

The Short Version

100 Ideas for a Better Life, Two Pages Each

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A sample: ten of the hundred. Each section of the book ends its opening page with "if you only do one", pointing at the subject that pulls the rest of the section along. These are those ten, exactly as they appear in the book, after the two pages that tell you how it works.

The full book has 100 subjects in ten sections, a map at the front that turns a problem into a subject number, and the references behind every figure at the back. Paperback and Kindle editions on Amazon.

8 · A one-week time audit | 13 · Spot your thinking traps | 23 · If-then plans | 34 · Design the environment, not your willpower | 43 · Put the phone in another room | 52 · Breathe: the physiological sigh | 61 · Sleep: the wake time comes first | 79 · Friendship takes hours and initiative | 87 · Pay yourself first, automatically | 100 · Memento mori: use finitude

How to use this book

Do not read it. Use it.

This is a hundred subjects, two pages each. The left page is the gist: five or six bullets on what the idea is, what the research found, and the mistake most people make with it. The right page is what to do: three exercises, one you can start today, most in under ten minutes, one that runs over a week, one more if you want it, each with a box to tick and a line for the date. At the foot of the right page, a short example of the first exercise filled in, so you can see what yours might look like.

There is no order. Each subject stands alone, and where another subject helps, its number is in brackets. Open the book where it hurts: the map on the next page turns a problem into a page number. Or open it anywhere. The sections run from the inside out, from knowing yourself to what it is all for, but nobody is checking.

Every subject earned its place the same way. It had to come from the books people actually recommend, and the research had to support the idea at its core; the exercises are this book's way of applying it, not things tested one by one. Where the evidence says the popular version is wrong, the page says so. Some well-known ideas are smaller than their reputation, and those pages say that too. The references are at the back, by subject number.

The book leaves things out on purpose: parenting, couples beyond a single page, faith, addiction, and anything a therapist should be handling. Not because they do not matter. Because a page cannot hold them.

One thing before you start. If what you are carrying is heavier than a page can hold, if you have not slept properly in weeks, cannot function, or have thoughts of harming yourself, this book is not the tool. Talk to a doctor, or call a crisis line in your country. The pages will still be here afterwards.

The way this book suggests using it: one subject for twelve weeks, rather than ten subjects for one. Pick one. Do the exercises. Redo the life audit (subject 1) each quarter, and pick the next.

Start here

Find the line that sounds like you. Go to the first number. The other two are where to go next.

If this is you	Start with	Then
I can't get started on anything	46	32, 23
I know what to do and don't do it	34	35, 38
My days disappear and I can't say where	8	42, 50
I can't focus for more than ten minutes	43	41, 44
I'm late with everything	47	48, 45
I'm tired all the time	61	63, 70
I'm anxious and can't switch it off	52	55, 57
I'm angry more than I'd like	56	51, 54
I'm hard on myself	15	13, 6
I compare myself with everyone	18	1, 20
I don't know what I want	2	21, 25
I say yes to everything	26	74, 11
I can't decide	27	28, 29
I keep starting habits and dropping them	31	39, 33
My relationships have gone thin	71	79, 80
I'm avoiding a hard conversation	73	76, 72
My career has stalled	81	84, 86
Money disappears	87	90, 88
I study and nothing sticks	91	92, 94
Nothing feels like it matters	99	100, 60
I've read all the books and nothing changed	24	37, 30

If none of these is you: subject 1, the life audit. It finds the line for you.

8 A one-week time audit

The week disappears and you cannot say where.

