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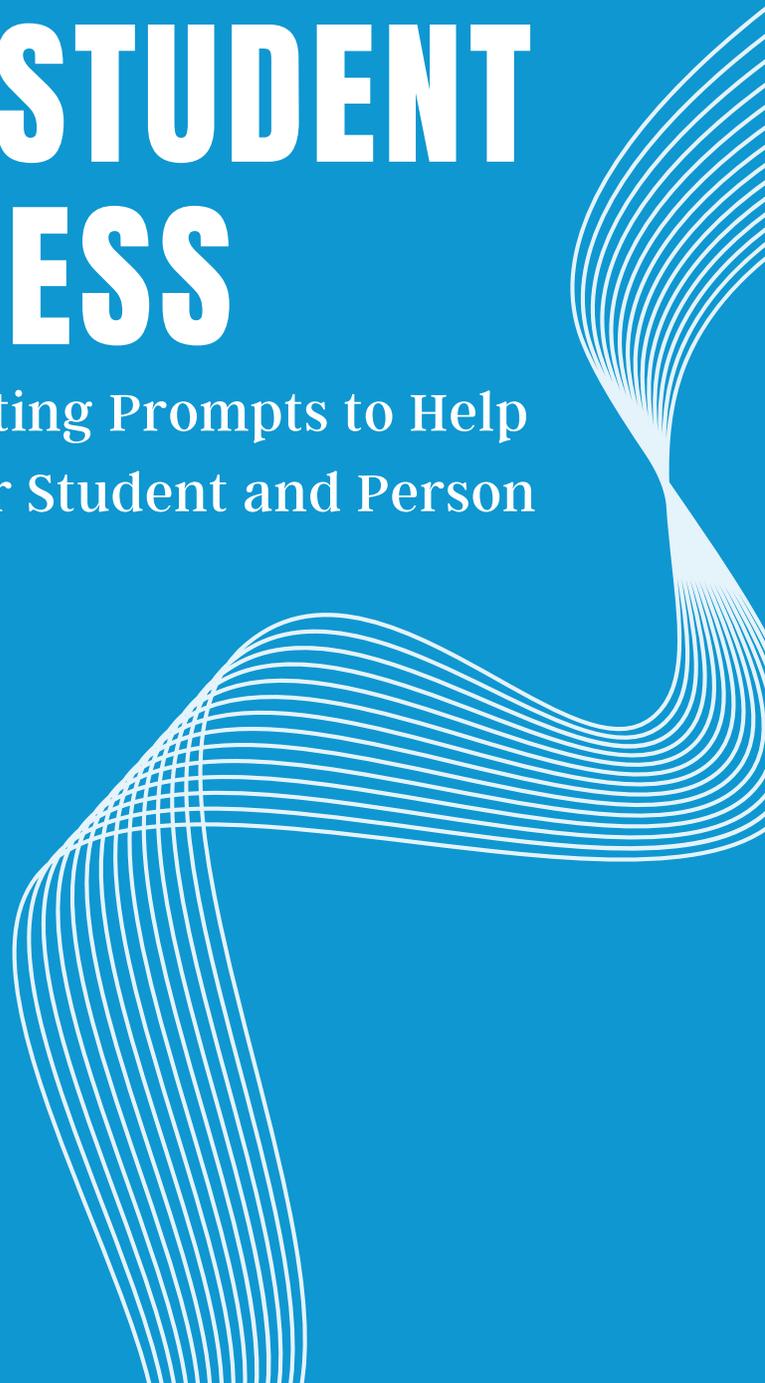
28

DAYS TO STUDENT SUCCESS

Brief Readings and Writing Prompts to Help
Anyone Become a Better Student and Person

SHAHAR LINK

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28 Days To Student Success

Brief daily readings inspired by Stoic Philosophy and science to help anyone become a happier and more successful student and human being.

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Day 1: Defining My Mission as a Student

“Stop letting yourself be pulled in all directions. But make sure you guard against the other kind of confusion. People who labor all their lives but have no purpose to direct every thought and impulse toward are wasting their time—even when hard at work.” — Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 2.7

The first lesson is about acknowledging that you have a lot on your plate -- and much of it you didn't choose yourself. It's easy to feel like you are working really hard for -- what, exactly? Just to get a good grade? Is an 'A' worth all of this effort in a class I don't even care about?

These are important questions. An 'A' in a class can mean a lot more work, so it's up to you to figure out why it's worth it. Your task is to align this class -- and really what you are doing as a student -- with a greater purpose. Perhaps it's to get into the school of your dreams, or to build a foundation for a career, or to cure cancer -- the loftier the better! Having a larger purpose, a deeper mission, makes the hard work much more do-able.

Having a Big Mission makes all the work easier and more enjoyable -- because it's meaningful. It's not all about 'A's. The bigger question is: what are my goals as a student and how can I align my time with my larger goals and purposes?

Prompt: Write down how your work as a student connects to your larger purpose and mission, both as a student and as a contributing member of society.

(Every day will have a writing prompt, since writing some small reflection really helps solidify the concept for each day. If you don't have a journal to write in, we strongly suggest you purchase one.)

Day 2: Finding Meaning in What You Are Doing Now

"They lose the day in expectation of the night, and the night in expectation of the day." -- Seneca

As students, it's easy to get caught up in future expectations. "I can't wait for the semester to be over." "I'm really looking forward to the summer." "I'm just doing this for the degree." We've all thought and said things like that.

But those kinds of thoughts don't really serve us. It's hard to feel motivated to work and think hard about your classes when you are more focused on just finishing them. And, worse than that -- we lose the day, which, let's face it, is really all we have. Not to get too philosophical, but the future actually exists only in your imagination.

So what we need to do is change those thoughts of "how great this will be when it's done" to "what value am I getting out of this work right now." What's interesting about what I'm learning? What are my thoughts and reactions to what I'm studying? How can what I'm learning in this class help me in some way right now? What am I curious about here? If you look for it, you can always find something about learning that has its rewards at this very moment. And finding that reward and meaning will help you be more motivated to put in your best work, which will lead to more reward, and a virtuous cycle ensues.

Prompt: Choose one activity that often feels mundane, and write about how you can focus on the joy and interest in the present moment.

Day 3: It's Not Supposed to Be Easy

“The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.”

— M. Scott Peck

Learning, real learning, is uncomfortable at times. We have to sit at a desk -- reading, memorizing, thinking deeply, for longer than we would like. We have to force ourselves to avoid distractions, feel the pain of missing that show, or missing that friend, or admitting that we don't really get it yet. Being a student sometimes feels like we aren't really doing anything in the “real world” -- we are wasting our time on books and papers and other people's ideas about what's good for us.

