

The Effortless Life

*A Concise Manual for Contentment,
Mindfulness, & Flow*

by Leo Babauta

Written publicly,
with help from the world

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About this Book

This book is by Leo Babauta of Zen Habits. It was written publicly, and the world was invited to help collaboratively write and edit the document. This book is the result of that collaborative effort.

This entire work is uncopyrighted.

This is meant to be a concise guide to living an effortless life.

Introduction

Life is hard. Or so we've imagined.

The truth is that life is only as difficult as we make it.

Most of us rush around doing a lot of tasks and errands each day, putting out fires, and dealing with dramas. Most of these struggles are invented.

We are simple beings. Food, shelter, clothing and relationships are all we need to be happy. Food grows simply and naturally. Shelter is a simple roof. Clothing is just cloth. Simple relationships consist of enjoying each other's company without expectations.

Beyond these simple needs, we've added invented needs: careers, bosses and co-workers; new gadgets, software and social media; cars and nice clothes and purses and laptop bags and televisions and more.

I'm not saying that we should go back to caveman days, but it's important that we remember what's necessary and what's invented. When we realize that something is invented, we can choose to eliminate that need; if it doesn't serve a good purpose, if it makes life more difficult, it can go!

By stripping away the things that make life difficult, we're left with an effortless life.

I learned an important lesson when I wanted to become a better swimmer—I thought swimming farther and faster was just a matter of trying harder, training harder. I would thrash madly through the water, but was left exhausted. When I learned that the water can actually push you up and help you float, it became much easier to glide through it. I relaxed, stopped trying to force things, and learned to swim better with less effort.

Life is like this. Life is water, and we tend to push too hard, thrash about, force things, struggle. Instead, learn to float, learn to allow things to become effortless. You'll get farther and life will be that much more pleasant. What is an Effortless Life?

Imagine a life where you wake up and do what you love doing. You spend time with the people you love and enjoy that time completely. You live in the moment, without worry for the future, without dwelling on past mistakes.

Imagine that you have a few close friends and family members, and you spend ample time with them. You have no expectations of them, therefore, they don't disappoint you, and, in fact, whatever they do is perfect. You love them for who they are, and your relationships remain uncomplicated.

You enjoy spending time in solitude—with your thoughts, with nature, with a book, and maybe even creating.

This is a simple, effortless life. It's not effortless as in "no effort," but it feels effortless, and that's what matters. And it's entirely possible.

The only thing that stands in the way of an effortless life is the mind.

Guidelines for an Effortless Life

These are not rigid rules. And they are in the negative for a reason: this guide doesn't tell you what to do. It tells you what not to do, so that you don't create unnecessary effort. What you do is left up to you.

GUIDELINES:

- Cause no harm.
- Have no fixed goals or plans.
- Have no expectations.
- Don't create false needs.
- Do nothing you hate.
- Don't rush.
- Create no unnecessary actions.

SOME POSSIBLE POSITIVE GUIDELINES:

- Be compassionate.
- Be passionate.
- Find contentment.
- Go slowly.
- Be patient.

- Be present.
- Prefer subtraction.

Wu Wei & Doing Nothing

Taoism has a concept that's difficult for the Western mind: Wu Wei, often translated as “not-doing” or “without action.” I prefer to think of it as knowing when not to act, and knowing when it's appropriate to act.

This is difficult for us in the Western tradition of “doing.” Our culture values action, and inaction breeds anxiety. This way of living, however, is the root of many difficulties in our lives—we create unnecessary efforts because we're uncomfortable with the state of “not doing.”

Is it possible to do nothing? Not literally—even if we're not acting, we're sitting or lying or standing. But acting usually means taking an action, often toward a goal and with a purpose. What if we removed the goal or purpose? Then the action is unnecessary, and taking it would make things unnecessarily difficult.

So, removing goals and simplifying purpose removes the need for many actions.

It's extremely hard for us to accept this thought. We want to be productive. The word “passive” has such negative connotations that we shy away from doing nothing. Our culture disdains laziness. And so we do things that aren't necessary, and we create arbitrary goals because we feel we must.

What if we stop measuring our worth by our accomplishments? Who we are will always be more important than what we do. Try doing nothing. Even just for five minutes. We become anxious and want to open a new tab, check email, read the news, talk to someone, do a task. And that's just for five minutes—what if we did nothing all day?

If we remove false needs, goals, expectations, and purposes, we strip away the need to do much of what we do. We can then be left with an emptiness that can be filled only with what's necessary, with what's natural, with what's beautiful.

True Needs, Simple Needs

So what's really necessary? I mentioned above that our basic needs are few: food, clothing, shelter, relationships.

None of these needs are complicated.

You might argue that getting food can be complicated, but read “One Straw Revolution” by Masanobu Fukuoka—he shows that we can grow enough for a family on an acre of land, intervening minimally with nature. Let weeds grow, use no pesticide, don't till the soil, let animals and bugs and lizards run wild among the fields. It's not complicated.

That doesn't mean we're all going to return to the land tomorrow, but it's important to remember that our true needs have been complicated only by the society we've created, and that food need not be another status symbol. And thus we have the ability to create something simpler, by subtraction.

Shelter has also been made complicated—housing is the biggest expense for many people, and a beautiful home is now an expensive status symbol. But at its most basic, shelter consists of a roof that protects us from the elements. It can be a one-man lean-to, or a large shelter for several families. It can be as simple as we'd like it to be.

Clothing, too, has been made far more complicated. It's been turned into a status symbol so complexly contrived that it has become many times removed from a true need. We really just need to cover ourselves, and as Gandhi showed, all you need is a bit of homespun cloth. Again, we're probably not going to be wearing loincloths anytime soon, but let's remember how much of our clothing fills a true need, and how much is invented.

Relationships are probably the most complicated among our needs, because humans are complicated entities not easily simplified. We want to belong. We want to look good in the eyes of our peers, to be attractive to others. So relationships have evolved into webs of interaction and emotions and expectations so complicated that they can't be easily untangled.

It doesn't have to be so difficult. I get together with a friend, let the rest of the world melt away, and focus on being present. We talk, we joke, and we have no expectations of each other. We walk away without feeling hurt, and have no worries about when we're going to get back together.

My marriage and my relationships with my kids are more complicated than that, but I'm learning to subtract expectations and needs, so that what remains is the pure enjoyment of each family member for who he or she is. I'm not there yet, but I'm learning. Subtraction leaves just the essence, just what we need from relationships.

Our contribution to society can of course become just as complicated. This usually involves our jobs, and it takes up a majority of our lives and makes up a majority of our stress and frustrations. But part of the reason for this are the long hours that we must work in order to support invented needs. If we reduce our needs and learn to be content with little, we need to work little to survive.

That leaves us with a lot of free time to contribute to society in very simple ways. We can volunteer with charities, create something amazing, help others in our neighborhoods. We can do good and let go of it, with no expectation of reward, of payment, of praise. Or we can simply be available so that when others need us, we won't always be in a hard-charging mode toward our own goals.

Those are our needs, and they are simple.

Reduce Your Needs

As I've said, our true needs are very simple. In modern society, we have created more needs: you need a job to pay for your home and clothes and car and computers and fuel and electricity and food and going out and entertainment and education and more.

If you reduce your needs and learn to be content with little, you will need to do very little. Your reduced needs result in reduced effort.

If you have few needs, you have few expenses, and you then have reduced need for work. You can work less and play more. You're also freed up to do work that you love, as you won't have to earn very much from that passionate work, giving yourself freedom to fail for a while.

If you have few needs, you have less pressure to succeed and you can relax more. You don't worry as much, because there's little to worry about.

Reducing your needs is a slow and mindful process. You don't need to slash everything overnight. Pay attention to your spending, to what you do each week, and ask yourself whether these things and activities are truly necessary.