- Memory is a bad clock. When time-diary studies compare what people say they work with what they log, the people claiming the longest weeks overestimate the most, by many hours. Screen time runs the other way: under-estimated by hours.
- A week is 168 hours. Take out 56 for sleep and 50 for work and commute, and 62 remain for everything else: care, chores, meals, recovery, and the hours nobody can account for. The audit finds out which is which.
- The version that works is logging as you go, in 30-minute blocks, for seven days. Reconstructing the day at bedtime produces the same fiction as memory. Your phone's screen-time report and your calendar fill the gaps.
- The audit is diagnostic, not moral. You are looking for drift, the 45 minutes between dinner and the thing you meant to do, not for sins.
- Measuring changes behaviour on its own: monitoring progress toward a goal improves the odds of reaching it across 138 studies, more so when the record is written down. The audit is the first week of that.
- The common mistake: fixing things during the audit week. Observe first. Change after.

Go deeper: Laura Vanderkam, *168 Hours* (2010); Harkin et al., "Does monitoring goal progress promote goal attainment?", *Psychological Bulletin* (2016).

DO THIS

- ☐ **Today, 5 minutes: set up the log.** One sheet, 7 columns for the days, 48 rows for the half-hours; or a notes file; or a spreadsheet. Put it where you will see it every two hours: on the desk, on the home screen. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week, 7 days: log it.** Every two to three hours, fill the blocks since the last time. Ten words a block, one category each: sleep, deep work, shallow work, commute, family, chores, phone, TV, exercise, or "?". A "?" is a finding, not a failure. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **Next Sunday, 20 minutes: add up and name the drift.** Hours per category. Circle the three biggest blocks of "I didn't mean to". Pick one to reassign next week. Leave the other two alone for now. *Done on* _____

What it looks like. Sunday's totals: sleep 49, work 46, commute 6, family 24, chores 9, phone 17, TV 11, exercise 2, "?" 4. The three biggest "didn't mean to": phone after 9pm (6 hours), the gap between lunch and the first afternoon task (3), Sunday morning (2). Reassigned next week: the 9pm phone hour.

13 Spot your thinking traps

One short email and you have decided they hate you and the project is dead.

- Cognitive therapy's founding observation: distress often comes from automatic thoughts, and automatic thoughts have recognisable shapes. Beck described them; Burns turned them into a checklist.
- The ten: all-or-nothing thinking; overgeneralising ("always", "never"); the mental filter (one bad detail fills the view); discounting the positive; mind-reading; fortune-telling; magnifying or minimising; emotional reasoning ("I feel it, so it is true"); should statements; labelling ("I'm an idiot").
- Naming the trap works because it moves the thought from "fact" to "pattern". You cannot argue with a fact. You can check a pattern.
- The therapy built on this is one of the best-tested treatments for depression and anxiety, and its central tool, the thought record, works on paper without a therapist for everyday thoughts.
- The common mistake: replacing the negative thought with a positive one. The target is the accurate thought. "The email was short; short emails are usually busy, not angry; I will know tomorrow."

Go deeper: David Burns, *Feeling Good* (1980, revised 1999); Hofmann et al., "The efficacy of cognitive behavioral therapy: a review of meta-analyses" (2012).

DO THIS

- ☐ **Today, 5 minutes: catch and label.** The last thought that spoiled an hour. Write it word for word. Check it against the ten; most thoughts carry two or three. Label each one. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **Today, 5 minutes: the accurate version.** Three columns: evidence for, evidence against, what a fair observer would say. Write the fair sentence. Rate how much you believe the original thought, 0 to 100, before and after. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week, 7 entries: the thought record.** One a day, four lines each: situation, automatic thought, traps, accurate thought. By day seven you will know your two favourite traps, and they will be the same two for years. *Done on* _____

What it looks like. Thought: "Her reply was one line. She's furious and the project is dead." Traps: mind-reading, fortune-telling, magnifying. For: it was short. Against: she has back-to-back meetings on Mondays; the last three short replies were fine. Fair version: "Short reply on a Monday. I will know by Wednesday." Belief: 85 before, 25 after.

23 If-then plans

You meant to. The intention never had a starting cue.

