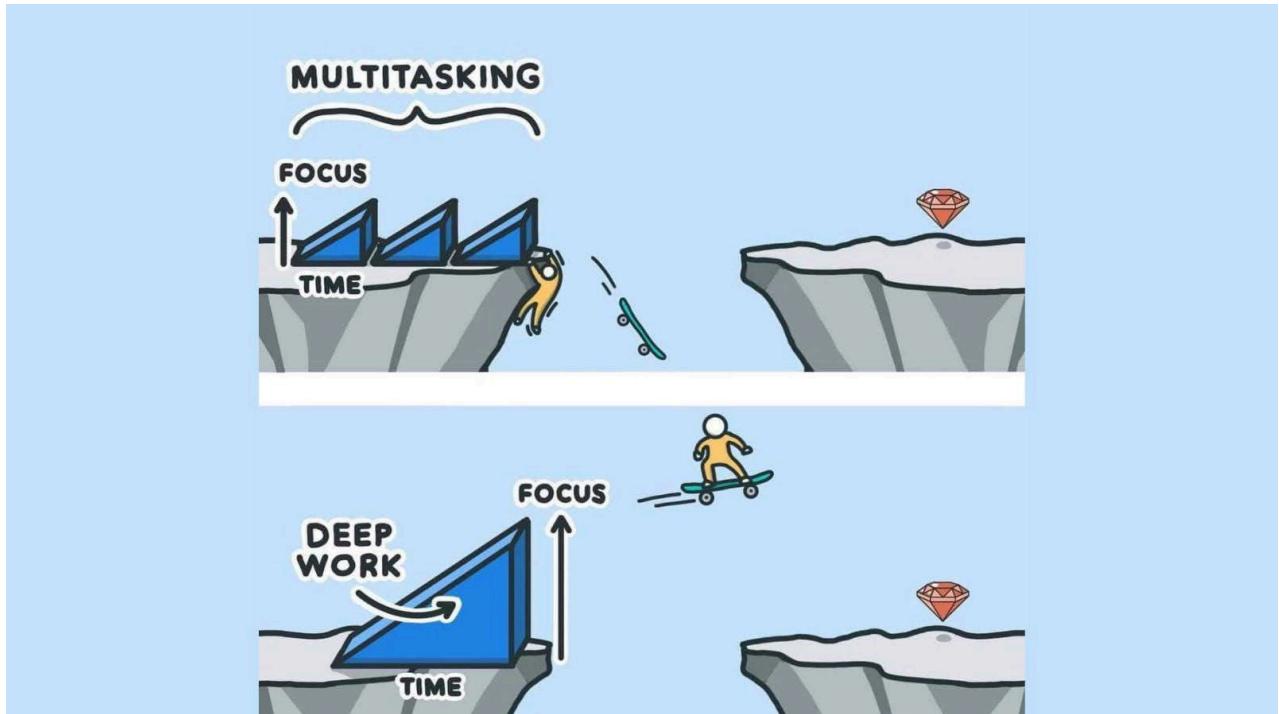


On the surface, the incredible rise in workplace burnout makes zero sense. Are we just whiny and weak, or is there something deeper and more psychological going on?

The non-obvious thing to consider for this problem, is the friction that's been removed with the shift to digital work.

We no longer have to walk down the hall to ask Bob for a report and Karen to make a copy, we can just send an email. Which turns into multiple emails. Which turns into multiple unnecessary Zoom meetings. Which turns into dozens of notifications, follow-ups, check-ins, etc.

Basically, the perceived quantity of tasks to achieve the same thing has skyrocketed. Even if these tasks are just five minutes each, and they seem minor and easy, there's a cognitive load associated with switching between dozens of 5-minute tasks.



Instagram Image: milanicreative

Ever noticed how when you sit down to do something, it takes a while for your brain to boot up and focus? Yeah, well, that. Any time you focus your brain on a new task, cognitive processes need time to set up. Therefore, constant context-switching, even if the tasks are simple and easy, drains us and makes us feel exhausted.

The human brain is designed to manage 2-3 big tasks at a time, not dozens and dozens of small ones.

For us to switch focus from one thing to another, we have to reconfigure and activate different neural networks relevant to the new task. Unlike a robot, we have a "switch cost," which can take more brain power than the task itself.

One way to mitigate the cognitive load caused by dozens of small tasks is to mentally "chunk" them into large over-arching tasks—basically, zoom out and maintain perspective on the long-term goal. Another way is to simply remove bullshit tasks and notifications altogether. Prune ruthlessly.

Finally: only do one big task at a time. So don't respond to 20 emails about 10 different things, only respond to the emails related to one project. Then go back later and respond to the emails related to another project, and so on.

The key to all of this, of course, is learning to say no.