Start to slowly pare back, cutting one expensive activity after another. Do you really need that Starbucks coffee every day, or can you make your own, or drink water instead? Do you really need expensive snacks, or can you eat fruit and nuts? Do you really need to partake in expensive entertainment, or can you play with your kids or hang out with a few friends in the park? Do you really need the gym membership, or can you go on walks with your spouse or do push-ups outdoors?

Slowly start to look at the bigger expenses: Do you really need two cars? Can you trade your SUV for a smaller, less expensive, used car? Can you give your car up for a bike or mass transit? Do you really need such a large home? Can you move to someplace smaller, less expensive, less costly to heat or cool? Do you really need such an expensive education, or can you educate yourself for free?

I'm not saying you have to give any or all of these things up—I'm suggesting you pay attention, and slowly pare back so that most of what you spend is spent on the essentials.

The things that make you happy don't have to cost a lot. Some of my essentials:

- A good book—which can be found at the library.
- A notebook or laptop for writing.
- A walk outdoors.
- Tea with my wife.
- Playing with my kids.
- A run with a friend.

That's pretty much all I need beyond the basic necessities (food, clothing, shelter, etc.) to be happy. And none of those things costs very much.

Reduce your needs, be content with little, and life's required effort drops by a mile.

Cause No Harm, & Be Compassionate

This is my basic rule for living, and it has served me well. It has made my life less difficult:

- Relationships are easier and more rewarding.
- People tend to be kinder to me.
- Being known as a kind person opens more doors.
- I'm happier.
- Everyone around me is a bit happier.

The first guideline of Effortless Living is to cause no harm. It's first because it affects everything else. If the guideline "don't rush" will cause harm, for example, then you should ignore "don't rush" in favor of "cause no harm."

When you cause harm, it creates ripples of problems that make life more difficult for yourself and those you have harmed. You then become burdened with the obligation to rectify your mistakes and seek forgiveness, which are both long and tedious tasks that could easily have been avoided.

How does this play out in everyday life? Here are some examples:

- Don't kill or be violent toward others if that will harm them.
- Don't pollute or do things that will harm the health of others.
- Don't drink and drive, or do other negligent things that might injure others.
- Don't eat animals or animal products.

- Don't employ others in an oppressive way, or use products made by workers who are oppressed.
- Don't spread information that will lead to others being harmed.
- Don't steal or take things from people if that will harm them.
- Don't withhold resources from people if that will harm them.
- Don't stand idly by or be silent if you see others being harmed.
- Don't do to others what you would not want done to yourself.
- Don't force your beliefs on others.
- Don't lie.
- Don't buy things you don't really need (don't harm the environment).

Often “causing no harm” leads to difficult choices—sometimes you have to figure out what action (or non-action) leads to less harm.

The positive side of this principle is “be compassionate.” This often involves a complete change in the way that we think. Instead of judging others, for example, being compassionate means to try to understand them better, to empathize, and to try to relieve them from pain.

Compassionate living is a topic that deserves an entire book—I'd recommend [The Art of Happiness](#), by the Dalai Lama. In brief, it requires understanding, empathy, and the desire to lessen the pain and increase the happiness of others.

Have No Goals or Fixed Plans

The idea of having concrete, achievable goals seems to be deeply ingrained in our culture. I know that I lived with goals for many years, and, in fact, a big part of my past writings are about how one can set and achieve goals.

These days, however, I live without goals, for the most part. It's liberating, and contrary to what you might have been taught, it doesn't mean that you stop achieving things.

It means that you stop letting yourself be limited by goals.

Consider this common belief: "You'll never get anywhere unless you know where you're going." This seems like common sense, yet it's obviously not true if you really think about it. Conduct a simple experiment: go outside and walk in a random direction, and feel free to change directions randomly. After twenty minutes, an hour . . . you'll be somewhere! You just didn't know you were going to end up there.

And there's the rub: you have to open your mind to going places you never expected to go. If you live without goals, you'll explore new territory. You'll learn some unexpected things. You'll end up in surprising places. That's the beauty of this philosophy, but it's also a difficult transition.

Today, I live mostly without goals. Now and then I start coming up with a goal, but I'm letting them go. Living without goals has never been an actual goal of mine . . . it's just something I'm learning that I enjoy, that is freeing, that works with the lifestyle of following my passion.

THREE IMPORTANT NOTES

Many people have a problem with my “no goals” experiment, so I’m going to make three notes before we get into it:

1. **My Definition of “Goal”:** I don’t define goal as “anything you want to do”. I’m not talking about getting rid of all desires. I’m talking about letting go of predefined outcomes. So “goal” means “predefined outcome or destination”. If you start walking, without knowing where you’re going, you could say, “I have a goal of walking!” But you don’t know where you’re going. If instead you start walking to go to the store, that’s a walk with a goal. When people say, “You’re doing something, so therefore you have goals!”, my response is, “Yes, but I don’t know or care where it takes me.” (Btw, this is a symptom of the Gotcha Syndrome, where people try to point out my hypocrisies instead of actually trying the recommendations.)

2. **You don’t have to try it.** If living without goals seems stupid or too extreme for you, don’t try it. It doesn’t matter to me if you disagree with me on this point -- it works for me, but it might not work for you. That’s OK. The other things in this book are still useful. And who knows, maybe some day you’ll come back to this and consider it.

3. **Did I need goals when I started?** Many people say that it’s fine for me to not need goals now, but that’s only because I’ve already accomplished a lot, and have gotten to the point where I don’t need goals. That’s fine -- you can believe that ... or, you could just try living and working without goals, and see what happens. I don’t know if I needed goals when I started -- how can I go back and test it? My guess is I wouldn’t be where I am now, if I started by using these ideas, but I would be somewhere great.

THE PROBLEM WITH GOALS

In the past, I'd set a goal or three for the year, and then sub-goals for each month. Then I'd figure out what action steps to take each week and each day, and try to focus my day on those steps.

Unfortunately, it never, ever works out this neatly. You all know this. You get busy or procrastinate or life gets in the way, your weekly goals and monthly goals get pushed back or side-tracked, you become discouraged because you have no discipline. Then you review your goals and reset them. You create a new set of sub-goals and action plans.

Sometimes you achieve a goal and then you feel amazing. But most of the time you don't achieve them and you blame it on yourself.

Here's the secret: the problem isn't you, it's the system! The goals system is a set up for failure.

Even when you do things exactly right, it's not ideal because goals limit your possibilities. When you don't feel like doing something you have to force yourself to do it. Your path is chosen, so you don't have room to explore new territory. You have to follow the plan, even when you're passionate about something else.

Some goal systems are more flexible, but nothing is as flexible as a life without goals.

LIVING WITHOUT GOALS

So what does a life without goals look like? In practice, it's very different than one with goals.

You don't set a goal for the year, nor for the month, nor for the week or day. You don't obsess about tracking, or actionable steps.

You don't even need a to-do list, though it doesn't hurt to write down reminders if you like.

What do you do, then? Lay around on the couch all day? No, you find something you're passionate about, and you do it. Just because you don't have goals doesn't mean you do nothing—you can create, you can produce, you can follow your passion.

And in practice, this is a wonderful thing: you wake up and do what you're passionate about. For me, that's usually writing, but it could be helping others or connecting with incredible people or spending time with my wife or playing with my kids. There's no limit, because I'm free.

In the end I usually achieve more than if I had goals, because I'm always doing something I'm excited about. But whether I achieve or not isn't the point: all that matters is that I'm doing what I love, always.

I end up in places that are wonderful, surprising, great. I just didn't know I would get there when I started.

No matter what path you find, no matter where you end up, it's beautiful. There is no bad path, no bad destination. It's only different, and different is wonderful. Don't judge. Just experience.

Always remember: the journey is all. The destination is beside the point.

Have No Expectations

How much of your stress, frustration, disappointment, anger, irritation, foul mood stems from one little thing?

Almost all of it comes from your expectations, and, when things (inevitably) don't turn out as we expect, from wishing things were different.