But all of this discomfort is simply necessary to achieve your goals. You can't get to do the things that really mean something to you unless you experience the discomfort. That's how growing and learning works. It's more comfortable to remain in the status quo, knowing what you already know, doing what you know how to do. But that doesn't get you anywhere. To get somewhere, you have to sometimes feel the pain.

Instead of avoiding the discomfort by checking Twitter, or eating another pretzel, or however it is we distract ourselves, try telling yourself to “feel the feelings” for a bit, and then continue with your work. Just feel the feelings. Set a timer for 2 minutes, sit there with the feelings, and feel them. I promise, you'll make it to the other side just fine. Actually -- better.

Prompt: What am I avoiding as a student for which I can instead “feel the feelings”? Write it down, and today, just feel the feelings for a few minutes. You can also just say to yourself a few times “It's not supposed to be easy.” Because -- it's not.

Day 4: Honor Your Promises To Yourself

“Each time you tell yourself you’ll do something but don’t, your self-esteem suffers. If you do it repeatedly, the empty promises you make to yourself lose their power. If you know that whatever you promise won’t get done, what’s the point in making promises to yourself? Breaking promises to yourself will ultimately cause you to stop setting goals.”

-- Thibaut Maurisse

If you say you are going to do something, do it. You just have to. One thing that implies is that you shouldn't promise to do something huge that is almost definitely beyond your capacity. Don't promise to meditate every day for the next year. Don't promise to study 5 hours a day the whole semester. To keep your promises to yourself make them manageable but also meaningful. If you want to commit to studying without interruptions more often, start with 25 minutes of "deep focus" studying for the next 2 days -- or whatever feels manageable but just a bit of a stretch beyond your comfort zone. Just make it something you really think you can stick to.

Then put it in your calendar and stick to it. You might want to imagine this calendar appointment as if it were with someone extremely important -- like with your favorite actor, singer, or athlete. You would never miss an appointment with Tom Brady would you? Unthinkable. Well, are YOU any less important? No. You are the biggest VIP in the world. Don't miss -- don't even show up late -- to an appointment with YOU.

Prompt: Make a small but meaningful promise to yourself that you can carry out in the next week or so, write it in your calendar, and stick with it.

Day 5: The Obstacle is the Way

“The obstacle in the path becomes the path. Never forget, within every obstacle is an opportunity to improve our condition.” -- Ryan Holiday

One of Ryan Holiday’s books on modern Stoicism is called *The Obstacle is the Way*, and title pretty much sums it up. As students, though, this idea can be taken a step further. Because in many ways, being a student means being defined by obstacles -- specifically the obstacle of learning new things.

It is possible to choose a life where you almost never need to learn new things. You can just stick with what you already know, and spend the rest of your time binge-watching on Netflix. You really could do that. (Well, you might need to earn money at some point.)

But you aren’t doing that. You are a student. You are in a position that is defined by your not knowing. Your whole reason for being is an obstacle in itself!

What an opportunity! You are so lucky to be able to constantly get better. That doesn’t mean you will necessarily get straight A’s. What it means is that you can view all of your work as an opportunity to become wiser, stronger, smarter, more competent, and more skillful. That is why you are a student.

If this sounds a lot like "growth mindset" thinking to you. You are right. It is along those lines. But the message that the hard things are really your best teachers -- the obstacle is the way -- might be a powerful mantra for you to recall when things feel hard.

Prompt: What subjects or areas can I re-frame as opportunities to better myself, as opposed to an “obstacle” that I have to “get through”?

Day 6: Is this In My Control?

We should always be asking ourselves, is this, or is it not, in my control?" -- Epictetus

Today's quote might be the one sentence summary of Stoicism, an ancient philosophy whose proponents believed that happiness was mostly a result of letting go of that which isn't in your control, and focusing on what is.

As students, this idea has tremendous relevance. After all, there is so much we can't control in our academic lives, such as who our teacher might be, how much work they give, how challenging we find a topic or subject to learn, what classes we have to take to meet our goals, who we have to deal with on a daily basis -- and much more. Many of these we will find frustrating and irritating. We might not like the teacher. We might wish we didn't have to take one more math class. We might find organic chemistry very confusing. We might think the bureaucracy of the school is incompetent. That's just how it is. We can't control those things.

We can, however, control how we respond to these frustrations. Every time we think "I hate this teacher" we can remind ourselves that they nonetheless have something valuable to teach us -- even if that lesson is how to deal with a difficult teacher! Every time we get angry at ourselves because we aren't understanding something we can remind ourselves "this will make me stronger and smarter." Every time we think "I don't see why I have to take math to get this degree" we can think "Math comes up everywhere and knowing more of it will only be a benefit for me, even if I'm not sure exactly how right now." And you can come up with your own creative responses to the situations you find annoying but aren't in your control. Doing so will not only make you a better student, but you'll find the whole process more enjoyable too.

Prompt: Think of something that irritates you but is not in your control. Come up with a way of reframing how you think about it, so that you turn it into something positive for yourself. Write this down.

Day 7: Value Your Time

“People are frugal in guarding their personal property; but as soon as it comes to squandering time they are most wasteful of the one thing in which it is right to be stingy.”

-- Seneca

Time is simply the most important thing we have -- we have absolutely nothing without it. Somehow this plain truth constantly gets lost in the busy shuffle of our lives. But that makes it no less true, or crucial to remember on a daily basis.

As students, we have limited time and a lot to do. We have to use our time wisely. That's why procrastinating can have such harmful effects if it gets out of control. It's not an overnight fix. Actually, time-management is a lifetime endeavor. But there are some key elements that need to be in place if you are to use your time in a way that really serves you.

Future emails will get more deeply into the nitty-gritty of time management techniques. But for now, just take a minute to notice that time is the number one most important thing you have, period. It is precious beyond anything else. Your path to successful time-management starts with committing to using your time better, so that you can better achieve your goals.

You may have noticed that this first week of messages were really big picture ideas about finding purpose, keeping promises, dealing with setbacks, and valuing your time. That's because without thinking about the big principles, the small tactics like using your calendar or forming better habits will not stick. These lofty concepts are absolutely necessary for the day-to-day tactical operations to work. So, if you've glossed over the emails from the last week, have a look back and do some more of the prompts that were suggested. They really do help.

Prompt: Choose an activity that is important for you that you will do today, and do it without any distractions. Do it as if it were the most important thing in the world. Just for today.