- An implementation intention is one sentence: "If \[situation\], then I will \[action\]". Not a goal ("exercise more") but a cue wired to a response ("if it is Tuesday at 7am, then I put on my running shoes").
- Across 94 studies and 8,000 people, forming one raised goal attainment with a medium-to-large effect ($d = 0.65$), on top of the effect of having the goal at all. Few techniques in the goal literature have evidence this consistent.
- Why it works: the decision moves from the moment, when you are tired or tempted, to now, when you are calm. Later, the situation triggers the action without a fresh decision.
- It works best at the three places where plans die. The start: "if I reach my desk, then I open the draft before anything else." The interruption: "if a message arrives, then I finish the sentence first." The lapse: "if I miss a day, then I do the tiny version the next morning."
- Specific beats vague: a place, a time, a cue you will notice.
- The common mistake: writing goals in if-then clothing. "If I want to be healthier, then I will eat better" has no cue and no action.

Go deeper: Gollwitzer & Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (2006); Gollwitzer, "Implementation intentions: strong effects of simple plans" (1999).

DO THIS

- ☐ **Today, 5 minutes: three if-thens for one goal.** One for the start, one for the interruption, one for the lapse. Write them here. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week: run them.** Tick each time a cue fired and the action followed. Rewrite any cue that never fired; the cue was wrong, not you. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week, once: the "if asked" plan.** One if-then for a social moment you handle badly: "If someone asks me to take on something new, then I say 'let me check and come back to you tomorrow'." *Done on* _____

What it looks like. Goal: write every morning. Start: if I sit at the desk with coffee, then I open yesterday's last paragraph. Interruption: if the phone buzzes, then I finish the sentence before I look. Lapse: if I miss a morning, then I write 100 words at lunch. Fired this week: 5 of 7, 3 of 3, 1 of 1.

34 Design the environment, not your willpower

You resisted all day and lost at ten in the evening.

- The popular model said willpower is a muscle that tires with use. In 2016, 23 laboratories ran the same experiment on more than 2,000 people and found an effect close to zero; a later multi-lab attempt with a different protocol found a small one. Fatigue after a hard task is real. A fixed daily tank of willpower that each task drains is not what the evidence shows, so build less on it.
- What people with strong self-control actually do: they avoid temptation rather than resist it. When researchers paged people through the day, those highest in self-control reported fewer temptations, not more heroic battles.
- Your environment decides for you all day: what is on the counter, what is open on the screen, what is in the fridge, who sits next to you. Change the environment and there is no fight to win.
- Habits run on context cues. In diary studies of everyday life, around four actions in ten were done in the same place, at the same cue, while thinking about something else. Remove the cue and the habit loses its trigger.
- The common mistake: keeping the temptation in view to "practise resisting". Put it in a drawer. The practice is not worth the losses.

Go deeper: Hagger et al., "A multilab preregistered replication of the ego-depletion effect", *Perspectives on Psychological Science* (2016); Wendy Wood, *Good Habits, Bad Habits* (2019); Hofmann et al., "Everyday temptations" (2012).

DO THIS

- ☐ **Today, 10 minutes: the walk-through.** Walk through your home and your workspace. For each bad habit, find its cue in the room: the bowl, the icon, the pinned tab. Move or remove three. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **Today, 5 minutes: the reverse.** For each good habit, put its cue in sight: the book on the pillow, the shoes by the door, the water bottle on the desk. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week: count the fights.** Each time you notice yourself resisting something, write it down. Every entry is a design task: what change would have made the fight unnecessary? *Done on* _____

What it looks like. Walk-through: biscuits on the counter (moved to the top shelf, in a tin); phone charging by the bed (charger moved to the hall); news site pinned in the browser (unpinned, logged out). In sight: running shoes by the door, book on the pillow. Fights this week: six, then two after the changes.

43 Put the phone in another room

It is face down and silent. It is still costing you.