We build these expectations in our heads of what other people should do, what our lives should be like or look like, how other drivers should behave . . . and yet it's all fantasy. It's not real.

And when reality doesn't meet our fantasy, we wish the world were different.

Here's a simple solution:

Take your expectations and throw them in the ocean.

Picture all the expectations you have for yourself, your life, your spouse, your kids, your coworkers, your job, the world. Take them from inside of you and toss them in the ocean. A river or lake will also do.

What happens to them? They float. They're carried around by waves. The current takes them out, and they drift away. Let them be washed away by the cleansing waters, and let them go.

Now live your life without them.

What's a life without expectations like? You accept reality as it is, and people as they are, without trying to force people into the containers that you have created for them. You see things as they are. You don't need to be disappointed or frustrated or angry—or if you are, you accept it, and then let it go.

That's not to say that you never act—you can act in a way that's in accordance with your values and influence the world, but never have an expectation of how the world will react to your actions.

If you do something good, you won't expect praise or appreciation. Let those expectations of reward and praise float away with the waves. Do good because you love doing good, and expect nothing beyond that.

Pay attention to your thoughts. Don't beat yourself up if you have expectations. Just see them. Then toss them in the ocean.

Notice if you start to wish things weren't the way they are. If you wish someone else didn't do something, notice that. You have expectations, and you wish people or the world could meet them instead of doing what they actually do. Toss those wishes in the ocean too. Now accept things, and move on.

Let the waters of the world cleanse us, and let us walk lightly in a world that is already wonderful without our fantasies.

The Illusion of Control

When you think you control something, you're wrong.

It's amazing how often we think we're in control of something when really we aren't.

Control is an illusion.

We constantly make plans that never actually turn out the way we envisioned. "If you want to make God laugh, make plans," an old saying goes.

We have been trained to set goals, and then work on the actions that lead to those goals . . . and yet how often do we fail to meet those goals? How often are we trying to control a future that we cannot predict?

Did you know five years ago that the world would turn out as it has—that Obama would be elected president, that the stock markets would crash, that we'd be deep into a recession, that earthquakes and tsunamis would hit, that you'd be doing exactly what you're doing today?

Of course not. We don't know the future, much less are able to control it. We like to think we do, but that never turns out to be true.

And yet we continue to believe in the illusion of control. We face a chaotic and complex world and seek to control it in whatever way we can.

Our attempts to control the world can be seen by these methods:

- Trying to control how our children turn out, as if we can shape them like blocks of clay, as if humans aren't more complex than we can possibly understand.

- Tracking every little thing, from spending to exercise to what we eat to what tasks we do to how many visitors are on our site to how many steps we've taken today and how many miles we've run. As if our selective tracking can possibly include the many complex factors that influence outcomes.
- Trying to control employees—again, complex human beings with many motivations and whims and habits that we don't understand.
- Obsessively planning projects, trips, days, parties, as if the outcomes of events are things that we can control with our powers of manipulation of the world.

If we can let go of this illusion, what are we left with? How can we live among this chaos?

Consider the fish. A fish swims in a chaotic sea that it cannot possibly control—much as we all do. The fish, unlike us, is under no illusion that it controls the sea, or other fish in the sea. The fish doesn't even try to control where it ends up—it just swims, either going with the flow, or dealing with the flow as it comes. It eats and hides and mates, but does not try to control a thing.

We are no better than that fish, yet our thinking creates the need for an illusion.

Let go of that thinking. Learn to be the fish.

When we are in the midst of chaos, let go of the need to control it. Be awash in it, experience it in that moment; try not to control the outcome but deal with the flow as it comes.

How do we live our lives like this? It's a completely different way of living, once we let go of the illusion:

- We stop setting goals, and instead do what excites us.
- We stop planning, and just do.
- We stop looking at the future, and live in the moment.
- We stop trying to control others, and focus instead on being kind to them and showing love.
- We learn that trusting our values is more important to taking action than desiring and striving for certain outcomes.
- We take each step lightly, with balance, in the moment, guided by those values and that which we are passionate about . . . rather than trying to plan the next 1,000 steps and where we'll end up.
- We learn to accept the world as it is, rather than being annoyed with it, stressed by it, mad at it, despaired by it, or trying to change it into what we want it to be.
- We are never disappointed with how things turn out, because we never expected anything—we just accept what comes.

This might seem like a passive way of living to some, and it's against our aggressive, productive, goal-oriented cultural nature. If you can't accept this way of living, that's OK—many people live their lives with the illusion of control. Being ignorant about what it is that makes them unhappy or frustrated isn't the worst thing ever.

But if you can learn to live this way . . . it's the most freeing thing in the world.

Living with Chaos

We've talked about letting go of goals, plans, expectations. What I'm still learning is what to do if you let go of the illusion of control and plan as little as possible.

What's life like without goals or plans? How do we deal with the chaos?

I don't have all the answers, but I'm learning a lot.

I recently went to the World Domination Summit in Portland with few plans. I had a speech to give, a couple smaller sessions to hold, a bike tour scheduled, a plane ticket and a hotel room. But the large majority of the weekend I left open, with no plans.

It was liberating. I didn't mind giving the talks, and I loved the tour, but meeting unexpected strangers, hanging out with people I'd never met, going with the flow of the crowd—it was fun. I never really knew what was going to happen next, and that's scary . . . but strangely freeing.

I also recently went to Guam for a month, and had tons of friends and family to see. But other than a place to stay, we had no set plans. We didn't know what we would do for transportation, we didn't know what we would do each day. It was scary, but we were fine.

How do you live with the chaos?

You learn to embrace it.

Living Daily Without Plans

I try to schedule as little as possible, and I have no goals for each day. I wake up and ask myself, “What excites me today?” And each day the answer is different.

Sure, there are obligations that I have to meet, but mostly those are things I’m excited about. I’ll still do the things I’m not so excited about—unless I can avoid them.

But in each moment I try to live consciously, in the moment, and ask myself . . . “What am I passionate about? And how can I handle each moment while being true to my values?” It’s about being “mindful.” Most people don’t live in a state of mindfulness.

My value is compassion, which comes in various manifestations: love, kindness, empathy, gratitude. Every time a situation comes up, I ask myself, “How can I deal with this compassionately?” This is a question more people should ask of themselves.

I’m still learning how to do this. I don’t claim to have mastered it, and will probably be exploring the ways in which to do it for years to come.

Why Plans are an Illusion

Living without plans might seem foolish or unrealistic to most people. That's fine. But if you want to be realistic, you should understand that the plans you make are pure illusions of control.

Let's take a simple example. You have plans to write a report (or a blog post or a book chapter) and then meet with a colleague or business partner. The writing is supposed to happen at 9 a.m. and the meeting is at 11 a.m.

Let's assume those things actually happen according to plan. Many days, other things come up and the illusion of control is easily shattered. But some days we get lucky and our plans actually happen as we had hoped.

So you sit down to write, as planned. Perhaps you've outlined your writing. But as you write, you think of things you hadn't planned. You face problems you couldn't have foreseen before you started writing. In fact, if you pay close attention, it becomes clear that there's no way you could have planned the writing ahead of time—it has to unfold as you do it, because only as you do it do you fully think things through, and there's no way to predict one's own thinking (let alone the thinking of others).

And so things emerge from our writing that could never have been planned, and, in fact, if we're open to it, we might write something entirely brilliant that we never could have predicted. However, if we try to stick to the outline, we might ignore the brilliant possibilities that arise.

So now it's 11 a.m. and it's time for your meeting. You meet your colleague or partner, as planned, and start talking. Of course, conversations can't be planned, and there's no way to predict what will emerge as you talk. You might even have an agenda, but as you

talk about things on the agenda, new ideas surface, and when one of you suggests a new idea, that sparks another idea in the other person, and so on—ideas are sparked, back and forth, that couldn't have been planned.

And so new ideas and projects and collaborations emerge from this meeting that never could have been planned. Which is a great thing.