Day 8: The WOOP Strategy

“The solution isn’t to do away with dreaming and positive thinking. Rather, it’s making the most of our fantasies by brushing them up against the very thing most of us are taught to ignore or diminish: the obstacles that stand in our way.” -- From "Rethinking Positive Thinking" by Gabrielle Oettingen

Today is our first on-the-ground strategy for dealing with difficult circumstances. It’s called the “WOOP Framework,” and it was developed by a researcher (Gabrielle Oettingen) who specializes in human motivation. Over the past 20 years, she has found that “positive thinking” isn’t enough to overcome challenges. We need to think more specifically about what inner obstacles come up for us that prevent us from succeeding, and then make a plan to deal with those inner obstacles.

WOOP stands for:

Wish -- A meaningful, challenging, and feasible wish or goal

Outcome -- The best result or feeling from accomplishing your wish

Obstacle -- Something inside of you that prevents you from accomplishing your wish

Plan -- If [obstacle], then I will [effective action]

For example, let’s say I want to study biology for 20 minutes a day this week, instead of cramming for the test the day before. That would be my wish.

I would feel calmer and more confident by doing that, because I would know that I would do better on the test and not feel stressed the night before. That is the outcome.

The main thing that prevents me from doing this is that I tell myself “I don’t really need to study now. It can wait. And biology is so boring anyway.” That’s my obstacle.

Now I come up with a plan: When I tell myself that I don’t need to do it now and biology is boring, I can remind myself that I always feel better when I study a little every day. I can also put the 20 minutes on my calendar and tell myself that I honor my commitments to myself -- that’s the kind of person I want to be.”

You can learn more about WOOP [here](#), and even [practice](#) right on the website or on their app. WOOP is a proven system for managing your inner obstacles so that they don't impede your ability to achieve your goals in any area of life.

Prompt: Do a WOOP (and write it down)! If you want more help understanding how to do it, you can get guidance right here:

[Practice — WOOP my life](#)

Day 9: Recognizing Self-Worth Protection

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves...” -- Rainer Maria Rilke

Have you ever procrastinated on something important? A big project, essay, or some other assignment? You knew it was important -- it would determine a large part of your grade, perhaps. And yet you somehow couldn't bring yourself to do it until the last minute. And in the end your work just wasn't your best. You are not alone. We've all done it.

But why do we do that? Frankly, it is a kind of self-harm. We are clearly hurting ourselves. But why?

The fancy name for why we do this is “Self-Worth Protection.” Basically, we do it so we don't look bad. Because if we don't work hard at something and we end up with a poor grade, well -- isn't that better than getting a poor grade if we did work really hard? How horrible would that be? (Answer: not so horrible.)

That's a big reason we procrastinate on important things in our lives. The name we usually give this flawed reasoning is “fear of failure.” It's a big deal. We all have it, to some degree.

But there are powerful ways to counteract it. The quote by Rilke gets at one important strategy: focus on the process, not the outcome. Focus on the writing itself, or the coding, or the content you are learning, or whatever it is -- not on the grade. The irony is that if you do that, you are likely to get a better grade! (But don't do it for that!!)

The deepest strategy here is to realize that your own self-worth has nothing to do with the grades you get, or the school you go to, or your job, or how much money you make. Your self-worth is based on the simple fact that you are you -- a wonderful, complex, amazing person -- whatever grade you get.

Again, the strange but delightful irony is that the more you accept that you are “worth it” no matter what external things define you, the more you will be able to focus on the process, and put in effort, and not procrastinate in order to protect yourself from feeling shame. For now, focus on the process, not the outcome. Focus on the effort, and not what the outcome may or may not say about you. Love the questions -- not the answers.

Prompt: Where in my life am I engaging in “fear of failure” thinking (self-worth protection)? How can I focus on the process instead of the outcome in this situation?

Day 10: Adopting a Growth Mindset

Perhaps everyone knows about growth mindsets by now. And if you do, that's great! But it's so powerful that it's worth getting lots of reminders about how to get more of a growth mindset than you already have. Because we can all continue to grow in this area, which will help us all to lead happier and more flourishing lives.

And if the concept of Fixed vs Growth Mindsets is new to you, get ready to hear one of the most important findings in motivation research of the last 50 years.

A mindset is an overall set of mental attitudes about something. A fixed mindset believes that intelligence and abilities are fixed and mostly *unchangeable*. Thus, when someone with a fixed mindset finds something challenging, they are more likely to give up. When they hear negative feedback about themselves, they will take it personally -- because they believe there isn't much they can do about it. When they fail at something, they believe they must just not be very good at it, and they will, on the whole, simply avoid challenges.

A growth mindset believes the opposite: intelligence and abilities are *malleable*. They can change and grow -- we can get smarter. A challenge is seen as an area to improve and work on. Feedback is a valuable learning opportunity. Other people's successes are inspiring, not deflating. And most importantly, people with growth mindsets do not shy away from new and difficult things.

Obviously, you want a growth mindset. But how do you get it?

Basically, you actively work to **reframe your thoughts** so that they sound more like growth mindset than fixed. When you feel jealous because someone else got an A on a paper but you got a B, you reframe your thinking to sound more like "I don't have to feel jealous. I can be inspired by the effort they might have put into writing that paper." When you feel sad because of some negative feedback you received, you can turn your thoughts into: "I can use this feedback as an opportunity to get better at this. That's a gift."

Every fixed mindset thought has a growth mindset thought that you can use to counteract it. You will be well-served by thinking actively about how to turn fixed-mindset thoughts into growth-mindset thoughts.

For much more about mindsets, read the classic book [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#), by Carol Dweck.

Prompt: What is an area in which I have some fixed-mindset thoughts, and how can I reframe them to be growth-mindset?

Day 11: What is the immediate next step?

You've learned about turning fixed-mindset thinking into growth-mindset thinking. You've learned how to do a WOOP so that you can pre-emptively plan for the inevitable inner obstacles that come up when you find something hard to do. You've learned to remind yourself that it's not always easy, and that some things just aren't in your control. You've thought about the big picture, and your big goals as a student.

Sometimes, though, it all falls apart, and you just can't get moving on something.

Don't fret! There are still more tools in the toolbox!

One essential tool for overcoming the inertia you may feel when starting something new and difficult is asking yourself: What is the immediate next step? Just the one tiny little step that needs to happen next to get on the path of accomplishing the task.

For example, you have to write a paper for history class. You need to choose a topic, but you have no idea what to write about. What is the immediate next step? Maybe get a pencil and paper and for one minute write down anything you think of that might be interesting -- just stream of consciousness. You can do that one small step.

Or maybe you have to start studying for a big test and you just don't know where to start. What's the immediate next step? Open the book. What's the immediate next step after that? Start reading the introduction.

