

Summary. A refreshingly raw and self-deprecating book designed to get you out of your head and into a fulfilling life. Reason being, most of our biggest challenges and obstacles are not external: they are constructs of our mind, usually rooted in various forms of fear. This book also offers the antidote to perhaps the most insidious disease of our generation: entitlement. The ultimate goal of this book is *clarity of thought* for what we choose to find 1) important, and 2) unimportant in life.

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Chapter 1: Don't Try

Overview (in one sentence): Learning how to lose and let go is ultimately a more important skill set than relentless chasing the mirage of success defined by our culture.

Quotes

- [The cult of more] “causes you to become overly attached to the superficial and fake, to dedicate your life to chasing a mirage of happiness and satisfaction.”
- “We joke about first-world problems, but we really have become victims of our own success. Stress-related issues, anxiety disorders, and cases of depression have skyrocketed over the past 30 years.”
- “The desire for more positive experience is itself a negative experience. And, paradoxically, the acceptance of one’s negative experience is itself a positive experience.”
- “This book will not teach you how to gain or achieve, but rather how to lose and let go.”

Notes

- Story of the alcoholic writer, [Charles Bukowski](#) who wrote poems, novels and short stories. Most of life was spent in abject poverty and drug abuse. He experienced success later in life when a small, independent publisher took a chance on him.



- The moral of Bukowski’s legacy: don’t try. He was a failure, he new it, and what’s more he was **comfortable with himself as a failure**.
- Today’s advertising is designed to sell one thing: MORE.
- The subtleties of the NGAF philosophy:
 - “Not giving a fuck does not imply being indifferent. It means being being comfortable with being different.”
 - “To not give a fuck about adversity, you must first give a fuck about something more important than adversity.”
 - “Whether you realize it or not, you are always choosing what to give a fuck about.”
- This book is designed to turn your pain into a tool, your trauma into power, and your problems into slightly better problems.

Chapter 2: Happiness is a Problem

Overview (in one sentence): Our struggles determine our success, and happiness comes from solving problems; happiness is therefore a form of action, and requires struggle.

Favorite Quotes

- “Happiness comes from solving problems.”
 - “To be happy we need something to solve. Happiness is therefore a form of action.”
 - “Happiness requires struggle.”
 - “The path to happiness is a path full of shithoops and shame.”
- “Negative emotions are a *call to action*. When you feel them, it’s because you’re supposed to *do something*.”
- “I wanted the reward and not the struggle. I wanted the result and not the process. I was in love with not the fight, but only the victory.”

Notes

- Story of the Buddha + central teaching: “Pain and loss are inevitable and we should let go of trying to resist them.”
- Disappointment panda = Mark’s humorous superhero manifestation of radical candor.
- What prevents us from solving problems and obtaining happiness? Two things:
 - Denial: resorting to delusion and distraction to feel good in the short term
 - Side effects: life of insecurity, neuroticism, and emotional repression
 - Victim mentality: blaming others and outside circumstances
 - Side effects: anger, helplessness, and despair
- Rather than wishing for “the good life” everyone wants, ask yourself *What pain do you want in your life? What are you willing to struggle for?*
- Story of Mark’s dream to be a rockstar: he was in love with the result, but wasn’t in love with the process. In other words, *he didn’t actually want it*.

Chapter 3: You Are Not special

Overview (in one sentence): Free your mind from the obsession with exceptionalism; the rare people who truly do become truly exceptional at something do so because they’re obsessed with improvement due to an unerring belief that they are, in fact, not great at all which is a philosophy of anti-entitlement.

Favorite Quotes

- Paraphrased: “You and your problems are not special.” Realizing this is “the first and most important step toward solving them.”
- “The vast majority of life is UNextraordinary” yet today our lives “are filled with information from the extremes of the bell curve of human experience. This flood of extreme information has conditioned us to believe that *exceptionalism* is the new normal.”
- “A lot of people are afraid to accept mediocrity because they believe that if they accept it, they’ll never achieve anything, never improve, and that their life won’t matter.”
 - **“The rare people who truly do become truly exceptional at something do so not because they’re believe they’re exceptional. On the contrary, they become amazing**

because they're obsessed with improvement. And that obsession with improvement stems from an unerring belief that they are, in fact, not great at all. It's anti-entitlement.