The two planned events, even though they happened as planned, were totally unpredictable and uncontrollable. The more we embrace this chaos, the more we embrace the brilliant possibilities that might emerge. The more we try to control our day and actions with plans, the more we limit ourselves.

Be Open to the Unfolding Moment

We try to hold onto the illusion of control, but what if we instead embraced the chaos? What if we leave ourselves open to the changing, unfolding moment, and the possibilities we could never plan for?

It's beautiful.

Try it. Throw out your plans for the next hour. See what happens, moment to moment. Think about what excites you, what's in line with your values. Be intentional about this.

And as you start doing things that excite you, things that are in line with your values . . . see what new things emerge. Talk with people with no fixed intentions, and see what ideas arise from those interactions. See what new opportunities evolve as you interact with people, with ideas, with your own thoughts.

It sounds nebulous, but in fact it's as concrete as anything else. As I've shown, when we make plans, we think we're setting things in concrete, but life is always fluid—we just try to make ourselves believe that it's solidly concrete.

When we acknowledge the fluidity of our lives, we learn to use that fluidity to our advantage. We flow. We are open to changing currents. We see things with open eyes, instead of trying to make the world adjust to our plans and goals.

I don't have all the answers, and, in fact, I'd be a hypocrite if I claimed to be able to predict what will happen when I live like this . . . or if anyone else lives like this.

I don't know what will happen. Think of the limitless possibilities of that simple statement.

Don't Create False Needs

Our lives are filled with things that we need to do. Until we look a little more closely at those needs.

Think about what needs you might have: the need to check your email every 15 minutes, or empty your inbox, or read all your blogs, or keep something perfectly neat, or dress for work in the latest fashion. The need to constantly badger your kids about things, or control your coworkers, or meet with anyone who wants a meeting, or have more and more money, or own a nice car.

Where do these types of needs come from? They're completely made up.

Sometimes the needs are created by society: the industry you're in requires you to work until 9 p.m. or dress in flawless suits. Your neighborhood has certain standards and if you don't have an impeccable lawn and two BMWs in the driveway, you'll be judged. If you don't have the latest iPhone, you won't have your geek cred or status symbol, and you'll be jealous of those who do.

Sometimes the needs are invented by ourselves: we feel the urge to check our emails or RSS feeds or news websites or text messages or Twitter accounts constantly, even though there are no negative societal or work consequences if we don't keep up with them. We want a perfectly made-up bed even if no one else cares. We want to create a list of goals in life, or for the year, and achieve every one of them, even if nothing bad will happen if we don't achieve most of them.

Any of these made-up needs can be eliminated. All it takes is the willingness to let go.

Examine one of your made-up needs, and ask yourself why it's such an important need. Ask what would happen if you dropped it.

What good would it do? Would you have more free time and more space to concentrate and create, or less stress and fewer things to check off each day? What bad things would happen—or might happen? And how likely is it that these things would happen? And how could you counteract them?

These needs are created by fears, and the more honest we are about these fears, the better. Face the fears, and give yourself a little trial period—allow yourself to let go of the need, but just for an hour, or a day. Just for a week. If nothing bad happens, extend the trial, and, slowly in this manner, you'll find that the need wasn't a need at all.

It can feel good to let go, and by letting go, you are freeing yourself.

Be Passionate & Do Nothing You Hate Doing

How much of our days are spent doing things we dislike? It's been ingrained in us that we must do things we don't like doing—that these things necessary, that it's a virtue to do things we dislike doing. I disagree.

If you hate doing something, figure out a way to stop doing it. This can sometimes be very easy, but other times it means eventually making a drastic life change. Whether you make that change is up to you.

Sometimes I can just stop doing something, other times I've had to let go of something I really thought was necessary (my job, living in Guam, etc.). And each time that I've dropped the odious task, I've felt freer.

I've quit several jobs that I hated. I dislike driving, so I moved to San Francisco, and now my wife and six kids and I are car-free. I don't like budgeting, so I automated my finances. I got tired of moderating comments, so I removed them. I didn't like dealing with advertisers, so I removed ads from my site. When I'm reading a book that bores me, I choose another. I automate or remove repetitive, boring tasks from my life.

Dropping the things I hate frees me up to do the things I love. Now I only do things I'm passionate about. If I start to hate a project, I'll drop it. That might mean I don't finish everything I start, but finishing what we start is a false need—in my experiments, I've found that doing what we love is a much better method.

I spend time with the people I love most. I read, and run, and write. I help others, and find time for solitude. These are the things I love, and my life is filled with them.

I apply the same ideas to health and fitness: I find the healthy foods I love, and eat those. I find ways to play, and so I'm active and fit doing things I love—running and jumping and throwing things around and playing with my kids and climbing and sprinting up hills and swimming and playing basketball. I get fit doing what I love doing, and it is effortless.

How much more skillful, soulful, and useful could your best work get if you didn't spend so much energy pushing yourself into doing stuff you hate?

Don't Rush, Go Slowly, & Be Present

Don't rush. Go slowly. Be present. Rushing through our days causes difficulties and extra effort.

We tend to rush around, doing everything quickly, piling as many tasks into our days as humanly possible. That means we have little down time, little space between tasks and events, little rest. And it means we are very rarely present as we do things, which means we're not enjoying life, or food, or people.

It also means we're causing unnecessary problems. Rushing often leads to accidents—driving fast, for example, is the biggest cause of auto accidents. Rushing around a workplace leads to accidents. Rushing through a task leads to mistakes. We aren't mindful as we're rushing, which means we miss things, we don't see problems as they're approaching, we harm ourselves and others.

Rushing makes everyone else around us more stressed as well. When I try to rush my family out the door so we won't be late, my wife (who takes her time getting ready for anything) gets stressed out because I'm rushing her. When we rush around the office doing things, it makes our coworkers feel more rushed themselves. It adds an extra, unnecessary pressure to every event in our lives.

Instead, try going slowly. This is the true tempo of an effortless life, and, ironically, it isn't easy for many people. Walking slowly between two things in the office, or in the home, is a foreign concept for most of us.

Try eating more slowly. Try doing nothing but eating—no reading or Internet browsing or watching television or talking to others. This is hard if you're not used to it. But the result is that we

become more mindful of our food—the taste and texture of it, where it came from, how much we eat, how full we are. It's a good way to lose weight, to be grateful for what you have, to fully appreciate the food you're eating.

Try driving more slowly. You'll be safer, cause less harm, be less stressed, enjoy your drive more.

Living a slower life means removing unnecessary goals, plans, actions, so that you have more breathing room. This subtraction can take time. Feel free to subtract slowly.

Create No Unnecessary Actions

Much of what we do is unnecessary. That's a bold statement, but one that I've found true from observation.

Consider Masanobu Fukuoka, the revolutionary Japanese farmer I mentioned in the earlier chapter, "True Needs, Simple Needs." He studied traditional and modern farming, and after long and careful observation concluded that most of what farmers (modern or traditional) do is unnecessary: plowing and tilling and weeding and fertilizing and pruning and using pesticides. He stripped away these unnecessary actions and was left with much less that needed to be done.

The same principle applies to everything we do. Much of what we do is only done because of custom, because we think it's necessary, or because we've created the need for the actions through problems caused by other actions we've taken. By giving careful consideration to each action we take, we can start to refrain from unnecessary actions.

You'll want specifics, not just generalities. So, here are some examples:

- Responding to every email or Facebook message or tweet is unnecessary. We feel the urge to do so, perhaps, because we don't want to be rude; but I've found that few people are truly offended if I don't reply. Figure out what replies are the most essential, and do those.
- We create unnecessary cleaning and maintenance when we bring too many possessions into our lives. By removing those unnecessary possessions (de-cluttering) and not bringing more

into our lives, we have less cleaning and maintaining and storing to do.