Often, just starting with something small, e.g. opening the book or writing for one minute, will get the process started and you'll find yourself able to just keep going. It's overcoming that initial inertia that is the hardest part.

Hopefully beginning to notice that becoming a successful student is about managing your thoughts and emotions and also having a set of strategies for dealing with specific types of issues that might arise. The more techniques you have for dealing with these kinds of common obstacles, the better you will be at overcoming them and being productive. And there are more tools to come!

Prompt: Today, choose one thing you really want to accomplish, and do the immediate next step to get moving on it. Write down how that worked for you.

Day 12: Make Learning Active

We're a test prep company, which means it is our job to get scores on tests up as much as possible in as little time as possible. That is our mission. Therefore, it behooves us to figure out learning -- what makes people learn the most, in a way that really sticks, in as little time as possible? That's what we try to make happen every single day.

The book that taught us the most about how to do that is called *Make It Stick*. Every student should read it very carefully. Today and the next few days, we will present the most important take-aways from that book, in little bite-sized nuggets of learning gold.

Arguably the most important take-away for students is this: reading texts, watching videos, reading notes, listening to lectures -- the things most students do to "study" for a test -- doesn't really work. Unfortunately, you don't remember much of what you read. You can spend hours re-reading the whole textbook and feel like you've done some great studying and actually you've accomplished very little. This is the sad truth of how most students study.

The problem is that reading or listening or watching are all rather passive activities, and the science shows clearly that passive activities don't lead to learning. To really learn something effectively, **you have to engage with it in an active manner.**

Here are ideas of what that might look like:

- As you read a textbook, in a separate notebook, **write questions** that might be on a test and answer them in your own words.
- Make **flashcards** for factual things you need to remember. Write the word or question on the front and the definition or answer on the back. When you study flashcards, always try to guess what's on the back before looking at the answer.
- If you are watching a lecture, take notes, and then write your notes afterwards into a coherent, organized system. Use different colors. Draw diagrams. **Make it your own.**
- **Find quizzes** on the material on the internet and take them to see how well you actually know something. Or ask a friend to give you a quiz. Taking tests and quizzes is a superb (because active) way to learn!

None of this is easy. That's sort of the point. "Easy learning" is actually not a thing. Which is why Day 3 of this email course is so crucial: it's not supposed to be easy! If you find yourself spending an hour on Facebook instead of starting to study your flashcards, time to do a WOOP!

When it gets down to the nitty-gritty of learning hard stuff, the principles and tools of mental and emotional management that we discussed in the first week become essential for success.

In one phrase, the first take-away from *Make It Stick* is: **make your learning as active as possible.**

Prompt: What am I learning too passively, and what's one way I can make my studying more active for that subject or class?

Day 13: Interleaving and Spaced Repetition

Yesterday, we learned the importance of active study techniques as opposed to passive ones. An umbrella term for what active studying accomplishes is that it avoids “illusions of knowing.” Illusions of knowing means what it sounds like: thinking you know something when actually you don't. That's not good.

Another way we fall into illusions of knowing is by studying the same topic for too long at one time. Strange right -- the common thinking is that if you study something for 3 hours straight you'll know more than if you split the studying up into smaller chunks over a few days. But that common thinking is incorrect. Research shows that spreading the studying out over more time is significantly more effective than doing it in one sitting. This is called "interleaving."

This again relates to Day 3 -- it's not supposed to be easy. And also to yesterday's concept of making learning more active. Because by spreading the learning over several sessions, you are actually making your brain work harder. Every new study session your brain needs to work to remember what this is all about -- and that work is where the magic happens.

Let's say you have a history test on Thursday and a Math test on Friday. Here's what the old school study plan might have been:

Wednesday: Study for history for 2.5 hours

Thursday: Study for math for 3 hours

Bad plan! Here's the new-school plan:

Saturday: History for 30 minutes, then Math 30 minutes

Sunday: History for 30 minutes, then Math 30 minutes

Monday: History for 30 minutes, then Math 30 minutes

Tuesday: History for 30 minutes, then Math 30 minutes

Wednesday: History for 30 minutes, then Math 30 minutes

Thursday: Math 30 minutes

Good plan!

Not only should you spread studying out into smaller chunks over more time, but even within the smaller blocks of time you should do different kinds of studying, to mix it up even more. Instead of “Read for 30 minutes and then write paper for 30 minutes,” you should “Read 15 minutes, write 15 minutes, read 15 minutes, write 15 minutes.” Or throw in a little quiz, or work on flashcards intermittently. Basically, the more you mix up different ways of learning (all as active as possible), the more your brain has to sweat -- and that means it's learning.

Research has shown that these techniques of interleaving and spaced repetition across a longer period of time increase retention of material significantly. It's worth making the change.

Prompt: Create a study plan for an upcoming test or assignment. Spread the studying out over more time, and put the smaller blocks of time on your calendar -- and stick to it!

Day 14: Deep Work

We're going to talk today about "deep work." Deep work is creative, engaging, thoughtful work that, when you are really into it, can be very joyful and rewarding. It is sometimes associated with a "flow state" in which you lose track of time and are completely tuned in to what you are doing. Examples of deep work might be writing a paper, coding, reading, brainstorming, and artistic work of all kinds.

The problem is, it seems like it's getting harder for most of us to do deep work. Phones, social media and all of that has made it possible for us to be interrupted at any and all times. You know what I mean! For many of us, it's hard to even relate to the idea of deep work. The beeps and buzzes and checking this and that app are just constant features of our lives.

But there's a lot of evidence that this is not a good thing, and intuitively most of us know that. What to do?

First of all, you have to schedule deep work. It has to go on your calendar, and you have to stick with it. If you aren't in the habit of deep work, start small -- 20 minutes or so. Put that block of time in your calendar.

Next, do your deep work in an uncluttered place. Clean the desk. Get rid of all the books and devices that might distract you.

You'll also have to turn off the notifications on everything. Best to put your phone in another room. Turn on the "Do Not Disturb" switch on your computer. Take off the watch. Every time you get distracted by one of these things you get sucked out of deep work, and it takes energy to get back into it. So you just can't be as deep, or productive, if you have these distractions.

You'll also need to stick to one thing for the 20 minute block. Don't write an email in the middle of it. Choose 1 task for deep work and do it for a specified block of time.

When you are done, congratulate yourself heartily. That will help you want to do it again. We need to feel rewarded when we do hard things so that we solidify the habit.

The good news is that doing deep work once makes it easier to do it more. You will enjoy it. It will feel more gratifying than shallow work, and you will want more of it. The hardest part is getting started -- but you can do it! Start with the immediate next step.

Define your purpose. Use the tools and techniques we've discussed so far to make it possible for you to get this done.