### **3. 80/20 Your Way to Getting Shit Done**

In 1906 there was an Italian economist named Vilfredo Pareto. One day, strolling through his garden, Pareto noticed that every year, 20% of the pea plants in his garden produced approximately 80% of the peas.

This got him thinking about economic output on a larger scale. Sure enough, he began to find that in various industries, societies and even companies, 80% of the production often came from the 20% most productive portion.

This became known as the Pareto Principle, or what is now often referred to as the 80/20 Principle.

The 80/20 Principle states that *80% of the output or results will come from 20% of the input or action.*



The 80/20 Principle has historically been most popular in business management situations. Businesses often found that roughly 20% of their customers brought in 80% of their sales. They found that about 20% of their sales reps closed 80% of the sales. They found that 20% of their costs led to 80% of their expenses. Microsoft and other tech companies have found that 20% of the bugs they found create 80% of the problems for their users.

In terms of time management, businesses often found that 20% of their time created 80% of their productivity, and that 20% of their employees created 80% of the value.

As time went on, the 80/20 Principle became a popular management tool that was used widely to increase efficiency and effectiveness within businesses and industries. And it's still widely taught today, in more areas than just business.

It's been suggested that when it comes to pandemics (gulp), about 20% of infectious individuals are responsible for "superspreading," transmitting and spreading 80% of the disease, which has included STD's, SARS, and more recently, COVID-19.

The examples go on and on. And of course, nobody was actually there with a yardstick measuring out exactly 80% and 20% for all of these items, but the approximate 4-to-1 ratio popped up constantly. Whether it was actually 76/24 or 83/17 is irrelevant. The point is that you are gaining maximal gains from a small input, or something is costing you way more than it's worth.

## Applying the 80/20 Principle

While widely used in business, few people traditionally thought to apply the 80/20 Principle to everyday life or the ramifications it could have.

For instance:

- What are the 20% of your possessions you get the most value out of?
- What do you spend 20% of your time doing that gives you 80% of your happiness?
- Who are the 20% of people you're close to who make you the happiest?
- What are the 20% of the clothes you wear 80% of the time?
- What's the 20% of food you eat 80% of the time?

Chances are these are easy questions for you to answer. You've just never considered them before.

And once you've answered them, you can easily focus on increasing the efficiencies in your life.

Identifying the 20% of the food you eat 80% of the time will probably explain whether you keep a healthy diet or not and how healthy it is. Hey, who needs to follow a diet? Just make sure to switch to where the 20% of food you eat 80% of the time is healthy.

It's also highly likely that 80% of what you own brings you a small amount of your pleasure or happiness. An obvious place to start 80/20'ing yourself is with all of that extra stuff laying around.

Another is time and how we spend it. Clearing away distractions and setting up your most productive hours (morning or night) for success is how to get 80% of the day's work done in 20% of the time.

When I first considered how the 80/20 Principle applied to my own life, I instantly realized a few things.

- A few of my hobbies (television shows and video games) accounted for 80% of my time, but only brought me 20% of my fulfillment.
- I didn't enjoy a few of my friends who I spent 80% of my time with (hence I was not happy in my social life).
- 80% of what I spent my money on was not useful or healthy for my lifestyle.

Recognizing these things eventually inspired some hefty changes in my choices and my lifestyle. I dropped video games and television for one. I made efforts to identify other friends to spend more time with, and I paid more attention to what I bought with my money.

## 80/20 and You

What changes could you make in your life today based on the 80/20 Principle?

At work, what tasks do you spend 80% of the time doing that bring in 20% of the returns (i.e., checking email over and over, writing memos, taking a long time to make basic and unimportant decisions, etc.)?

What is the 20% of your work that gets you 80% of the credit and recognition from your team or boss?

In your emotional life and relationships, what are the 20% of behaviors that cause 80% of the problems in your relationships? What are 20% of the conversations that create 80% of the intimacy with your partner?

These are important questions that most of us never even consider.

It doesn't occur to us that there's an efficiency to every aspect of our life, to everything we do. And not only is there an efficiency, but we have control and influence over that efficiency. It's something we can take responsibility for and improve.

Obviously, the 80/20 rule is not a rigid dictum to live by. Not everything will fit so nicely into its nice, neat categorization. But think of it as a tool, a lens to view aspects of your life through. Sit down and think about it, maybe even write it out. You'll likely be surprised with the realizations you come to.

## 4. Delete the Distractions

In what should have been 20 minutes of work writing this section, I compulsively interrupted myself at least nine times, checking X, responding to emails, and writing texts. The cost of these interruptions goes way beyond the added amount of time to finish writing this. They distracted my train of thought, which risked reducing the quality of my writing, thus causing a need for more edits and revisions. They likely created anxiety as I spent much of my distracted time anxious about the fact that I wasn't working and much of my time working anxious that I was missing out on text conversations, email threads, or news updates. They likely made the process of writing itself less enjoyable and caused it to appear more taxing in my mind.