- As parents, we tend to do too much for and with our kids. In truth, we can teach our kids to be fairly self-sufficient, and we can give them space to play and create without needing us (and electronics) to fill every single minute of their days. And so, by subtracting parenting actions, we can do less, but give the kids more room to grow and learn on their own.
- Yard work can become unnecessary if you let wild plants grow naturally and sow veggies among the weeds. Sure, that's not in keeping with neighborhood norms, but it's an example of how we can change the way things are done.
- If you shave your head, there's a whole host of hair maintenance actions that can be eliminated.
- If you can work from home, or live near your work, you eliminate commuting.
- If you remove comments from your blog, you don't need to moderate comments.

There are countless examples, of course, but the guiding principle of “do nothing unnecessary” is one to keep in mind as you go about your day.

Find Contentment

Almost everyone I know is looking for something better, all the time.

They want a better life, better clothes, a better car, a better job, a better place to live. And I understand this, because I was there most of my life.

It wasn't until I learned to find contentedness, slowly, that I was actually able to improve my life:

- By realizing that spending time with my wife, my kids, and myself was all I needed, I no longer needed entertainment or shopping. I spent less and got out of debt.
- By learning to be content with homemade food, I stopped needing to eat out all the time (although I still do on a semi-regular basis) and I lost weight.
- By learning to explore and be amazed by all that was around me, I stopped needing to drive so much, and have now ditched my car. I contribute less to global warming, and am getting pretty fit from all the walking and biking.
- Most of all, I stopped the endless cycle of wanting more, of wanting better, and I realized I already had everything. I'm so much happier now.

Finding contentment isn't something that usually happens overnight, but rather comes in small doses. Here are some things you can do today to learn to find that contentedness:

- Look around you right now, or perhaps when you're sitting at home. Realize that everything around you is all that you need for happiness. What do you need to be happy? Food, shelter,

clothing, other people, something meaningful to do, and a mindset of contentedness.

- Want something meaningful to do? You don't need to change jobs—just help others, in any way you can. Help coworkers to succeed. Be there for friends when they need you. Spend time with loved ones and encourage them. Volunteer to help the needy. Improve your community in small ways.
- Need others in your life? Find a neighbor and make a friend. Volunteer and be friendly. Hang out with coworkers. Be considerate, friendly, positive in all human transactions.
- Start counting your blessings—all the things for which you have to be grateful.
- When you find yourself thinking about what you want, start appreciating what you have, every day.
- Be more mindful in everything you do—eating, showering, walking, working, washing dishes, talking, writing, reading and spending time with others.
- Improve your capacity of mindfulness through daily sitting meditation.

When you find contentment, you realize you need very little, and little needs to be done. Life becomes easier, and better.

Let Go of Success & the Need for Approval

Laozi said:

Success is as dangerous as failure.

Hope is as hollow as fear.

What does it mean that success is as dangerous as failure?

Whether you go up the ladder or down it,
your position is shaky.

When you stand with your two feet on the
ground,

you will always keep your balance.

Success is something that's ingrained in us from birth, and almost every moment of our childhood and schooling are geared towards the idea of success. But it's a hollow concept. Who defines success? Why is it so important? What happens when we don't achieve it? And what happens when we do, and still want more, or realize it wasn't worth all the effort, and that we've wasted our lives?

The need for success, and to be seen as an achiever, drives us to do so much that's unnecessary. We strive for a nice house, car, clothes, gadgets, traveling the world, a prestigious job, a list of accomplishments, a flock of online followers. To what end? To look good in the eyes of the world, when in truth the rest of the people in the world are worried about themselves.

Let go of the need for success, of the need for approval from others. We want to look good to our peers, sure, but relinquish this as a driving force in our lives.

Keep your feet on the ground. Find balance, find contentment. Forget about “success.”

Prefer Subtraction

We seem to have a natural instinct to add things to our lives. We want to achieve more, do more, find new hobbies, make new friends, acquire more.

But every single thing added to our lives requires new efforts. One by one we add new things and don't account for all the maintenance required for each new thing, friend, hobby and goal. Soon we become overwhelmed, and we don't know how to cut back.

A general guideline is to be very careful about adding new things to your life, and, in general, favor the subtraction of things.

When a new online social network comes out, be careful in your choice to add, and prefer the removal of online activities instead.

Be careful about adding new friends, new projects, new commitments. Prefer to get out of commitments that aren't enhancing your life, but rather complicating it.

Subtraction is a careful process and it takes time. Addition tends to be mindless—it's easy to say yes without fully scrutinizing all the ramifications it will have on our lives. So take care when considering something new, and slowly remove things when possible.

Be a curator of your life. Slowly cut things out until you're left only with what you love, with what's necessary, with what makes you happy.

Changing Your Mindset & Getting Rid of Guilt

When people first hear of effortlessness, of giving up goals and expectations, of surrendering control, of doing less . . . they often have negative thoughts.

It's against our cultural norms to do less—it's considered lazy. We don't like to be passive, it's not an empowering word. We want to work harder, not merely sail through life. We want to achieve more goals, not give them up.

That's the mindset we've been trained to have, but it's not necessarily better. It's the mindset I had for many years, and, through my experiments, I've found the effortless life to be more natural, more satisfying. I'm much more content these days.

If you find yourself having a negative reaction to any of these ideas, that's OK. Pay attention to those thoughts. Then ask if you're right, or if it's possible that this way might work as well, or better. If you only think you know but don't have factual evidence, get the factual evidence by experimenting.

When we start to do less, and do it with less effort and more fluidity, we might feel guilty at first. But as we see the results of this crazy experiment, we start to feel better about it because we see that doing less is not so bad. The changed life is not a matter of laziness, but of living more naturally and mindfully with more contentment.

That's a good life. Instead of rejecting your old ideas, you are giving yourself permission to lead a better life—the Effortless Life.

Be Like Water

Bruce Lee taught us the lesson of fluidity:

Be like water making its way through cracks.
Do not be assertive, but adjust to the object,
and you shall find a way round or through it.
If nothing within you stays rigid, outward
things will disclose themselves.

Empty your mind, be formless, shape-
less—like water. Now you put water in a cup,
it becomes the cup; You put water into a
bottle it becomes the bottle; You put it in a
teapot it becomes the teapot. Now water can
flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend.

In practice, this means letting go of fixed plans and routes. It means not having expectations of what a situation will be, or what its outcome will be. It means remaining flexible so that we can adapt our actions—or non-actions—to the ever-changing situation, the unfolding moment.

When we fix on one path or goal, we lose flexibility and adaptability, because we want to go to one specific place using one specific path. But what if things change? It's hard to adapt if we're fixed and rigid; but if we have nothing fixed in stone, we can adapt to the changes easily.

What happens when your plans get messed up? Do you get upset? If you learn to give up expected outcomes, and let go of wishing that things were different, you won't get upset. You'll adapt. You'll flow.

This opens us up to possibility. With no fixed path, we are free to take any turn, any opportunity, any whim, any door that opens

up when we least expect it. It's impossible to predict the future accurately, so how can we know how things will unfold? If we don't know how things will unfold, how can we set a fixed path in advance? By leaving yourself fluid, you allow yourself to see things as they change, adapt with balance, learn as things happen, and use this new information to change your course intelligently and intuitively.

Equal Weight to Every Action

A Zen monk and friend of mine, Susan O'Connell, taught me something important recently. Susan is Vice President of the San Francisco Zen Center and a movie and TV actress in a former life.

She gave a talk about how she goes through her day, and it was enlightening. I've since put her ideas into practice.

Susan says she gives equal weight to every action, to every moment. We tend to do the opposite: certain things we do are more important than others and so we mentally focus on those and give little thought to the smaller things.

Susan gives equal weight to meditating, working on an important project, talking with a stranger, walking to her car in the parking lot, eating a bowl of soup. None is more important than the other. Even the space between things is given equal weight.

The spaces between things: when we move from email to talking to a co-worker, that is a space between things. When we move from eating to putting our dish in the sink, that's a space between. And we tend to barely register these spaces on our consciousness.