Notes

- The chapter opens with a story about “Jimmy”: a delusional deadbeat fueled by a false sense of positivity and self-confidence.
- In the 1960's it was vogue to develop “high self-esteem” as it was linked to higher performance
 - It turns out that adversity and failure are actually useful and even necessary for developing strong-minded and successful adults.
 - Conversely, affirmation without action = delusion (Jim Rohn teaching)
- **The result of exceptionalism: we feel insecure and desperate.**
- On eating your proverbial veggies with regards to emotional health:
 - Your actions don't actually matter that much in the grand scheme of things
 - The vast majority of your life will be boring and not noteworthy, and that's okay
- You will have a growing appreciation for life's basic experiences:
 - pleasures of simple friendship
 - Creating something
 - Helping a person in need
 - Reading a good book
 - Laughing with someone you care about
 - These things are ordinary because *they are what actually matter* in life

Chapter 4: The Value of Suffering

Overview (in one sentence): True self discovery comes from answering the question “By what standard to I measure myself?” and by adopting values that are honest, socially constructive, and controllable right now, and avoiding shitty values like pleasure, material success, always being right, and constant positivity.

Favorite Quotes

- “One day, in retrospect, the years of struggle will strike you as the most beautiful.”
- “What “self-improvement is really about: prioritizing better values, choosing better things to give a fuck about.”

Notes

- Self-awareness onion. Ask yourself:
 - Why?
 - Why does this seem true?
 - Why does X make you free like a failure?
- Shitty values (that cause problems for people):

- **Pleasure:** ephemeral, often superficial, and linked to anxiety, emotional instability, and depression. Don't prioritize your life around pleasure.
- **Material success:** additional income is not correlated with additional happiness once you get past \$80k or covering your basic needs w/ a few luxuries. Another risk: possessions end up overshadowing more important values: honesty, compassion, not being as asshole. Since there will always be someone with MORE stuff, it's unlikely attainment will lead to lasting happiness.
- **Always being right:** our brains are often wrong: memories, bias, lack of objectivity. . . therefore, "always being right" will 1) be extremely difficult to rationalize, and 2) prevent learning from mistakes, and 3) limit new perspectives and empathy
- **Staying positive:** admit when life sucks. Denying negative emotions leads to dysfunction and is a form of avoidance. Denying negativity perpetuates problems.
- Good values: reality-based, socially constructive, immediate, controllable
- Shitty values: superstitious, socially destructive, not immediate, not controllable

Chapter 5: You Are Always Choosing

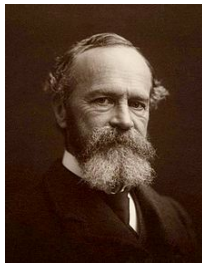
Overview (in one sentence-ish): The power of choice: taking responsibility for one's own circumstance is perhaps the highest form of maturity and yields critical learnings and personal development, even when you aren't at fault—you are the captain of your ship; blaming others only hurts yourself. #ownership

Favorite Quotes

- "Often the only difference between a problem being painful or being powerful is a sense that we chose it, and that we are responsible for it."
- **"We, individually, are responsible for everything in our lives, no matter the external circumstances."**
- "A lot of people hesitate to take responsibility for their problems because they believe that to be responsible for your problems is to also be at fault for your problems."
 - **"Fault is past tense. Responsibility is present tense."**

Notes

- Story of [William James](#), chronic health issues, failure at most things by 30 years old



- What changed: he read a lecture by [Charles Peirce](#) and decided to take 100% ownership of life's happenings for a period of one year ("rebirth" as he called it)



- He became the father of American psychology
- You are always choosing:
 - What values are we choosing to base our actions on?
 - What metrics are we choosing to use to measure our lives?
 - Are these good choices? I.e. good values, and good metrics?
- We all love to take responsibility for success. But taking responsibility for our problems is far more important because that's where the real learnings come from, along with real life improvement.
 - Blaming others only hurts yourself.
- "Outrage porn" - Ryan Holiday. Anyone who is offended about anything assumes the victim mentality and becomes outraged and seeks attention.
- "Do, or do not, there is no try (or how, in Mark's usage)".
 - Changing values is simple yet really really hard. Expect feeling like a failure. Expect uncertainty. Expect rejection from people who measured you on old values.