These distractions aren't just unproductive, they're anti-productive. They create more work than they replace.

Chances are you go through this do-si-do yourself on the regular. For me, it's only gotten worse as time has gone on—which is strange, because you'd assume that my attention span and focus would be getting stronger as I get older, but that's not been the case.

There are a few fronts on which our attention is being assaulted. First off, there's just a massive surplus of stuff to pay attention to. And the more crap there is to pay attention to, the more difficult it is to choose what to focus on—not to mention stay focused on it!

I'd like to introduce you to the idea of taking an "Attention Diet." A lifestyle hack that will allow you to focus on the things in your life that actually matter.

The first and most important goal of an attention diet should be to consciously limit the number of distractions we're exposed to. Just as the first step of a nutritional diet is to consume less food, the first step of an attention diet is to consume less information.

That then raises the question, "What stuff is worth paying attention to?" What should we give a fuck about? The same way the proliferation of junk food fucked up our bodies in the 20th century, the exponential growth in junk information has fucked up our emotions and minds in the 21st century. Therefore, the second goal of the Attention Diet is to find highly nutritious sources of information and relationships and then build our lives around them.

Basically, the name of the game is quality over quantity. Because in a world with infinite information and opportunity, you don't grow by knowing or doing more, you grow by the ability to correctly focus on less.

The method of the Attention Diet is similar to a nutritional diet—by cutting out whole categories of consumption for a period of time, your body (or mind) adjusts, becomes healthier, and then, ideally, after enough time you no longer crave your old guilty pleasures.

So, how do we define "junk" information and relationships and "nutritious" information and relationships?

Well, without getting all philosophical, let's keep it simple.

Junk information is information that is unreliable, unhelpful, or unimportant (i.e., it affects few to no people in any significant way). Junk information is short-form, flashy, and emotionally charged, encouraging addictive consumption patterns.

Nutritious information is information that is reliable, helpful, and likely important (i.e., it affects you and others in significant ways). Nutritious information is long-form, analytical, and encourages deep engagement and extended thought.

Junk relationships are people/groups who you have little face-to-face contact with and/or little mutual trust, who bring out your insecurities and consistently make you feel worse about yourself or the world.

Nutritious connections are people/groups who you have frequent face-to-face contact with and/or a lot of mutual trust who make you feel better and help you grow.

A note on sports/entertainment: There is a place for sports and entertainment in all of this. We all need something to help us unwind in our free time. I personally love video games. But I also recognize that if I check Reddit or Twitch 20 times a day, that's a really unhealthy indulgence of that hobby. Put another way, my hobby starts to hurt me rather than help me. Our goal is to make our hobbies work for us rather than against us.

One final word: The Attention Diet should be emotionally difficult to implement. Junk information hooks us because it is pleasing and easy. We develop low-level addictions to it and end up using it to numb a lot of our day-to-day stresses and insecurities. Therefore, getting rid of the junk information will expose a lot of uncomfortable emotions, trigger cravings, and compulsions, and generally suck for the first few days or weeks.

The goal here is to push yourself to stay more focused on what adds value to your life. If it's not difficult, then you're probably not really cutting out all of the junk.

## 5. Clear Your Mind

If you really pay attention, you'll notice that our minds are producing a constant stream of thought vomit, and most of us identify so strongly with it that we don't even notice it's happening. Our mental energy is sapped by an endless stream of useless, unhelpful thoughts and opinions:

*"I hope the Lakers win tonight. I wonder if Shannon will ever call me back. I really enjoyed our date together, but maybe I should have picked a better restaurant? Oh, that's silly worrying about that. I wonder if that new sushi place near Dave's is any good? I should call him, I haven't talked to him in a while. He can be overly negative though sometimes. Oh, I should buy a movie to watch this weekend, that will be cool. I wonder what though. I remember when I watched that one movie with Sara, my teenage girlfriend. God, we were young and naive. First kisses are awkward. But yeah, I should call Dave, I haven't called him in a while. I should call Dad too, he gets testy if I don't call him. Oh, today's Tuesday, Breaking Bad is on."*

Chances are your mind sounds like this on a daily basis, and you're rarely aware of it. Few of us are.

Enter meditation. Meditation trains our minds to prune and hone our thoughts, to only focus on what's useful and important, to disregard the rest, and to separate our egos and identities from the thoughts and emotions running through our heads. This may sound like little, but it adds up and the life benefits are massive.

Meditation forces one to disidentify with their mind and emotions. It is perhaps the easiest to learn and most readily available personal developmental tool on the planet. The disabled can do it. Children can do it. Stephen Hawking can do it. Anyone with conscious awareness can practice it.

You can do it on a crowded bus. You can do it in a monastery. You can do it in your bedroom. You can do it now as you read this. Experienced meditators can even do it while they sleep.