Imagine giving these spaces the same weight as you would something more "important". What would a day filled with these important spaces be like? In my experience, it means we're more mindful, that we have a slower and more evenly paced day, that we are calmer and more at peace. It means less stress, and less effort.

Try it for an hour. Every single thing you do should be done mindfully, and given equal importance — whether that's putting something away, walking from one spot to another, picking up the phone, or talking to someone.

It also means that things we tend to overemphasize — perhaps over-dramatize — are less emphasized. This tends to mean fewer unnecessary emotions are invested in things that aren't that dramatic in the first place. We tend to lose perspective sometimes, but if we give equal weight to everything, it's easier to keep perspective and not lose our cool.

As with any of these ideas, I'm still learning this one, but it's been useful to me. I hope it will help you too, and if it does, give thanks to Susan.

Eating Simply

I've been slowly getting healthier, fitter, leaner, happier using a very simple diet — though I give myself a lot of latitude and am not strict at all.

WHAT I EAT

I generally (though not strictly) eat whole, real, unprocessed plant foods. Some combination of these things:

- Lots of veggies, especially dark green leafy ones
- Beans (including soybeans)
- Nuts & seeds (almonds, walnuts, flax seeds, quinoa, etc)
- Whole grains like steel-cut oats, brown rice
- Fruits with abandon
- Wine, coffee, tea

I'll also eat minimally processed foods like olive oil, nut butters, tofu, vinegars, etc.

I love avocados, black beans, almonds, lentils, coconut milk, berries, sweet potatoes, sprouted grains.

I'll eat veggie chili, stir-fried tofu & veggies with quinoa, black beans with tahini sauce on brown rice with kale, steel-cut oats with raw almonds & berries & ground flax seeds & cinnamon, things like that.

WHAT I EAT LESS OF

The only thing I've cut out completely is meat and other animal products. But there are some things I eat less of than before:

- Sweets

- Processed grains
- Sugary beverages
- Fried foods

I indulge in these things sometimes, but only in modest amounts.

WHY I CUT OUT ANIMAL PRODUCTS

I didn't stop eating meat, dairy, or eggs for health reasons. It's for ethical reasons. I see no reason we should willingly cause the suffering and mass killing of millions of innocent feeling, suffering beings just for our pleasure (it tastes good).

Sure, you can say that fish or yogurt are healthy, but the fact is, we can eat a healthy diet without them (as I've shown here). And so the only real reason to eat animals is for pleasure, and that's not something I can feel good about. I don't judge those who do it, but I personally don't want to be a part of it.

CONCLUSIONS

This isn't a difficult diet. It's fairly cheap, it's packed with dense nutrition, it's not hard to prepare, it's delicious.

And it's healthy. You can eat simple, unprocessed foods, all plants, and be incredibly healthy. And you don't have to stress about it or be disciplined — just enjoy this diet, and enjoy less healthy foods on occasion in moderation.

I found that when I cut out the animal-related foods, my enjoyment of the other foods I continued to eat increased. So did my energy level.

SOME RECIPES

I know people will ask for recipes, so here are a few I've published before:

- S t e e l - c u t o a t s :
<http://zenhabits.posterous.com/my-favorite-healthy-breakfast>
- S c r a m b l e d t o f u :
<http://zenhabits.posterous.com/leos-healthy-scrambled-tofu>
- V e g g i e c h i l i :
<http://zenhabits.net/health-tip-try-eating-vegetarian/>
- Tahini sauce goes with beans, kale, brown rice (not my recipe):
<http://www.livestrong.com/recipes/i-am-attentive-spice-tahini-sauce/>

Effortless Parenting

For those of us with children, parenting is often one of the most “effortful” things we do. Parenting isn’t easy, and I’m not going to write a chapter here pretending that it is.

I have found that through subtraction, parenting can be easier than most of us are used to.

Consider some of the normal ways we parent, and how the principles of this book can help subtract those efforts:

- Many of us over schedule our children: they have school events and schoolwork, but also a variety of other activities: sports, dance classes, music classes, summer camps, play dates, birthday parties, and much more. The kids are endlessly busy, and so are we. What if we had them do less, and cope with boredom, and find ways to entertain themselves? We’d have less to do as parents.
- Many of us stress over clean houses and clean rooms. What if we gave up expectations of our kids’ rooms, and instead just tried to set a good example and forgot about whether our kids are actually learning from that example? We’d be less stressed.
- Many of us are worried about our kids’ success, and so we do so much to give them the best foundation for success. But what if we gave up expectations and hopes for what our kids might do, how they might turn out? And instead, what if we just accepted whatever they decide to do with their lives?
- We often expect our kids to be ideal kids, on their best behavior, and they almost never live up to that (or they get incredibly stressed out trying to live up to that). We spend a lot of our time trying to get our kids to conform to the standards we

set for them. What if we gave up our expectations of our kids and how they should behave, and instead accepted them for who they are?

- We have a set idea for what our kids should learn, and how they should be educated. I've found that most of my old ideas about school were wrong, and now Eva and I unschool our kids. We let go of the traditional top-down model of learning, and instead allow them to learn based on their interests (so they actually want to learn), allow them to teach themselves (so they can teach themselves into adulthood), allow them to learn to solve problems (so they can solve any problem, and not just memorize useless fact). In short, they learn how we learn as adults, which is based on what we're interested in. And as a result, I have much less to do when it comes to education, because really all they need to know is how to teach themselves and how to solve problems.

I haven't learned all these lessons fully myself. These are things I'm experimenting with, but so far the results have been incredible.

I've learned that there is very little we need to do as parents — mostly we should just try to keep them alive and keep ourselves from screwing them up.

Like Masanobu Fukuoka and his theories of “natural farming,” I'm finding that the least amount of intervention as a parent is the best amount. The less we do as parents, the better.

That doesn't mean I ignore them. Not at all: instead, I spend time with them, but it's unstructured time with no expectations of the kids. I set an example, with no expectation that they'll act exactly as I do or as I hope. I love them, unconditionally, no matter how they behave. I let them grow and learn on their own, with lit-

the intervention or desired outcomes. They're better off for it, I've been finding.

Effortless Relationships

Relationships are possibly the most complicated things in our lives. From long-standing battles with co-workers to the history of scars and joys we have with our significant others to the frustrations and miracles of parenting, every relationship becomes a multitude of layers of meaning and past actions and the emotions that result from those actions.

How can we simplify those relationships? By learning to be present, and forget about past injustices. By giving up our complicated expectations of the people we live and work with, and simply accepting them for who they are.

You can wake up and still be mad at your wife for an imagined slight from the night before, or you can wake up and see her beautiful face and appreciate her for the wonder she is. Those past injustices only live on if we dwell in the past. If we learn to live in the present moment, they disappear, because all we have is what is happening right now: another person, breathing like we are, wanting to be loved like we do.

Practice being present in your next interaction with a friend or loved one. Don't worry about what has happened before, or what will happen later. Just enjoy being with that person, pay full attention to that person, and be grateful you are in their presence.

Practice letting go of expectations of other people. It's these expectations that cause us to be frustrated and angry and disappointed. When your co-worker pisses you off, it's because you expect them to be better, to be different. They aren't. They're exactly how they are, and wishing they were different will get you nothing but frustration. So accept how they are, and work within that reality.

That doesn't mean you have to take crap from everybody. It means that in your mind, you don't wish people were different and weren't rude. Instead, you deal with that rudeness evenly and appropriately, and perhaps even learn about humanity in the process.

Letting go of expectations can be extremely difficult. It first entails mindfulness — the realization that we have expectations of people, and that these expectations are causing frustration. That's a tough first step, but letting go of the expectations is even tougher. It means taking a deep breath, and saying, "This is the way the world is right now, and it is perfect."