Chapter 6: You're Wrong About Everything (But So Am I)

Overview (in one sentence): Since our brains are "meaning machines" designed to be more efficient than accurate, we must develop the ability to be **less** certain and **more** self-critical; related, we are NOT special and must realize that most of our irrational fears lead us to be self-absorbed, and the more something threatens our identity, the more we will avoid it.

Favorite Quotes

- "Certainty is the enemy of growth."
- "Instead of looking to be right all the time, we should be looking for how we're wrong all the time."
- "The human mind is a jumble of inaccuracy."
- "The answer is to trust yourself LESS. After all, if our hearts and minds are so unreliable, maybe we should be questioning our own intentions and motivations more."
- **"The only way to solve our problems is to first admit that our actions and beliefs up to this point have been wrong and are not working."**
- "Act (fail). Grow."
- "There's a kind of self-absorption that comes with fear based on an irrational certainty"
- "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it." - Aristotle
- "If it feels like you versus the world, chances are it's really just you vs. yourself."

Notes

- p.118. “It’s easier to sit in a painful certainty that nobody would find you attractive, that nobody appreciates your talents, than to actually test those beliefs and find out for sure. **Beliefs of this sort are designed to give us a moderate comfort now by mortgaging greater happiness and success later on.** They’re terrible long-term strategies, yet we cling to them because we assume we’re right.
 - We assume we know how the story ends.
- On the ambiguity of “positive” vs. “negative” experience. . . it’s all relative
 - Some of the best and most gratifying experiences of our lives also end up being the most formative and motivating.
 - Don’t trust your conception of positive/negative experiences. All that we know for certain is what hurts in the moment and what doesn’t. And that’s not worth much.
- On how our brains are predisposed to causation, i.e. “meaning machines”
 - What we understand as “meaning” is generated by the associations our brain makes between two or more experiences. However there are two big problems
 - 1) The brain is imperfect. We mistake, forget, misinterpret frequently.
 - 2) The brain is stubborn. It wants to hang on to previously obtained “meaning”
 - Therefore, most of our beliefs are wrong.
 - The brain is designed to be efficient, not accurate.
- On evil: evil people never believe that they are evil; rather, they believe that everyone else is evil.
- On Manson’s Law of Avoidance
 - Kind of douche that he’s naming laws after himself, but here we go:
 - **The more something threatens your identity, the more you will avoid it.**
 - This means that the more something threatens to change how you view yourself, how successful/unsuccessful you believe yourself to be, how well you see yourself living up to your values, the more you will avoid ever getting around to doing it.
 - This is why people are often so afraid of success—for the exact same reason they’re afraid of failure: **it threatens how they believe themselves to be.**
- Mark writes about Buddhist philosophy and how the idea of “you” is actually just an arbitrary mental construct that we should let go of. Don’t get trapped in the idea of YOU.
- Rather than perpetually trying to be “special,” measure yourself by more mundane identities:
 - Student
 - Partner
 - Friend
 - Creator
- The world doesn’t owe you anything. Give up your sense of entitlement.
- As a general rule, we are all the worst observers of ourselves. Try these questions:
 - *What if I’m wrong?*
 - *What would it mean if I’m wrong?*
 - *Would being wrong create a better or worse problem than my current problem for both myself and others?*
- **Rule to think about: If it’s down to me being screwed up, or everybody else being screwed up, it is far, far more likely that I’m the one screwed up.**
 - Similarly: If it feels like you versus the world, chances are it’s really just you vs. yourself.

Chapter 7: Failure Is the Way Forward

Overview (in one sentence): The path to success is fraught with failure: learn to seek it and embrace it, all the while humbly acknowledging that life is about not knowing what the f\$%^ we're doing, and then *doing something* anyway (bias toward action) which can spark motivation and inspiration.

Favorite Quotes

- "If someone is better than you at something, then it's likely because she has failed at it more than you have."
 - We can be truly successful only at something we're willing to fail at. If we're unwilling to fail, then we're unwilling to succeed.
- "It's growth that generates happiness, not a long list of arbitrary achievements."
- "Just as one must suffer physical pain to build strong bone and muscle, one must suffer emotional pain to develop greater emotional resilience, a stronger sense of self, increased compassion, and a generally happier life."
- "Life is about not knowing and then doing something anyway. Don't ever be afraid of that."
- "If you're stuck on a problem, don't sit there and think about it; just start working on it."