The benefits of meditation—mental, emotional, and physical—are innumerable and there are no side effects to a small daily practice. You can learn to do it in as little as five minutes and once you learn you'll never forget. Doing it as little as 10 minutes a day can make you happier and healthier, and doing it as little as 30 minutes per day could change your life.

Yet almost no one does it regularly. Myself included. Why?

It's hard to do. Really fucking hard. No seriously, take a few seconds and close your eyes and try to think about nothing for 30 seconds. No seriously, try it. Just for 30 seconds. I guarantee you can't do it.

If your mind is a muscle, then meditation is a way to take it to the gym. The stronger your control of your mind becomes, the more you're able to consciously control what your mind focuses on and how it processes new information.

Strengthening your mind in this way affects every aspect of your life: your emotional health and self-esteem, your work performance, your discipline, your relationships, your overall happiness, your stress levels, even your physical health.

With that all said, let's actually learn how to do this shit.

## How to Meditate

There are dozens of meditation styles and techniques—from mindfulness, spiritual, movement, mantra, to loving-kindness, and more.

The beautiful thing is that none of them are right or wrong, simply different. Whatever forces you to focus your mind on your awareness and let go of any thoughts or emotions that arise is a form of meditation. Whether it involves mantras, counting breaths, yoga, chanting, rituals, or whatever.

But to begin, I recommend people start with a basic sitting and counting of breaths. The process is easy:

- Set aside 10 or 15 minutes. Get a clock or timer and set an alarm preferably, because you are going to be tempted to get up or stop before the time is up.
- Go into a quiet room where there are no distractions.
- Toss a pillow on the floor and sit on it cross-legged. Don't worry if you can't cross your legs perfectly, just do it as much as possible while remaining comfortable. Plant your ass firmly on the pillow and then make sure your back is straight.

- Relax your diaphragm and let your belly hang out (don't worry, no one's looking).
- Look straight ahead. You can close your eyes or leave them open, it doesn't really matter. I prefer leaving mine open, but to start out you can close them if it makes you feel more comfortable.
- You can put your hands on your knees or you can rest them in your lap, one on top of the other, palms facing up, as shown in the picture.



- Now comes the hard part. Allow whatever thoughts to enter your mind without judging them.
- Breathe through your nose into your chest until your chest is full. Your belly should expand. Then slowly exhale. One.
- Do the same thing again. Count each breath.
- When a thought or distraction arises, start the count over again at one. Thoughts and distractions *will* come up, and if you're just starting out, they will often come up without you even noticing them until they've been rattling around for a few seconds.
- Don't judge yourself. Don't get mad. Don't get frustrated and say, "I suck at this." Just acknowledge the thought, let it go, and reset your counting. Chances are you won't get past two or three the first few times you meditate. It often takes people months to even get to ten.

Do this for the full 15 minutes. It's only 15 minutes, but I guarantee it will feel closer to three hours. By the fourth minute you'll be dying to get up and do something. Your mind will be going crazy. Chances are you'll start to let your mind go and just start thinking about the party last weekend, or the project that you're working on at work. That's fine. Don't judge. Just let go and start the count over again.

This is the most basic form of Zen meditation, which is the practice I followed for a few years. If you get through one session, congratulations. I imagine you will get up feeling much more relaxed, clear-headed, and will feel calmer throughout your day.

These sessions are easier to do and to keep up with if done with someone else, so you can keep each other accountable. Daily practices are best. Start with 10 or 15 minutes each morning when you wake up and slowly add time from there. Once you get to the point where you can keep your mind thoughtless for a full 10 breaths or so, there are other techniques or practices you can begin to add.

Many people find it useful to start with meditation apps. There are many excellent ones out there: Headspace, Calm, Waking Up, and dozens more. Each app will have a particular style and approach to meditation. Take advantage of the free trials and figure out which one works for you.

I hope by now you see how powerful meditation can be and have some ideas on how to get started. Now it's time to try it out and experience its wonders. It will improve your life, and everything in it, like relationships. Speaking of...

# **Cheat Code 5**

## **Don't Die Alone**

## Cheat Code 5: Don't Die Alone

If you do a ton of research on what drives happiness and well-being—and even things like physical health and longevity—*relationships* come up over and over and over again. It's the most consistent finding in all of psychological literature: better relationships, better life.

Better relationships equate to a strong marriage, a supportive family dynamic, lasting friendships. It means having a solid network and community around you, which you feel you're a part of.

The problem is, so many of us tend to go around for big chunks of our life either mistreating or completely destroying good relationships, or, worse, indulging in truly goddamn awful ones.

So Cheat Code #5 is all about relationships. And not *just* romantic relationships.

High-quality, life-improving relationships come in different shapes and sizes. Everything from a great family dynamic, to an extraordinary friendship with a neighbor or your loyal canine. Of course, romantic relationships play a huge part in one's foundational happiness, but having a romantic relationship is not the be-all and end-all to a good life. In fact, let's start with friendships.