Prompt: Decide on some deep work you need to do. Put it on your calendar. Clear your desk, turn off the devices, and do it for 20 minutes. Congratulate yourself on your effort. Well done!

Day 15: Closing the Loops

“If you don’t pay appropriate attention to what has your attention, it will take more of your attention than it deserves.” -- David Allen, author of Getting Things Done

Is your brain like an internet browser with 20 tabs open, and half of them you don’t even know what they were open for in the first place? If so, you are not alone. Unfortunately, those extra tabs take up energy and speed from your computer (and your brain) for no reason. It’s not a great way to operate the system.

If you have a whole bunch of “tabs” open in your brain -- too many balls in the air is another analogy -- you can’t focus on the important things. Those unfinished “to-dos” take up mental space and create constant mental chatter, which causes unneeded stress and doesn’t help get things done. You need a better system -- a reliable system that works for you.

Here’s what you need to do, in a nutshell:

1. Do a “brain dump”: write down everything that is unfinished and taking up mental space, from big things (do my college apps) to small things (make my bed).
2. Organize them. Maybe you will have “School,” “Social,” “Volunteering,” or whatever else makes sense for you.
3. Break down big tasks into smaller sub-tasks so they’re not overwhelming. Schedule Deep Work on your calendar.
4. Consider an app like Trello, OneNote, ToDoist (my favorite), or Google Tasks if you want some technological help. Paper and pen work for a lot of people just fine, though. Experiment to see what works for you.
5. Look at your list every day at the same time, and cross off what’s done! Add new tasks as needed. Keep scheduling deep work. Let your system evolve.
6. Stick with it. Remember that doing this is actually being kind to your future self, who will greatly appreciate the reduction in stress and mental chatter that this work will accomplish, not to mention the increase in productivity and efficiency and the achievement of your goals.

Prompt: If you don't have a reliable system for keeping track of what you need to do, start the process today. If you have time for only one thing, start with the brain dump. Your future self will thank you!

Day 16: Understanding Your Willpower Account

“Just do it!” says Nike, and a million other well-meaning but poorly informed people. We all know from experience that it’s not as simple as “Just do it.” We’ve all wanted to just do something, but didn’t, or wanted to not do something, but did it anyway. Why? Why can’t we just do it?

We’re talking about willpower. That’s the ability we have to choose what we want to do and then go ahead and do it. But we know that it’s much more complicated than that. We can “choose” to work out for an hour every day but then we don’t. We can “choose” to never eat cookies again but then the next day we eat a cookie.

There’s a lot we can say about willpower, but let’s focus on a few key ideas that can help you accomplish what you set out to do.

First of all, we only have a certain amount of willpower. It’s like money in a bank. If you spend it, it goes away. It’s not in unlimited supply.

Here are some things that reduce your willpower account: making decisions, feeling anxious or lonely, getting angry, dealing with difficult people, negative feedback, frustrating experiences of all kinds. The more of these experiences you have in your day, the less willpower you will have to get things done or avoid behaviors you don’t want to do.

The good news is, you can replenish your willpower account as well. Here are things you can do to fill it back up: talk to friends, do a hobby, do some exercise, listen to music, get some rest, play with your pet. Basically, things that make you feel good and positive. The more of those you have, the more able you are to “choose” to do something or not, and stick with it, when the time comes.

Another key take-away from this idea of a “willpower account” is that the best way to make sure you actually get something done is to modify your environment so that it happens (or doesn’t happen) as easily as possible. For example, if you don’t want to eat cookies, don’t have cookies in your house. If you want to start exercising, start with small things you can do at home, like the 7-minute workout. Turning off your phone while you are doing your homework would also count as modifying your environment and means you have to use less willpower to get your homework done, because you don’t have to say “no” to your phone.

Sheer “force of will” is in limited supply, so try to reserve it by creating an environment in which you only need it when you really need it. In addition, create time for positive, enjoyable experiences (and sleep) so that your willpower account is full enough for when you need it. And go back to some of our earlier lessons, such as “The Obstacle is the Way” to help you re-frame difficult experiences so that they can actually be more positive. All of these strategies work together to help you “just do it” when the time comes.

Prompt: Pay attention when you feel an urge to something that you didn't really want to do -- something that isn't in line with your goals, or who you want to be as a person. Notice what is happening at that time. Then, think about some small way that you can change your environment to make it less likely that you would feel that urge.

Day 17: Getting Started with Habits

“First, say to yourself what you would be, and then do what you have to do.” -- Epictetus

Habits dictate a huge amount of our lives. We have a habit when we wake up -- do we stay in bed and look at our email for a while, or do we get up right away and do some exercise? We have habits around what we eat -- how much, when, where. We have habits around studying for classes -- when do we study, how do we study, how long, in what way? Habits around our phones -- how often do we check email, social media? Habits related to exercise. Habits related to our social lives -- when do we talk to our friends, our family?

Habits control roughly 40% of our daily lives. By “habit,” we mean what you do without really thinking about it. An automatic routine. What more or less “just happens.”

Some of these habits work well for you. Some of them don’t. And maybe there are some habits that you aren’t doing that you wish you were. Fortunately, there is a lot we know about how to change habits, start new ones or stop old ones.

The first thing you need to do to start or stop a habit is to clearly connect it to who you want to be. If you want to exercise more, you need to say to yourself “I want to exercise because I am a physically fit person.” It’s your identity as a fit person that really provides the power to change your habits related to exercise.

If you want to study more or better, it’s because you want to be a successful learner, or a strong student. If you want to be a writer, or an artist, then you will want to solidify your habit of writing or painting daily. It’s all about connecting the habits to your identity -- who you want to be as a person.

So, who do you want to be?

Once you are clear on that, you need to identify 1 or 2 habits to start or stop. Starting a new habit is usually easier than stopping an old one, so you might want to start there.

Once you have your 1-2 habits identified, you need to build your habit cycle. The habit cycle is:

CUE → CRAVING → RESPONSE → REWARD

Let's say you want to start exercising every day. Your CUE might be a time of day -- right when you get home, for example. It's important to make it easy for you to take up the cue. Maybe that means setting up an appealing space for you to work out. Getting the right clothes, shoes, music. Make it as easy as possible for you to do it. Put it on your calendar, too, to remind yourself to do it.

Next, your RESPONSE. Make it as fun as possible. Put on good music. If you like being outside, do it outside. (My dog makes running much more fun for me!)

Last, your REWARD -- congratulate yourself! Write down what you did in your calendar. Maybe write it on a whiteboard with a big smiley face in your kitchen to remind you how great you are for exercising!