And those expectations, and resulting frustrations, are everywhere. When we get mad at other drivers in traffic, it's because we expect them to drive a certain way, when the reality is, there will always be rude drivers. Expecting different is useless. When we're in line and the person serving the line is slow, we expect them to be faster, and it makes us angry. When our child misbehaves, we expect them to act perfectly. When our friend doesn't show up for a date, we expect them to be better.

Those expectations serve no purpose but to cause us grief. Letting go of them simplifies every relationship.

Effortless Work

Work can be play, and when it is, it's virtually effortless.

Take the writing of this book. I decided to do it for fun, to explore some of the ideas I've been practicing lately, to see what would happen if I did it publicly and opened the doors to the world. And I had a ton of fun doing it. As a result, I've written this book faster than any other book, and the writing has been easier than ever.

Some ideas for turning work into effortless play:

- Do what excites you. When you do drudgery, it's hard to have fun doing it.
- Make it social. Work with someone you like, or make it a group project, or get an accountability partner.
- Post your progress online. This won't work for every project, but it can be fun to share what you've been doing with others, and to get feedback daily.
- Do it in small bursts. As an example, I've kept the chapters of this book very short. I can write them in one sitting, and in fact I can usually write several chapters in one sitting. That means writing a chapter is never very hard, and I don't have to force myself through an intimidating amount of boring work. If a project is too large, break it into smaller chunks.
- Make it a competition. Creating a challenge between two or more people can add a lot of fun to any job. I love playing basketball, for example, and so I can play for a couple hours and it doesn't feel like exercise — it's just a game.
- Walk away if it's boring. You never force yourself to play, and if you get tired of playing, you walk away. Any work should

be the same way: if you're tired of the work, walk away. You can always come back later.

Of course, this assumes you have a decent degree of control over your work. Sometimes you aren't as lucky, but you can still focus on the parts of the work that are fun, and turn the boring bits into little games — how many words can you write in 10 minutes, or how many customers can you send away with a smile?

If you hate your job — maybe it won't allow you to play effortlessly every day — realize that you can change it. We are not stuck in our jobs. I felt like I was, more than once, because my family relied on my income. But I changed, by looking for other opportunities, by putting feelers out, by exploring things that really interested me.

Find something you love doing, that feels like play, and turn that into your job. That means you have to get really good at it — once you're really good, people will pay you. So play at the job, perhaps on the side of your day job, and keep playing until you get good at it. The only way to get better is to do it.

Find a way to make a living doing it, once you're good at it. Find a way to help people by doing what you love doing. That can take some creative thinking, but often it just takes a few Internet searches before you find others who are doing what you love doing, and making money at it.

No matter what your job, you can find a way to make it play. It's all a matter of mindset. And once it's play, it's effortless.

Turning Complaints Into Gratitude

A life full of complaints isn't effortless. It's a constant struggle, because everything in life is horrible. But a simple switch in mindset can change everything.

Take your biggest complaint today. Now try to find a way to be grateful for that complaint.

A few examples:

- I hurt my elbow playing basketball. But how lucky I am to be able to lead such an active life!
- My boss has been obnoxious all day. I'm thankful for the opportunity to practice patience, to be present, to learn about humanity, to be alive.
- I lost my job today. And thus I'm free to explore all the scary job paths I've never had the time to pursue before.

It's transformative. You go from hating the world to loving it. You stop wishing you had things you don't, and start appreciating what you do have.

Turning a complaint into gratitude is a simple process:

1. You have to first notice that you're complaining. Be mindful of your thoughts, of your negative self-talk.
2. Notice also that you're wishing things were different than they are. Which is a futile activity, if you think about it.
3. Now accept things as they are. Be OK that the world has turned out exactly as it is. And note that the world will go on, whether you're OK with it or not.

4. Now be grateful you have the opportunity to even make a complaint. Being alive is a miracle. Find a way to see the silver lining, because everything has a positive side if you look hard enough.

Doing this once is a great pick-me-up. But doing it daily, even all day long, can change your life. Soon you'll have no complaints, and go through life happier than ever.

Letting Go of Struggle

Our lives aren't effortless because we struggle through so much. But the struggle is entirely invented, lives entirely in our minds.

We invent this struggle for many reasons: to give our lives meaning, to give ourselves a feeling of accomplishment, to dramatize our story (even if only in our own heads), or simply because this is the mode of thinking we've become used to.

Giving up the struggle isn't always easy, but it is liberating. When you realize you don't have to struggle with everything, life becomes so much more effortless.

Take the example of struggling with your young child when she won't eat her vegetables. This struggle is unnecessary — forcing her to eat the vegetables accomplishes nothing. The child won't like vegetables more because she's forced to eat them. Instead, set the example of eating vegetables yourself, and find ways to make eating healthy foods fun for her. By making it fun, and letting go of the need to force her to eat veggies, you've let go of the unnecessary struggle.

The same applies to any struggle where we have expectations of others — let go of those expectations, and stop trying to force people to conform to the expectations. Those are an imagined ideal anyway. Instead, motivate through inspiration, make things fun, and focus on what's important: the relationship. The struggle is never as important as the relationship.

Struggle comes when we try to force things down a certain path. Instead, flow around the obstacle like water, finding an alternate path, letting go of the fixed path. Adapt, be fluid, and accept the changing course.

Dealing With Others

One of the most difficult questions for anyone trying to make changes in their lives is: What if others in my life don't want to simplify?

It's an amazingly common problem, and one that doesn't have an easy answer.

However, there are things you can do if your significant other, family members, friends, co-workers or others in your life are standing in the way of finding simplicity.

I'm lucky in that my wife, Eva, is incredibly supportive and in fact has joined me in my journey to simplify. She has eliminated a lot of her stuff, has streamlined her life, and while she's not quite as minimalist as I am (who can blame her?), she's come an amazingly long way and I'm proud of her.

But that didn't happen by accident — I engaged Eva's participation from the beginning, got her on my side, and didn't push or try to force her to do anything (well, usually — I don't claim to be perfect). And of course, what's most important is that she genuinely wants me to be happy and to succeed in anything I do. Again, I'm really lucky.

I've had success in getting my kids on board, at least a little bit, with a lot of what I do, and I've also had success in letting them live their lives differently than I lead mine. I've also had to deal with other family members and people in my life who haven't been so supportive — in a few cases, actively against some of the things we've tried to do.

A SIMPLE METHOD

How have I dealt with all of this? I'd like to share some of what's worked for me, in hopes that it'll help some of you. As always, your mileage will vary.

1. **Model behavior.** The most important thing you can do to convert others to your ideas is to be the best model possible. Walk the walk, and do it visibly, so others can see what you're doing. This goes for your spouse, for your kids, for family and friends, for co-workers. Just showing how to do it can be a powerful tool indeed. De-clutter your life, live more simply, and you'll go a long way to converting others.

2. **Share how important it is to you, and the benefits.** This is really the second part of being a role model: as you start to live the simple life, show others how great it is to you, how important a part of your life this is. Talk with them about it, and tell them why you're doing this. When people understand your motivation, they can start to get on board, or at least stop feeling so threatened. And when they see how great it is for you, how happy it makes you and all the great things it brings into your life, they'll move closer and closer to your way.

3. **Ask for help.** One of the first things I did with Eva was ask for her support. Not just her consent, but her physical help. I confessed that I can't do it on my own and I need her. Many people, if they truly care about you, want to help you. They want you to be happy, and if you tell them how they can help you succeed, they'll do their best. If possible, make simplifying a team effort — not just something you're doing, but something you're all doing together. And make it fun!

4. **Educate.** The best way to educate others is, as I said above, by your good example. But beyond that, you may want to share books and websites and blogs you're reading, not in a way that insists that they change, but just to show what you're interested in

and how they might learn more if they're interested. Documentaries, podcasts, magazines, and other good sources of information are helpful as well. You can't force people to read or watch, but you can make it available. In addition, talk with them about it — again, not in a pushy way but in a way that shows how excited you are and how you'd like to share what you're learning about. If they seem put off, don't drone on and on.