### 1. The Friendship Success Equation

Romantic relationships tend to get all the attention, but I'd argue that friendships are just as important—if not more so—for our health and happiness.

Like, imagine this: you're single. Forever. The end.

Yeah, that may be a sucky thing to think about. But it's not exactly the end of the world. We've all been single before. And many of us in committed relationships will someday be single again.

Now imagine something else. Imagine that tomorrow, you lose all of your friends and will never have any friends ever again. Let's pretend they all coincidentally boarded the same flight that disappeared over the Bermuda Triangle. Or maybe they all got together for a surprise pizza party in your honor and then the pizza oven exploded and immolated everyone you know and love.

Single for the rest of your life? That could suck. But then again, you could still have a pretty bitchin' life. Plenty of people do.

Friendless for the rest of your life? Well, let's just say that this is what suicides are made of.

Alas, just like with romantic relationships, creating fulfilling, lasting friendships as an adult can be really hard.

But... why?

I mean, sure, there's the logistical side of it. As we age, our lives get more complex and filled with responsibilities, making it harder to find the time and energy to forge new connections.

We also get set in our ways, making it difficult to let down our guard and open ourselves up to new people and experiences.

But there's also this whole emotional world that, as adults, we tend to forget—or outright ignore—because we think we shouldn't have these kinds of “emotional problems” anymore, underlying issues that a lot of people face when trying to make new friends in their 30s, 40s, and beyond.

I mean, it probably feels a little weird to even be reading advice about “making friends.” You should have figured out how to “make friends” by now, right?

Well, like so many areas of self-improvement, the answers are actually quite counterintuitive. They go against everything we've been conditioned to believe about the world.

Like a good friend—you're welcome—I've compiled four counterintuitive ways to make friends as an adult, just for you, starting with:

## 1. Focus on Yourself First

This may seem selfish, but the truth is that when we invest time and energy in our own passions and interests, we become more interesting and likable to others. People are drawn to those who are confident, passionate, and engaged in life.

By pursuing your own goals and interests, you'll naturally attract others who share your values and passions.

What's more is that there's nothing worse in a friendship—any relationship, really—than someone who constantly needs to be "fixed." Take care of your own shit so you can be there for other people when they need you, and they'll do the same for you.

In a seemingly paradoxical way, taking care of yourself first will attract the kind of supportive, loving friends that can help you be even better in the long run.

## 2. Seek More Rejection, Not Less

When we put ourselves out there and attempt to build new connections, rejection is inevitable.

Rather than fearing rejection, try embracing it.

Recognize that rejection is not a reflection of your worth or value as a person, and use it as an opportunity to learn and grow.

By taking risks and putting yourself in situations where rejection is a possibility, you'll become more resilient and more likely to find the right connections while weeding out all the wrong ones.

## 3. Be More Selective

If there's one point that conventional advice for making friends misses completely, it's how selective you should be.

I don't mean that you should be a snobby asshole, going around thinking you're better than everyone else. All I'm suggesting is rather than trying to connect with anyone and everyone, focus on building deep, meaningful connections with a few key people.

It's better to have a small group of close friends who truly understand and support you than a large network of superficial connections.

By being more selective, you'll be more likely to find the right people who share your values and interests.

#### **4. Drop Your Expectations of Others**

Any healthy relationship of any kind doesn't come with strings attached.

When we approach social interactions with the expectation of getting something in return, we can come across as needy or insincere or even manipulative.

Instead, focus on giving to others without any expectation of reciprocity. Offer your time, resources, and expertise freely, and you'll be more likely to attract people who appreciate and value your generosity.

And as for those who *don't* appreciate and value you, here's what you should do...

## **2. Stop Wasting Time**

In economics, there's a concept known as the sunk cost fallacy. The sunk cost fallacy occurs when someone makes a decision based on their previously invested time or resources.

The classic example occurs when you buy something that you end up not needing or enjoying, but you force yourself to use it anyway because you don't want the money to go to waste.

You're actually making yourself less happy than if you simply discarded it because you want to justify the money you spent.

Another example is when a company spends a ton of money on an ad campaign that bombs. But rather than discontinuing the campaign, they need to feel like they got some return for all of the time and money invested, so they continue to run it even though it loses money.

The sunk cost fallacy is also illustrated in the saying, “throwing good money after bad.”

People don’t want to quit the job that underpays them because they don’t want to feel as though they wasted the last five years of their life.

Businesses don’t cut wasteful spending because management doesn’t want to admit they were wrong about something.

Governments don’t surrender when losing a war because they don’t want people to feel as though their soldiers died for nothing.

In economics, the sunk cost fallacy is seen as purely irrational. Bob should quit his job at Acme. He can make more money elsewhere. But Bob stays. Why? Because Bob trained for years to work at Acme and he doesn’t want that training to be “wasted.”