That was a lot for today! We will talk more about habits tomorrow. But you already have the tools to start creating new habits for you so you can be more aligned with the person you really want to be.

If you want to learn a lot more about habits, check out James Clear's Atomic Habits.

Prompt: Just write down a habit or two that you would like to develop in your life. No need to change everything right now – first just think about some habits that might serve to make you a happier and more fulfilled person. Write those down. Then choose one, and write down your CUE, RESPONSE, and REWARD.

Day 18: Eliminating Habits That Don't Serve You

Yesterday, we looked at habits in general. We learned about how your identity and values drive the acquisition of new habits and the stopping of old ones. We learned about the habit cycle (Cue → Craving → Response → Reward) and how understanding it helps you create and stop habits more effectively. We looked at an example of creating a new exercise habit, but the general principles apply to starting any new habit.

Today, let's look at stopping a habit that doesn't serve you. A good example would be checking email or social media too much.

The cue in this example is perhaps a notification on your phone, or simply looking at your phone on your desk. That cue creates a craving -- see what's new on twitter, for example. In order to reduce this habit, we need to stop the cue from happening. Eliminate notifications. Turn your phone over or put it in another room when you need to focus on a task.

If the cue happens anyway and you want to reach for your phone, you need to intervene at the "Response" stage -- you need to change how you respond. Notice how you feel when the notification comes. Is it like an itch that you have to scratch? Sit with that. Take a few deep breaths. Have a WOOP plan -- "When I feel the itch to check twitter, I will take three deep breaths and remind myself that I'm not a productive person when I check twitter in the middle of study time." Connect it to your identity -- is this who I want to be?

Be sure to reward yourself in some small way for what you are doing instead of the maladaptive habit. You can't do enough positive self-talk! You are doing great! You're really focused now! Nice work!

You might want to consider a habit tracker to help you form new habits. There are lots of apps, but you can also find free, printable trackers online. Checking off the boxes for your daily accomplishments can be highly rewarding itself -- part of making the new habits stick.

Habits are easily unnoticed, by definition. But they are also the bedrock of who we are and underlie the potential for what we can get done. So, start paying attention to your habits. Ask yourself how they align with your goals and aspirations. Slowly, and with small steps, start to build new ones and reduce those that don't serve you.

Prompt: Pick one habit that you want to track, and use a habit tracker to reinforce your attempt to change the habit.

Day 19: The Motivation Equation

You have a big test coming up. Are you motivated to study? If so, why? If not, why not?

Maybe you want to study because you want to get an A to get into your choice of college or job.

But maybe you found the whole subject really confusing and you aren't even sure studying will help you at this point. Or maybe you want to study but you are simply more interested in playing Fortnite.

Welcome to the motivation equation:

$$\text{Motivation} = \frac{\text{Expectancy} \times \text{Value}}{\text{Impulsiveness} \times \text{Delay}}$$

Expectancy is how likely you think it is that your actions will result in success.

Value is how much you value the payoff in this case.

Impulsiveness is how distractible you are while doing this.

Delay is how far away the result is.

You can see how all of these come into play when studying for a test: if you are very confident that studying will result in a higher grade (expectancy), you are more motivated to study. If you really want an A in this class (value), you will be more motivated to study. If you would really rather play video games (impulsiveness), you'll be less likely to study, as you will if the exam is weeks away, as opposed to days away (delay).

Understanding the elements of motivation helps you figure out how to manage your motivation. If your expectancy is low, then you might want to work on your mindset -- reminding yourself that challenges are how you learn. Or you might want to improve your study habits, doing more active learning, so that the material will "stick" better. Or you might want to find a friend to help you study.

If your value is low, you might want to take a step back and think about the big picture -- how does doing well on this test align with your values, or your identity -- do you want to be a strong student, a disciplined person?

If impulsivity is a problem here, maybe you need to change your environment to make it less likely that you will do something else when you planned on studying. And if delay is a problem because the test feels far away, maybe you need to put sub-deadlines on your calendar to bring the “horizon” closer so it feels less distant.

You can apply the “hacks” of the motivation equation to just about anything that you might want to get done in school or in life. Let’s say you want to get better at a sport but keep finding excuses for not working at it. Maybe you need to increase the value -- write down how great you will feel when you can climb that hard climb, kick the ball further, throw the ball harder, whatever it is. Put sticky notes on your bathroom mirror reminding you how awesome it will be to accomplish that.

Motivation is complex, and we will learn more tomorrow about other ways to manage motivation so that you can more effectively choose what you want to get done and actually do it.

Prompt: Think about something you want to accomplish, and do a small “tweak” with one aspect of the motivation equation to make it more likely that you will feel motivated to get the work done.

Day 20: Responding to Rationalizations

To bear trials with a calm mind robs misfortune of its strength and burden. -- Seneca

There's a part of us that would like nothing better than to lie on the beach all day, sipping cocktails and eating cookies. For the rest of our lives. A part that wants physical comfort above all else. We all have this. Some refer to this as our "reptile brain." (Nothing against reptiles.)

Thankfully, we also have a thinking brain, which realizes that sitting on the beach all day, every day, sipping cocktails and eating cookies, could have some negative consequences. Fortunately, we all have a thinking brain, too.

Rationalizations are your reptile brain trying to convince your thinking brain to go along with its evil reptilian plans. The reptile brain can be very convincing, but now that you know its nefarious machinations, you can outsmart it. It takes some effort, but you get better at it with practice, especially when you see how shutting up the reptile brain actually makes you a happier, more fulfilled person.

Here are the most common rationalizations and some possible thinking responses:

Reptile: You'll feel more like doing this later.

Thinking Person: No, I probably won't. If I don't feel like doing it now, I probably won't want to do it later either. I don't have to feel like doing something in order to do it, anyway.

Reptile: You work better under pressure.

Thinking Person: Actually that's not true. I work better when I'm calm and focused. There's a lot of research to support that. I don't need to wait for the day before the test to start working.

Reptile: You're too stressed to work right now.

Thinking Person: Part of the stress is that I'm not getting this done. I will feel less stressed when I start to do this work, even though I don't feel great at the moment. Getting started will actually help me feel better.

Reptile: It's not fair that you have to do this.

Thinking Person: Well, I have to do it anyway. Thinking about whether it's fair or not is besides the point, and actually doesn't help the fact that I still have to do it. So let's get on with the program!

Reptile: You'll feel more like working after checking email/twitter/TikTok for a few minutes.

Thinking Person: No, I won't feel more like it after that. I don't feel like it now, and I probably won't feel like it then. I still have to do it. I don't have to feel like doing something in order to do it.

Reptile: Other people don't get things done on time, why should you?