5. Help them succeed. If you do have some success converting some of the important people in your life to your way of thinking, at least to a minor degree, don't criticize when they don't do it as well as you'd like, or to the extent you'd like. Instead, be encouraging, be happy for them, and support them in any way you can. Again, make it a team effort.

6. Realize you can't control or change others. One of the most common frustrations comes when people try to control other people, or force them to change. It's a recipe for control others, but there will always be a struggle, and you'll always fail to some degree. This applies to your significant other, even to kids. We try to control them but we can't, not really. Instead, try to influence others, encourage them, support them, help them find happiness. And let go of the need to control. It's difficult but really essential here. Once you can release that need to control, you'll find much more happiness.

7. Set boundaries. Once you stop trying to control others, you have to find ways to live together with different goals and different ways of life. If you want to simplify and the others you live or work with don't, how can you peacefully coexist in the same space? Some possibilities (but nowhere near an exhaustive list): decide who owns what and just simplify your own things; split up the house or office into your area and theirs; find a happy compromise between simplicity and major clutter.

8. Have patience. Don't expect others to change overnight just because you have. The important people in your life might not get quite as excited about this change, because it's not coming from them. They might not learn it as quickly as you have, or go quite as far. Or they might not want to change or support your change at all, at first... but later, they might come around. Again, don't push or be obnoxious about it, but instead be patient, encouraging, with an attitude of sharing what you're learning and excited about.

9. Change what you can. Sometimes you can't change everything you'd like, and you have to learn to accept that. Find areas you can control, find places that others will allow you to change, and focus on those. The other areas might come later (or they might not). This is what comes from having others in your life — you give up complete control, but you also get the wonder of sharing your life with other human beings, something I'd never give up.

10. Find support. If you can't get support from some people in your life, find it elsewhere if possible. This might be from others who are doing the same thing as you — friends or family, or people in your community. It could be from online communities, such as social networks or forums. There are tons of people out there who are trying to simplify. Share your progress, challenges, frustrations with them, and you'll find help from people who understand.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO PRACTICE

Many times there are large parts of your life you can't control — teenagers must live with the rules of their parents, for example, and many employees don't control their work flow or work environment. This can be extremely frustrating if you're trying to change, to live a more effortless life.

If you have others who try to control you, or who won't cooperate, or who make your life difficult, try a simple but powerful method:

Look at every interaction with those people as an opportunity.

- An opportunity to practice patience.
- An opportunity to empathize and find compassion for others.
- An opportunity to let go of your expectations of what others should do.
- An opportunity to stop wishing things were other than they are.
- An opportunity to be grateful in the face of frustrations.

When you see these difficult situations as an opportunity to practice these skills, you can see that these people in your life are a blessing.

You're Already Perfect

A lot of people read other personal development blogs and books because they want to improve something about themselves. They're not satisfied with their lives, they're unhappy with their bodies, they want to be better people.

I know, because I was one of those people.

This desire to improve myself and my life was one of the things that led to Zen Habits. I've been there, and I can say that it leads to a lot of striving, and a lot of dissatisfaction with who you are and what your life is.

A powerful realization that has helped me is simply this: You're already good enough, you already have more than enough, and you're already perfect.

Try saying that to yourself, as corny as that might sound, just to see if it sounds true. Does it resonate as something you already believe (in which case, you can probably stop reading now and start writing), or does it not feel right? Do you feel like there are things you still need to improve?

The thing I've learned, and it's not some new truth but an old one that took me much too long to learn, is that if you learn to be content with who you are and where you are in life, it changes everything.

Consider what changes:

- You no longer feel dissatisfied with yourself or your life.
- You no longer spend so much time and energy wanting to change and trying to change.
- You no longer compare yourself to other people, and wish you were better.

- You can be happy, all the time, no matter what happens in the world around you.
- Instead of trying to improve yourself, you can spend your time helping others.
- You stop spending so much money on things that will supposedly improve your life.
- You can be smug about it, like me.

OK, the last bit was a joke, but the rest is true, in my experience.

And here's another realization that I've written about before: You already have everything you need to be content, right here and right now.

Do you have eyes that see? You have the ability to appreciate the beauty of the sky, of greenery, of people's faces, of water. Do you have ears that hear? You have the ability to appreciate music, the sound of rainfall, the laughter of friends. You have the ability to feel rough denim, cool breezes, grass on bare feet... to smell fresh-cut grass, flowers, coffee... to taste a plum, a chili pepper, chocolate.

This is a miracle, and we take it for granted. Instead, we strive for more, when we already have everything. We want nicer clothes, cooler gadgets, bigger muscles, bigger breasts, flatter stomachs, bigger houses, cars with leather seats that talk to you and massage your butt. We've kinda gone insane that way.

The sane thing is to realize we don't need any of that. We don't need to improve our lives. We don't need to improve ourselves, because we're already perfect.

Once you accept this, it frees you.

You're now free to do things, not because you want to be better, but because you love it. Because you're passionate about it, and it gives you joy. Because it's a miracle that you even can do it.

You're already perfect. Being content with yourself means realizing that striving for perfection is based on someone else's idea of what "perfect" is ... and that that's all bullshit. Perfect is who you are, not who someone else says you should be.

You are perfect today. You may be different tomorrow, and you will still be perfect.

Now stop reading this, and go be happy.

Putting This Book Into Practice

A person living a complicated life full of struggle and difficult people might find this book a bit overwhelming, though it's meant to be fairly simple.

You might not know where to start, or feel like it's too difficult to make these kinds of fundamental changes.

It doesn't have to be a struggle, or overwhelming. Finding effortlessness doesn't have to require great effort.

Start simply, and effortlessly. Practice one little thing, in small bursts throughout the day.

One step at a time, putting one foot in front of the other, is how you start the journey. It's how the entire journey is made.

Practice letting go of expectations of others. Practice being mindful of when you wish things were different. Practice turning complaints into gratitude. Practice stepping back when you start to struggle, and letting go of that struggle. Practice going through life with fluidity, with no fixed plans or expected outcomes, and being adaptable to the inevitable change that comes every day.

Practice each of these things separately, one at a time, and you'll get better with every practice. Soon you'll be a master.

Some of the ideas in this book won't apply to your life, and that's OK. You don't have to follow this as a manual of life, but more a collection of loose guidelines meant to help. They work for me, but no two people are the same, and you'll want to test them for yourself. Let me stress that: pick the ideas that work best for you -- if some of them are objectionable to you, try others.

You might also find that if you come back to this book and these ideas later, more of them will apply to your life then. I've found that to be true myself: sometimes I reject an idea as being impractical, only to come back to it later and find it to be perfect.

Be flexible. Be forgiving of yourself. Allow yourself to practice, every day, and make lots of mistakes. It's those mistakes that will help you learn, as they've helped me. I hope to make many mistakes as I continue to learn these ideas.

Effortless Writing & This Very Book

This book was written using many of the principles it contains.

I had no goals for this book. I was just inspired to share some ideas about effortless living I've been experimenting with, learning about, excited about.

I opened an online Google Doc and started writing it, with no fixed intentions. Within minutes, I considered the idea of sharing it publicly and writing it with the world watching. Then I considered the idea of allowing anyone to edit it and seeing what unfolded.

That's a scary idea, but a liberating one. I let go of control, and allowed things to unfold. I let go of copyright, and gave up ownership of the text. I have faith in the compassion and genius of humanity.

My daughter asked, "Isn't that scary?"

I said, "What's the worst that can happen?"

It was exhilarating to write this way -- it transformed the solitary act of writing into one that is public, almost performance art, and one that is collaborative. There was no control of the auteur, it was the passion of the crowd.

The writing has been effortless because I'm passionate about it, I have no fixed plans or expectations, I'm in no rush, I'm doing it mindfully, and I'm letting others help me edit, so I save unnecessary work.

So far, I've loved every minute of it. Thank you, my friends.

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