But the sunk cost fallacy usually only appears to be a fallacy because we measure the output in terms of money.

The truth is that when weighing whether a major decision is worth it or not, our emotions add a lot to the scale.

Perhaps Bob doesn’t leave Acme because he values his pride and his identity as an Acme engineer more than he does the extra money he’d make elsewhere. Perhaps he’s afraid of dealing with the uncertainty of the job market. Perhaps his closest friends work at Acme and he’s afraid of leaving them behind.

While economists focus on the financial irregularities of the fallacy, to me, the fallacy is most illustrative when we look at the emotional side effects. For example, the most common place I see the sunk cost fallacy is not in a casino or in business or in government.

It’s in relationships. I will focus on romantic relationships here, but really, this can be applied to all types of relationships.

## Sunk Costs in Relationships

We all know someone (or perhaps we are that someone) who is in a bad relationship and continues to stay in that bad relationship. Neither person is happy. Everybody knows they aren't happy. Yet the two people stay. For years and years and years, people hang on.

And why?

It's easier to fight the sunk cost fallacy in work situations and financial situations because you can actually sit down and do the math.

But there's no math for relationships.

There's no spreadsheet to calculate the expected costs of the pain of breaking up versus the misery of coming home every day to somebody you don't want to see.

When it comes to emotions, we are terrible at accurately gauging how we will feel in the future and how important those feelings are.

For example, we generally overestimate the significance of feeling a large amount of pain today and underestimate the significance of feeling small amounts of pain over years and years.

Therefore, we stay in a bad relationship. We stay in the shitty job. "I'll just give it another year," we say, because another year feels bearable in the moment. Whereas destroying our relationship feels unbearable.

In this sense, we throw away good relationships after bad. Because every year we stay in a bad relationship, we're missing the opportunity to find a good relationship.

And while, on paper, that may be easy to see, it certainly isn't easy to feel.

### 3. The Healthy Romantic Relationship Code

Alright, let's talk romance. This final section explains how traits that don't fit our traditional narrative for what love is are actually necessary ingredients for lasting relationship success.

These are the important issues in relationships which most of us find hard to face. Things that might seem unhealthy on the surface but are actually counterintuitively incredible for building a strong romantic relationship with a partner. These are normal, everyday relationship issues that don't get talked about because it's far easier to talk about puppies and sunsets.

#### 1. Letting Some Conflicts Go Unresolved

There's this guy by the name of John Gottman—he's like the Michael Jordan of relationship research. Not only has he been studying intimate relationships for more than forty years, he practically invented the field.

Gottman devised the process of "thin-slicing" relationships, a technique where he hooks couples up to a series of biometric devices and then records them having short conversations. Gottman then goes back and analyzes the conversation frame by frame, looking at biometric data, body language, tonality, and specific words chosen. He then combines all of this data together to predict whether your marriage sucks or not.

His "thin-slicing" process boasts a staggering 91% success rate in predicting whether newly-wed couples will divorce within 10 years—a staggeringly high result for any psychological research. Gottman's seminars also report a 50% higher success rate of saving troubled marriages than traditional marriage counseling. His research papers have won enough academic awards to fill the state of Delaware. And he's written nine books on the subjects of intimate relationships, marital therapy, and the science of trust.

The point is, when it comes to understanding what makes long-term relationships succeed, John Gottman will slam-dunk in your face and then sneer at you afterwards.

And the first thing Gottman says in almost all of his books is:

“

***The idea that couples must communicate and resolve all of their problems is a myth.***

– JOHN GOTTMAN

In his research of thousands of happily married couples, some of whom have been married for forty plus years, he repeatedly found that most successful couples have persistent unresolved issues, issues that they've sometimes been fighting about for decades. Meanwhile, many of the unsuccessful couples insisted on resolving every fucking thing because they believed that there should never be a disagreement between them. Pretty soon there was a void of a relationship, too.



Successful couples accept and understand that some conflict is inevitable, that there will always be certain things they don't like about their partner, or things they don't agree with—all that's fine. You shouldn't need to feel the need to change somebody in order to love them. And you shouldn't let some disagreements get in the way of what is otherwise a happy and healthy relationship.

Sometimes, trying to resolve a conflict can create more problems than it fixes. Some battles are simply not worth fighting. And sometimes, the most optimal relationship strategy is one of live and let live.

## **2. Being Willing to Hurt Each Other's Feelings**

My wife spends a lot of time in front of the mirror because she cares about how she looks. Nights before we go out, she often comes out of the bathroom after an hour-long makeup/hair/clothes/whatever-women-do-in-there session and asks me how she looks. She's usually gorgeous, but every once in a while she tries to do something new with her hair or is wearing a pair of boots that some flamboyant fashion designer from Milan thought were avant-garde. And it just doesn't work.