Thinking Person: I'm not other people. I believe it is worthwhile for me to get things done on time. I am a punctual person. Other people's bad habits don't make it ok for me to have the same ones.

Don't be a reptile. Be a Thinking Person. It will make you happier, more productive, and more calm.

Prompt: Notice a time when you rationalize something today. Write it down, and write down how your "Thinking Person" can respond to it wisely.

Day 21: Thought Management 101

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” -- Victor Frankl

The quality of our lives is determined to a large degree by our thoughts. If we constantly have negative thoughts -- “I can’t do this,” “No one will like this,” “This will fail,” “This isn’t fair,” “Why are they doing this to me?” etc., that has a tremendously negative impact on our lives.

You can think of your place in the world working like this:

- There is a set of **facts and observations** I have about the world or some situation.
- These facts that I observe lead me to have certain **thoughts** about them.
- The thoughts lead to **feelings**.
- The feelings lead me to **do** one thing or another. (actions)
- Those actions lead to **outcomes**.

You can see from this cause-and-effect chain how powerful thoughts are. They are the first link in the chain from facts to outcomes. And while we cannot often change the facts, we can change how we respond. We can change how we think about the facts.

In order to make any headway on changing our thoughts, we need to first become aware of them. We are often barely aware of our thoughts. It takes a little effort to bring them to the surface so we can decide what to do with them.

When you feel frustrated, or are experiencing some consistent negative thought, or “big feelings” that are out of proportion to what is actually happening, or are procrastinating on something important -- those are all signs that you might want to analyze your thoughts on an issue.

For today, here are some questions you can ask yourself about these kinds of negative thoughts:

Is this true? For example, is it true that I can't do this, or that this other person is purposely trying to make my life difficult, or that my teacher has it out for me? Is there another possible explanation?

How does this thought make me feel? Do I feel good thinking that I am doomed to fail at this?

How would you feel without the thought? Would you be ok if the thought just disappeared? Would you feel better?

These are some questions you can ask yourself about your thoughts. They are the beginning of becoming aware of your thoughts so that you can learn to identify those that serve you and those that do not, and begin to loosen how much you identify with your thoughts. One basic point to realize is that you are not your thoughts.

Ultimately, these thought-management techniques will change your emotions, your actions, and therefore the outcomes of the work you do.

This is a big topic, but a crucial one. More tomorrow!

Prompt: Identify a thought chain that might bear some analysis. Start by noticing a thought you have that might not be serving you well. Identify the fact or observation that leads to that thought, then the feeling that stems from the thought, then the action that comes from the feeling, and the outcome from that action. Just write down the chain so you can see more clearly how it actually looks for you.

Day 22: Thought Management, Part 2

If you are pained by any external thing, it is not this thing that disturbs you, but your own judgment about it. And it is in your power to wipe out this judgment now. -- Marcus Aurelius

The topic of thought management is so deep and fundamental that it can be easy to overlook. Your thoughts just come out of nowhere, right? You don't actually control them, do you?

It's understandable to think that, because that is how it often seems to us. But it is incorrect. Others change your thoughts all the time. Advertisements try to -- and often succeed. Teachers and parents and politicians try to as well. So why can't you? Are you less powerful than all of those others? Of course not. If you believe in your own power to think and reason, you can change your thoughts.

Ok, so what should you change your thoughts to? Yesterday, we looked at how thoughts lead to feelings, which lead to actions, which lead to outcomes. That chain of cause and effect can help us determine what thoughts would be better for us. We work backwards from outcomes.

OUTCOMES → ACTIONS → FEELINGS → THOUGHTS

Let's say what you want as an outcome is an A in a tough class. But you have doubts about your ability to master the material well enough to get that. That's the thought you are needing to change. Taking a step back from the outcome of the 'A,' ask yourself what actions you need to take to get the A? Those might include studying more, or more effectively, taking better notes, etc. What feelings do you need to take those actions? You need to feel confident, you need to feel energetic, motivated, disciplined. What thoughts help you feel those kinds of emotions? The thoughts might be "If I work hard I can learn this material." "This class is interesting and the content is valuable for me to learn." "I have supportive friends and resources to help me succeed if I meet challenges."

You are reverse engineering your thoughts, based on the outcome you wish to achieve. You can do this for any outcome in your life -- losing weight, getting more physically fit, being more compassionate. It is a process you can engage in to help you determine what kinds of thoughts will serve you most effectively.

Prompt: Try this process on some outcome you wish to achieve for yourself but are having a hard time with. Figure out the actions you need to take, then the feelings you need to take those actions, then the thoughts that will lead to those feelings. Then, next time you have negative thoughts, replace them with the thoughts that you determined were more helpful for you to achieve your goals.

Day 23: What is Your Hedgehog?

“The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”

— Isaiah Berlin

A famous essay by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin was about how some people are “hedgehogs” and some are “foxes.” Hedgehogs know a lot about one thing, or do one thing really well. Foxes know a little about a lot of things, or do a lot of things -- but none too well.

There are pros and cons to both ways of being, but it makes sense to at least identify what your inner hedgehog is, and feed it. The frenetic pace of our society has a bit of a tendency to cultivate foxes, if only because it’s harder to focus deeply on any one thing. For students, there is also a sense that your “student resume” will look better if it shows that you not only have straight As, but you also are the President of this club, and do this sport, and engage in this service, etc.

But that thinking is almost definitely wrong. Admissions committees and employers alike tend to be more impressed by someone who gets really into something, and goes deep on it. That’s the hedgehog, and it’s more unusual in our world, and therefore stands out.

If you feel like you have “too much on your plate,” you might be acting a bit too much like a fox. Identify your main thing, your deepest interest and passion, and spend more time on that, and less time on the things that you might be doing more out of obligation than interest. You will feel less stressed and more fulfilled as a result -- and ironically, that will only make you a better student of whatever it is you are studying.

Prompt: Identify your hedgehog. What is your one big thing? How can you spend a little more time cultivating that?

Day 24: Finding a Mentor

Self-awareness is fundamentally important when you are attempting to change your thoughts, your habits, your mindset -- most of what we've been talking about over the last 23 days. But self-awareness is a tricky thing. We too easily fool ourselves.

That's why mentoring and coaching is so crucial. The greatest athletes and musicians in the world still have coaches. Why shouldn't we have someone who knows us, sees what we are doing, and gives us honest and timely feedback to help us achieve our goals and become the person we want to be? We all need and deserve to have someone like that in our lives.

What qualities should your mentor have?

First and foremost, a great mentor is honest. They don't sugarcoat our flaws and failings. Of course, that doesn't mean they berate us. They tell us the hard truths about ourselves so that we can be aware of them and work on them. They are telling us these things because they care about us. Because they want what's best for us.