Notes

- Mark entered the adult world a failure—no money, shitty economy, no career—which he spins as a "fortunate" way to enter adulthood because at rock bottom there's nowhere to go but up.
- Mark's value or metric in life: **freedom, autonomy.**
- Failure itself is a relative concept.
 - There is some Seneca-esque teachings here, i.e. practicing the act of being a "failure" intentionally to neutralize the fear
- What are the systemic problems that cause us to shun failure?
 - Education system
 - Parenting
 - Media bias, i.e. success porn
- What do you WANT to spend your life on getting really, really good at something? Can you answer this question?
 - Picasso and the value of "honest expression" - continual improvement
- Pain is part of the process
 - Dabrowski studying WWII survivors
 - *After the war they felt more confident, more sure of themselves, more grateful, and unfazed by life's trivialities and petty annoyances.*
- **If you continue to indulge in entitlement and delusional positive thinking, if you continue to overindulge in various substances (alcohol, drugs) or activities (sex, party), then you'll never generate the requisite motivation to actually change.**
- "VCR problem"
 - From the outside looking in, the answer is: *Just shut up and do it.*
 - From the inside person experiencing the problem: lots of emotional baggage suffocates the logical decision

- **Action isn't just the effect of motivation' it's also the cause of it.**
 - Action >> Inspiration >> Motivation
 - You can't think yourself out of a rut. You must ACT.
 - Mark calls this the DO SOMETHING principle.
 - Or form a habit, e.g. *200 crappy words per day*
- **You can become your own source of motivation.**

Chapter 8: The Importance of Saying No

Overview (in one sentence): We are defined by what we chose to reject; therefore, commitment gives you freedom because you're no longer distracted by alternatives / FOMO.

Favorite Quotes

- "After all the years of excitement, the biggest lesson I took from my adventuring was this: absolute freedom, by itself, means nothing."
- "We are defined by what we chose to reject."
- "Acts of love are valid only if they're performed without conditions or expectations."
- "There is freedom and liberation in commitment. I've found increased opportunity and upside in rejecting alternatives and distractions in favor of what i've chosen to let truly matter to me."
 - **"Commitment gives you freedom because you're no longer distracted by the unimportant and frivolous."**

Notes

- From the Russian culture he learned the value of radical candor and honesty vs. the West where we smile fuck our way through business and life (lots of posturing).
 - Trust lost its value. (really?)
 - Quantity of relationships took precedent over quality of relationships
- Where does the pressure to be likeable come from?
- There's a certain level of joy and meaning that you reach in life only when you've spent decades investing in a single relationship, a single craft, a single career. **And you cannot achieve those decades of investment without rejecting the alternatives.**
- Don't try to solve other people's problems. Good reminder. Especially in intimate relationships.
 - Don't try to "fix" your partner. Live and let live-type message here.
 - Just support them while they fix it.
- The pain in relationships is necessary to cement our trust in each other and produce greater intimacy.
- **Freedom through commitment**
 - When we're overloaded with opportunities and options, we suffer from what psychologists refer to as the paradox of choice
 - Speaks to the tradeoff of sacrificing breadth (partners, location, job) for depth
 - The older you get, the ore experienced you get, the less significantly each new experience affects you.
- Depth is where the gold is buried.

Chapter 9: . . . And Then You Die

Overview (in one sentence): Acknowledging death allows us to choose our values more freely, unrestrained by the illogical quest for immortality, and true happiness comes from caring about something greater than yourself.

Favorite Quotes

- “The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time.” - mark Twain
- “Death is the only thing we can know with any certainty.”
- “We’re all going to die, all of us. What a circus! That alone should make us love each other, but it doesn’t. We are terrorized and flattened by life’s trivialities; we are eaten up by nothing.” - Bukowski
- **“The more I peer into the darkness, the brighter life gets, the quieter the world becomes, and the less unconscious resistance I feel to, well, anything.”** - quoting the author here

Notes

- Mark challenged himself to read 50 nonfiction books in 50 days and did it. Impressive.
- Read: [The Denial of Death](#), by Ernest Becker.
 - “Death terror” = existential anxiety that underlies everything we do
 - “Immortality projects” = attempts at lasting legacy, i.e. what becomes our values
- Stoics: appreciate life, remain humble by keeping death in mind. Life is fleeting.
- What is your legacy?
- **They all say it. . . happiness comes from the same thing: caring about something greater than yourself.**
- Standing on the edge of a cliff at the cape in South Africa: staring death in the face.