When I tell her this, she usually gets pissed off. And as she marches back into the closet to redo everything and make us 30 minutes late, she spouts a bunch of four-letter words (fortunately, they're in Portuguese) and sometimes even slings a few of them at me.

Men often lie in this situation to make their girlfriends/wives happy. But I don't. Why? Because honesty in my relationship is more important to me than feeling good all of the time. The last person I should ever have to censor myself with is the woman I love.

Fortunately, I am married to a woman who agrees that we should always be honest. She calls me out on my bullshit sometimes, and it's one of the most important traits she offers me as a partner. Sure, my ego gets bruised and I bitch and complain and try to argue, but a few hours later I usually come back sulking and admit that she was right and holy crap she makes me a better person even though I hated hearing her truth-telling at the time.

When our highest priority is to always make ourselves feel good, or to always make our partner feel good, then more often than not nobody ends up feeling good. And our relationships fall apart without us even knowing it.

It's important to make something more important in your relationship than merely making each other feel good all of the time. The feeling-good—the sunsets and puppies—they happen when you get the important stuff figured out: values, needs and trust.

If I feel smothered and want more time alone, I need to be capable of saying that without blaming her and she needs to be capable of hearing it without blaming me, despite the unpleasant feelings it may cause. If she feels that I'm cold and unresponsive to her, she needs to be capable of saying it without blaming me and I need to be capable of hearing it without blaming her, despite the unpleasant feelings it may generate.

These conversations are crucial if we want to maintain a healthy relationship, one that meets both people's needs. Without them, we lose track of one another.

### **3. Being Willing to End It**

Romantic sacrifice is idealized in our culture. Show me almost any movie with romance at its center and it's bound to feature a desperate and needy character who treats themselves like dog shit for the sake of being in love with someone.

The truth is our standards for what a “successful relationship” should be are pretty screwed up. If a relationship ends and someone's not dead, then we view it as a failure, regardless of the emotional or practical circumstances present in the person's lives. And that's kind of insane.

Romeo and Juliet was originally written as satire to represent everything that's wrong with young, romantic love and how irrational beliefs about relationships can make you do stupid shit like drink poison because your parents don't like some girl's parents.

But somehow, we've come to think of the play as a romance. It's this kind of irrational idealization that leads people to stay with partners who treat them like shit, to give up on their own needs and identities, to make themselves into martyrs who are perpetually miserable, to suppress their own pain and suffering in the name of maintaining a relationship "until death do us part."

Sometimes the only thing that can make a relationship successful is ending it at the necessary time, before it becomes too damaging. And the willingness to do that allows us to establish the necessary boundaries to help ourselves and our partner grow together.



***Shoot myself to love you; if I loved myself I'd be shooting you.***

– MARILYN MANSON

"Until death do us part" is romantic and everything, but when we worship our relationship as something more important than ourselves—more important than our values, than our needs and everything else in our lives—we create a sick dynamic where there's no accountability.

We have no reason to work on ourselves and grow because our partner has to be there no matter what. And our partner has no reason to work on themselves and grow because we're going to be there no matter what. This all invites stagnation and stagnation equals misery.

#### 4. Feeling Attraction for Other People

One of the mental tyrannies we face in a non-honest relationship is the situation where any mildly emotional or sexual thought not involving your partner amounts to high treason.

As much as we'd like to believe that we only have eyes for our partner, biology says otherwise. Once we get past the honeymoon phase of starry eyes and oxytocin, the novelty of our partner wears off. And unfortunately, human sexuality is partially wired around novelty. I get emails all the time from people in happy marriages/relationships who get blindsided by finding someone else attractive and they feel like horrible people because of it. But the truth is, not only are we capable of finding multiple people attractive and interesting at the same time, it's a biological inevitability.

What isn't an inevitability is our decision to act on the attraction or not. Most of us, most of the time, choose to not act on those feelings. And like waves, they pass through us and leave us with our partner very much the same way they found us.

This triggers a lot of guilt in some people and a lot of irrational jealousy in others. Our cultural scripts tell us that once we're in love, that's supposed to be the end of the story. And if someone flirts with us and we enjoy it, or if we catch ourselves having an occasional errant sexy-time fantasy, there must be something wrong with us or our relationship.

But that's simply not the case. In fact, it's healthier to allow oneself to experience these feelings and then let them go.

When you suppress these feelings, you give them power over you, you let them dictate your behavior for you (suppression) rather than dictating your behavior for yourself (via feeling them and yet choosing not to do anything).

People who suppress these urges are often the ones who eventually succumb to them and suddenly find themselves screwing the secretary in the broom closet and having no idea how they got there and come to deeply regret it about twenty-two seconds later.

People who suppress these urges are often the ones who project them onto their partner and become blindingly jealous, attempting to control their partner's every thought, corralling all of their partner's attention and affection onto themselves.

People who suppress these urges are often the ones who wake up one day disgruntled and frustrated with no conscious understanding of why, wondering where all of the days went and saying things like, "remember how in love we used to be??"