- In two experiments with about 800 people, participants took tests of working memory (and, in one, fluid intelligence) with their own phone on the desk, in a pocket or bag, or in another room. Another room scored best. On the desk scored worst. The phones were silent and nobody touched them. A later pooling of studies found the effect smaller and less certain, so treat this as an experiment to run on yourself rather than a law.
- The effect was largest for the people who said they depended on their phones most. The ones who most needed the distance were the ones paying most for not having it.
- The proposed mechanism: part of your attention is spent not attending to the phone. Resisting costs the same resource the task needs.
- Notifications are a separate problem (subject 44). This is about presence. A device within reach is a standing invitation, and the mind keeps answering it.
- It generalises. Whatever is in sight competes: the open chat on the second screen, the tablet, the pile of post. Distance is cheaper than discipline.
- The common mistake: all or nothing. If you need it for calls, for a child, or for an accessibility function, keep it in the next room with the ringer on, or on the desk face down with everything but calls silenced. The point is distance from the feed, not from the people.

Go deeper: Ward, Duke, Gneezy & Bos, "Brain drain: the mere presence of one's own smartphone reduces available cognitive capacity", *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* (2017).

DO THIS

- ☐ **Today: one block with the phone in another room.** Ringer on if you must. Count how many times you reach for it anyway. Done on _____
- ☐ **This week: give the phone a home.** A drawer, a shelf by the door, a charger in the hall (subject 35). It lives there during deep blocks and after 9pm. Done on _____
- ☐ **This week, once: the desk audit.** Everything in your line of sight while you work. Remove the three most tempting. Done on _____

What it looks like. Block one, phone in the kitchen: reached for it six times in 90 minutes and found a coffee cup. Home: the shelf by the front door, charger there. Desk audit: the second monitor with chat (closed during blocks), the tablet (drawer), the pile of post (moved). Reaches by Friday: one.

52 Breathe: the physiological sigh

Someone told you to take a deep breath. It did not work.

- In the Stanford trial, about a hundred people spent five minutes a day for a month on either mindfulness meditation or one of three breathing patterns. The breathing improved mood and lowered breathing rate more than the meditation, and the pattern that worked best was "cyclic sighing".
- The pattern: inhale through the nose, then a second short inhale on top to fill the lungs, then one long slow exhale through the mouth. Five minutes a day as a practice is what the trial tested. One to three repetitions in an acute moment is this book's extension of it, untested in that trial.
- The likely mechanism: the double inhale reinflates the small air sacs and clears carbon dioxide; the long exhale slows the heart through the vagus nerve. The body already does it on its own before sleep and after crying.
- It can be done in the moment, in under thirty seconds, with nobody noticing. That is what most "calm down" advice lacks.
- The daily practice compounds: in the trial the mood gains grew across the month.
- The common mistake: the "deep breath" most people take is a big inhale with a short exhale, which raises arousal. The exhale is the lever. Longer out than in.

Go deeper: Balban et al., "Brief structured respiration practices enhance mood and reduce physiological arousal", *Cell Reports Medicine* (2023).

DO THIS

- ☐ **Today, 30 seconds: three sighs.** Double inhale through the nose, long exhale through the mouth, three times. Rate your state before and after, 1 to 10, here. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week, 5 minutes a day: the practice.** Timer, same time daily, anchored to something you already do (subject 33). Rate mood after each session. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week: the trigger list.** Three moments that spike you (the inbox, a certain meeting, the school run). Attach three sighs to each, done before you walk in. *Done on* _____

What it looks like. Three sighs before the 2pm call: 7 before, 4 after. Practice anchored after the morning coffee, five minutes; mood across the week 5, 5, 6, 6, 7, 6, 7. Triggers: opening email (three sighs first), the Monday meeting (three in the corridor), the drive home (three at the last traffic light).

61 Sleep: the wake time comes first

You get seven hours most nights and still feel as if you are underwater.