A great mentor also knows their own shortcomings, and has worked on them. They don't pretend to be perfect. But they have experience facing difficulties and working through them. And they are still doing that.

You have to respect a mentor. You have to admire their character and what they've done as people. Their respect has been earned in some way.

You will not always agree with a mentor, and you should feel comfortable voicing your disagreement, but it should be done in a spirit of seeking the truth about what's best for you. Sometimes you will ignore your mentor, and maybe you'll be right to do so -- but you both can learn from it, whatever happens.

Perhaps you have different mentors for different areas of your life. An academic mentor, an athletic mentor, a relationship mentor. Different people have different strengths.

Mentorships evolve and change. You will grow out of one and into another.

The key point is that you accept that sometimes other people can provide invaluable advice and feedback for you -- because, though you should continue to grow in self-awareness, we are sometimes too blind to our own "stuff" to really know the best way to move forward.

Prompt: Think about people in your life that you trust deeply, and ask them for advice on something. That's where mentorship starts.

Day 25: Breaking the Failure-Shame Cycle

Most of us have a belief that if we did something wrong, or failed in some way, then we should be punished, if only by carrying a sense of guilt or shame for what we did.

We further believe that if we don't carry around this guilt or shame, then we will continue to fail. We believe that the negative emotions of guilt or shame make it less likely that we will continue with the unwanted behavior.

But research clearly shows that the opposite is true: continued guilt only makes it more likely that we will engage in the behavior we wish to avoid. This is the failure-shame cycle: we fail, and we feel ashamed, and because we are carrying these negative thoughts and feelings, we find it hard to change -- so we fail again, and the cycle continues.

Research has found that those who self-forgive their failures are more likely not to repeat the unwanted behavior. Self-forgiveness allows one to move past the failure and learn from it, rather than repeating it.

So, how do we self-forgive?

First, you have to be mindful of the negative thoughts, such as "I'm no good at that," or "I'm just a bad person," or "I'll never be able to accomplish this goal." When you have such thoughts, you have to consciously change them into positive thoughts, like "That was a valuable learning experience," or "I shouldn't expect myself to be perfect all the time," or "I can overcome past failures by forgiving myself." You have to choose these positive thoughts every time you notice yourself thinking the negative thoughts. Over time, the positive thoughts will come automatically and the negative thoughts will be more and more rare.

Second, it is helpful to think about where your self-worth originates from. Is your worth as a human being based on your grades in school? No. On your performance on some activity or other? No. On your looks? No. On how much money you have? No. On how hard you work? No. On how nice you are? No. On how much volunteering you do? No.

Your self-worth comes from the simple fact that you are a sentient being (as the Buddhists say) that has feelings. That's it. Fully acknowledging this simple but profound

truth can help you self-forgive more easily, thus allowing you to move past your failures and back into a positive mindset in which you feel motivated, energetic, and positive.

Prompt: Think of past failures that can you turn into positive thoughts, such as “That was a powerful learning experience for me,” or “It’s foolish to think I can be a perfect person.” Work on changing your thoughts about these failures so you can forgive yourself and learn from them, instead of dwelling in negative thinking, which will likely hold you back.

Day 26: Being a Person of Discipline

The mind is difficult to control; swiftly and lightly, it moves and lands wherever it pleases. It is good to tame the mind, for a well-tamed mind brings happiness. -- The Buddha

“Discipline” is not a word that is often associated with happiness and joy. But the Buddha certainly made that connection.

Much of what we’ve been discussing ultimately rests on discipline, but a lot of what we’ve looked at also aims at helping us create discipline without the “forcefulness” often associated with the term. Habits are discipline, but after a while they can work mostly in the background. Keeping up with our to-do list is a kind of discipline, but it can become habitual as well. Turning off phone distractions so you can do deep work is a discipline, but once you are doing the work, you don’t feel like you are “doing” discipline. Learning more effectively with active techniques is a discipline, but it is also plainly strategic -- it’ll help you get better grades.

Discipline, therefore, should be thought of as the ongoing process of helping you achieve your goals. It’s not an intense, demanding thing. You can be a disciplined person and also easy-going and fun to be around. Discipline is simply thinking about what will work better for you, then doing the habits and actions that get you there, and sticking to that -- even if sometimes you don’t feel like it. (Back to Day 3 again -- it’s not supposed to be easy.)

All of these strategies and techniques we’ve looked at come together around this idea of discipline. It helps to think of yourself as a disciplined person -- or an aspiring one -- so that you can find motivation in your identity. (Remember Day 17 -- habits start with your chosen identities.)

Of course, everyone messes up, and it’s very important to self-forgive as we discussed yesterday. But then get back on the discipline bandwagon. It’s always there.

Ultimately, being disciplined is closely connected to happiness, no matter how unpopular the word might be, because without discipline, you just cannot do or be that which you set out to do or be, and the fulfillment that comes from a job well done will elude you.

Prompt: What is an area of your life that can use a little more discipline? What can you do to sharpen how you are doing things in that particular area? Start small -- big things happen from small changes.

Day 27: What Will You Do With Your Time?

Watch this 2 minute video:

 [The Time You Have \(In JellyBeans\)](#)

Prompt: What would you like to do in the next month, or in the next year with your “extra time”? You have some. You can make more for something important, if you really know what it is. Take some time and think about that. What is it you want to do with your time?

Day 28: Closing Thoughts

“In your actions, don’t procrastinate. In your conversations, don’t confuse. In your thoughts, don’t wander. In your soul, don’t be passive or aggressive. In your life, don’t be all about business.” -- Marcus Aurelius

Today is the last day of the 4 weeks of emails you’ve received. Congratulations for reading them -- and for whatever you’ve done of the prompts. If you’ve done all of the prompts, that’s amazing! If not, go back and do one tomorrow, and the day after that. You can do them many times -- your reflections and actions will change as you mature and your circumstances change. The task of growing in wisdom never ends.

Today’s quote gets at the final message we’d like to leave you with: remember that the goal of the work you do to become a better student and person is a joyful and meaningful life. It’s not “all about business.” The work of “business” or “school” has a higher purpose -- joyful fulfillment of your potential. Not tedious misery or soulless wealth. You want balance -- hard work but also laughter. Discipline but also curiosity. Working for a better future but also enjoying the present moment.

We hope you have found these lessons to be helpful, inspiring, and, if nothing else, thought-provoking. Working through these ideas can only lead to better things for you: a calmer mind, more effective work, more time for what matters to you, and therefore more meaningful fulfillment of your goals and aspirations. That’s why you’re doing this.

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