Looking at attractive people is pleasurable. Speaking to attractive people is pleasurable. Thinking about attractive people is pleasurable. That's not going to change because of our Facebook relationship status. And when you dampen these impulses towards other people, you dampen them towards your partner as well. You're killing a part of yourself, and it ultimately only comes back to harm your relationship.

When I meet a beautiful woman now, I enjoy it, as any man would. But it also reminds me why, out of all of the beautiful women I've ever met and dated, I chose to be with my wife. I see in the attractive women everything my wife has and most women lack.

And while I appreciate the attention or even flirtation, the experience only strengthens my commitment. Attractiveness is everywhere. Real intimacy is not.

When we commit to a person, we are not committing our thoughts, feelings or perceptions to them. We can't control our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions most of the time, so how could we ever make that commitment?

What we can control are our actions. And what we commit to that special person are those actions. Let everything else come and go, as it inevitably will.

## **5. Spending Time Apart**

We all have that friend who mysteriously ceased to exist as soon as they got into their relationship. You see it all the time: the man who meets someone and stops playing basketball and hanging out with his friends, or the woman who suddenly decides she loves every comic book and video game her partner likes even though she doesn't know how to correctly hold the XBox controller. And it's troubling, not just for us but for them.

**YOU FORGOT TO TELL ME YOU WERE  
GOING ON A TRIP WITH YOUR FRIENDS.**



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When we fall in love we develop irrational beliefs and desires. One of these desires is to allow our lives to be consumed by the person with whom we're infatuated. This feels great—it's intoxicating in much of the same way cocaine is intoxicating (no, really). The problem only arises when this desire becomes reality.

The problem with allowing your identity to be consumed by a romantic relationship is that as you change to be closer to the person you love, you cease to be the person they fell in love with in the first place

It's important to occasionally get some distance from your partner, assert your independence, maintain some hobbies or interests that are yours alone. Have some separate friends; take an occasional trip somewhere by yourself; remember what made you you and what drew you to your partner in the first place.

Without this oxygen to breathe, the fire between the two of you will die out and what were once sparks will become only friction.

## 6. Accepting Your Partner's Flaws

In his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera says there are two types of womanizers: 1) men who are looking for the perfect woman and can never find her, and 2) men who convince themselves that every woman they meet is already perfect.

I love this observation and believe it applies to not just womanizers, but just about anyone who consistently finds themselves in dysfunctional relationships. They either try to make their partner be perfect by “fixing” them or changing them, or they delude themselves into thinking that their partner is already perfect.

This is one of those things that is not nearly as complicated as it appears. Let's break it down:

1. Every person has flaws and imperfections.
2. You can't ever force a person to change.
3. Therefore: You must date somebody who has flaws you can live with or even appreciate.

“

***The most accurate metric for your love of somebody is how you feel about their flaws.***

If you accept them and even adore some of their shortcomings—her obsessive cleanliness, his awkward social ticks—and they can accept and even adore some of your shortcomings, well, that's a sign of true intimacy.

One of the best (and earliest!) expressions of this idea came from Plato in the form of a myth. In his *Symposium*, Plato wrote that humans were originally androgynous and whole. They felt no lack, no uncertainty, and they were powerful, so powerful that they rose up and challenged the gods themselves.

This posed a problem for the gods. They didn't want to completely wipe out the human race as they'd have no one to rule over, but they also had to do something to humble and distract humanity.

So, Zeus split each human into two, a man and a woman (or a man and a man, or a woman and a woman) and doomed them to spend their brief mortal existence wandering the world looking for their other half, the half that would make them feel whole and powerful again. And this wholeness would come not from two perfections meeting, but two imperfections meeting, two imperfections that both complemented and compensated for one another's shortcomings.

The artist Alex Grey once said that, "True love is when two people's pathologies complement one another's." Love is, by definition, crazy and irrational. And the best love works when our irrationalities complement one another, and our flaws enamor one another.

It may be our perfections that attract one another in the first place. But it's our imperfections that decide whether or not we stay together.

# Ebook Complete

Congratulations, Player One. You made it.

Remember, the game of life is designed to be complex and confusing. The difficulty is not in winning, but knowing what winning itself means. Because that's the real challenge: deciding what our own life is worth and then having the courage to go out and live it.

And not only having the courage to live it, but the wisdom to define what a good and meaningful life actually is—for yourself. It is important that you don't subscribe to other people's definition of a "winning life." You must decide what living a good life truly means to you.

Success doesn't have to be Ferraris and the corner office. Success can be creating art, helping people in need, being a good mom. It can be personal and private, something no one else notices or recognizes. It can be as big or small as you make it.

You define success for yourself. You choose your life and how you want to play the game. But I'll tell you now, playing with these cheat codes will give you a solid head start.

Good luck.

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