- Sleep loss hits sustained attention first and hardest. Across 70 studies of short-term deprivation, simple attention tasks degraded most. The first thing to go is the thing you need to read this page.
- You adapt to feeling tired faster than to being impaired. After two weeks limited to six hours in bed, people in the laboratory reported only mild sleepiness while their performance had fallen to the level of up to two nights without sleep.
- Regularity matters alongside duration. Among 60,000 people wearing sleep trackers, how consistent their sleep timing was predicted mortality more strongly than how long they slept; that is an observational finding, not a trial, and it does not make short nights fine. A fixed wake time, seven days a week, is the practical anchor.
- The numbers: seven to nine hours for most adults; a wake time that moves by no more than an hour at weekends; a dark, cool room; no screens in bed (subject 35).
- Sleeping in at the weekend is a two-hour time-zone shift taken on Saturday. Monday is the jet lag.
- The common mistake: fixing bedtime. Fix the wake time; for most people bedtime drifts into line within a week or two.

Go deeper: Lim & Dinges, "A meta-analysis of the impact of short-term sleep deprivation on cognitive variables", *Psychological Bulletin* (2010); Windred et al., "Sleep regularity is a stronger predictor of mortality risk than sleep duration", *Sleep* (2024); Van Dongen et al. (2003) on chronic restriction.

DO THIS

- ☐ **Today, 2 minutes: pick the wake time.** One time, seven days. Write it here. Set the alarm for the whole week, including the weekend. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week: log two numbers a night.** Lights out and wake time. Nothing else. See the spread. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week, once: the bedroom audit.** Light (blackout or a mask), temperature (cooler than the living room), the phone (out, subject 43), noise (earplugs or a fan). Fix one. *Done on* _____

What it looks like. Wake time: 6:45, seven days. Log: Mon 23:40 to 6:45; Tue 23:10; Wed 00:20; Thu 23:00; Fri 23:30; Sat 00:10 (hard); Sun 23:00. Spread of bedtimes in week one: 80 minutes. In week two: 40. Bedroom: phone moved to the hall, a mask ordered, window cracked and the room two degrees cooler.

79 Friendship takes hours and initiative

You have fewer close friends than ten years ago and cannot say when it happened.

- Friendship has a price in hours. In one study of new friendships, the transitions came at roughly fifty hours together for casual friend, ninety for friend, and two hundred or more for close friend, cumulative, and mostly hours of leisure and conversation rather than time at work. Hours are the currency, and adults stop spending them.
- Friendships die of neglect, not conflict. The commonest way adults lose friends is drift, because nobody initiated. The initiating is the friendship.
- People underestimate how much a friend will appreciate being contacted out of the blue. In a series of experiments, recipients valued a quick check-in message substantially more than senders expected, and the gap was largest for weaker ties and longer silences. "They're probably busy" is usually the wrong reason not to.
- Rituals beat intentions: a standing monthly dinner, a weekly call on the commute, a shared activity. Scheduled friendship is not less real. It is the kind that survives.
- The common mistake: waiting until you have time to catch up properly. Five minutes now beats an hour never.

Go deeper: Jeffrey Hall, "How many hours does it take to make a friend?", *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2019); Liu, Rim, Min & Min, "The surprise of reaching out", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2023).

DO THIS

- ☐ **Today, 2 minutes: message someone you have not spoken to in months.** Two lines: "Thought of you because _____. How are things?" No agenda. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week: book a ritual.** One standing thing with one person: a monthly dinner, a Sunday call, a weekly walk. Put the first three in the calendar. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week, once: the hours budget.** Pick the friendship you want closer. Estimate the hours spent together in the last year. Decide the hours for the next three months, and where they come from. *Done on* _____

What it looks like. Message: to an old flatmate, "thought of you because I passed the café; how are things?" Reply in twenty minutes, with a voice note. Ritual: a Sunday 18:00 walk with M; the first three Sundays booked. Hours budget: with R, maybe six hours last year. Next three months: fifteen, through the walk and one dinner a month.

87 Pay yourself first, automatically

You save what is left at the end of the month. There is never anything left.

- The experiment: employees who would not commit to saving more now agreed to have their contribution rate rise automatically with each future pay rise. Over about forty months their savings rate went from 3.5% to 13.6%, and four in five of those who joined were still in through the fourth pay rise.
- The lesson is about design, not willpower. A decision made once, in advance, beats a decision made every month against the pull of the present. It is subject 34, applied to money.
- Pay yourself first: the transfer to savings leaves the day the salary lands, before anything else. What is left is what you spend, and spending adjusts to it faster than you would believe.
- Start small and ratchet. Five percent if you can, one percent if that is what there is, and one more point at every raise or every six months. The ratchet is where the experiment's effect came from.
- Automation also removes the monthly moment of weakness. There is no "I'll skip this month", because there is no decision.
- The common mistake: waiting until you earn more. Spending rises with income (subject 90). The habit of the transfer has to exist first, at any amount.

Go deeper: Thaler & Benartzi, "Save More Tomorrow: using behavioral economics to increase employee saving", *Journal of Political Economy* (2004); Ramit Sethi, *I Will Teach You to Be Rich* (2009, revised 2019).

DO THIS

- ☐ **Today, 10 minutes: set the transfer.** Open your banking app. A standing order to a separate account, dated the day after payday, for an amount you can live without this month; five percent if unsure, less if that is the truth. Done before you turn the page. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week: write the ratchet.** The rule: "plus one percent every \[raise, or January and July\]." Put the first increase in the calendar. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week, once: make it slightly hard to undo.** A different bank, no card, or a notice period. Friction (subject 35) works in both directions. *Done on* _____

What it looks like. Standing order set: five percent to a separate savings account on the 2nd of each month; salary lands on the 1st. Ratchet: plus one percent on 1 January and 1 July, both in the calendar. Friction: the savings account is at a different bank with no card. First transfer went on Tuesday. Had not noticed by Friday.

100 Memento mori: use finitude

You have about four thousand weeks. You have used some of them.

- The Stoic practice: remember that you will die. Not to be morbid, but to spend the time as if it were finite, which it is. Seneca: it is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a great deal of it.
- The number: an eighty-year life is about four thousand weeks. It is small enough to feel. It turns "someday" into arithmetic. There will never be time for everything; the choice is what to leave undone, on purpose.
- The research version: when people perceive their time as limited, through age, illness, or simply a reminder, their priorities shift toward emotionally meaningful goals and close relationships and away from novelty and status. Older people's higher emotional wellbeing in surveys may come partly from this shift. You can try to borrow it without the years.
- Long-run regrets are about inaction (subject 29): the thing not tried, the person not called, the words not said. Short-run regrets are more often about actions, and they tend to fade. Plan for the long-run kind.
- The end of this book is the start of the next week. The ninety-nine subjects before this one are a menu. Finitude is the reason to order now rather than keep reading it.
- The common mistake: hearing this as gloom. It is the opposite. The finitude is what makes the Tuesday matter.

Go deeper: Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life* (c. 49 AD); Oliver Burkeman, *Four Thousand Weeks* (2021); Laura Carstensen, "The influence of a sense of time on human development", *Science* (2006).

DO THIS

- ☐ **Today, 5 minutes: the arithmetic.** Your age in weeks (age times 52). Four thousand minus that. Write it. If you want to, estimate how many of those weeks you will spend in good health, with the people you have now. That is the budget. It is a rough horizon, not a prediction. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week: one thing from the regret list.** Write five things you would regret not doing. Do the smallest one before Sunday. *Done on* _____
- ☐ **This week, once: choose the next subject.** Go back to the "start here" map at the front. Pick one subject for the next twelve weeks. Write its number here. Close the book and start it. *Done on* _____

What it looks like. Age 41: 2,132 weeks used; 1,868 left; in good health with the people I have now, perhaps 1,200. Regret list: the trip with my dad; the piano; the apology to R; the book; learning to sail. Smallest: the apology to R, sent on Tuesday. Next subject: 42, time blocking, twelve weeks, starting Monday. Book closed.