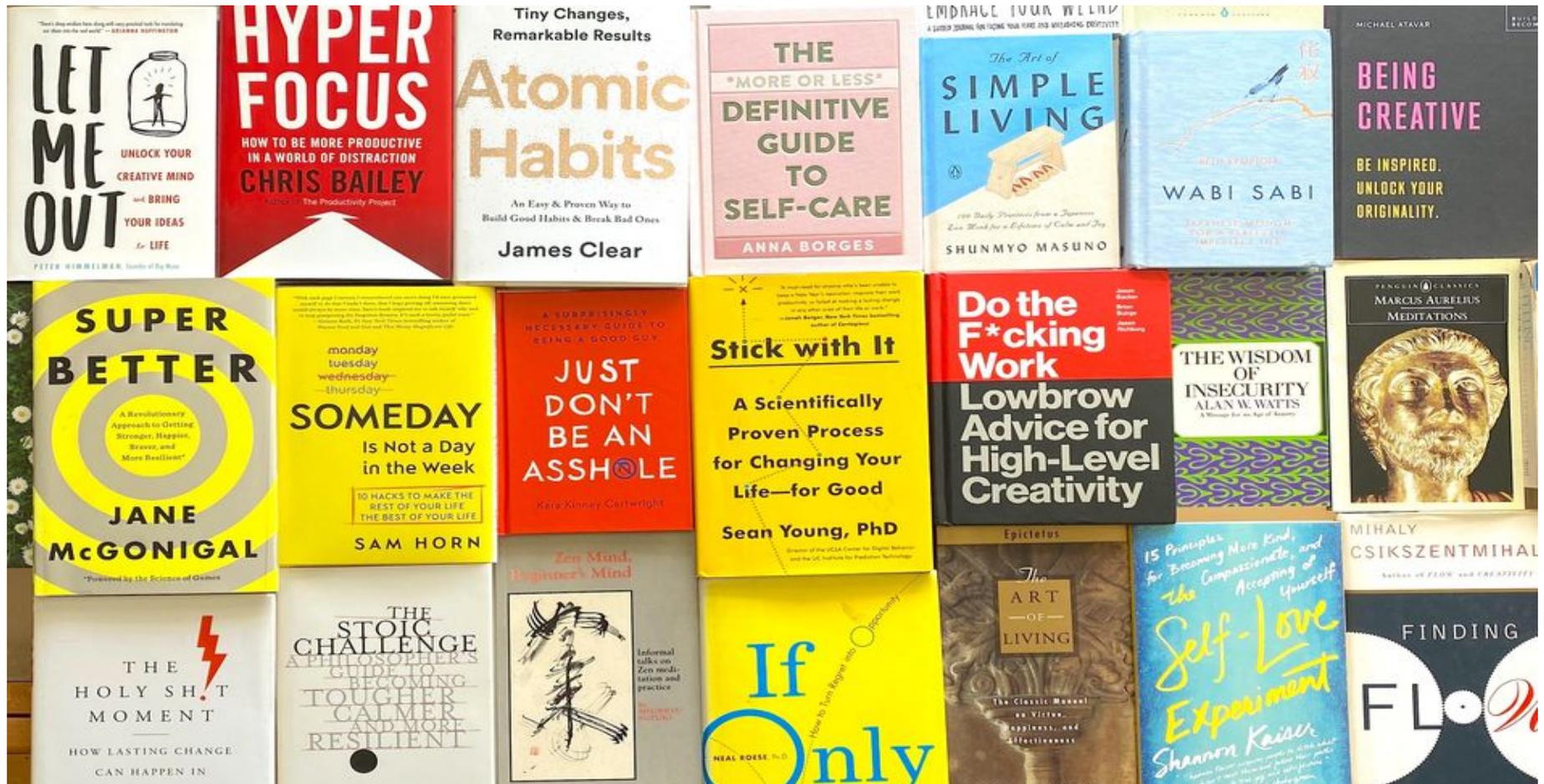


11 Simple Rules

Every self-help book ever, boiled down to 11 simple rules

By Chris Taylor



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The first self-described self-help book was published in 1859. The author's name, improbably, was Samuel Smiles; the title, even more improbably, was [*Self-Help*](#). A distillation of lessons from the lives of famous people who had pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, it sold millions of copies and was a mainstay in Victorian households. Every generation since had its runaway bestseller, such as [*How to Live on 24 Hours a Day*](#) (1908), [*Think and Grow Rich*](#) (1937), or [*Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*](#) (1997).

By now, the [\\$11 billion self-help industry](#) is most definitely not small stuff. Yet when you strip it down, there's very little new information. After all, we were consuming self-help for centuries before Smiles, just under different names. Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius gave tweet-sized advice in [*Meditations*](#); so did Benjamin Franklin in [*Poor Richard's Almanack*](#). Even self-help parody isn't new.

The 21st century has seen a measure of self-awareness about our self-help addiction. There's the wave of [swear-y self-help bestsellers I wrote about](#), such as [*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*](#). They hover somewhere between parody and dressing up the same advice as their forebears in earthier language. More recently, there's a trend you might call meta-self-help: books in which people write about their experiences following self-help books, such as [*Help Me!*](#) (2018) and [*How to Be Fine*](#) (2020), based on the similar self-help podcast [*By the Book*](#).

But hey, if it's all pretty much the same stuff — and it is — why stop at distilling it into a single book? Why not condense the repeated lessons of an entire genre into one article? That's what I've attempted here, after reading dozens of history's biggest bestsellers so you don't have to.

Here is the essence of the advice I've seen delivered again and again.

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1. Take one small step.

Your daily habits aren't just important; they're the whole ballgame. Aristotle knew this when he wrote "we are what we repeatedly do." And despite your natural desire to fix everything at once, the best way to get big results is to make tiny, continuous changes to daily habits. In Japan, this is known as *kaizen*, a concept introduced to American readers in Stephen Covey's 1989 bestseller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Habit adjustment got a lot of help in the 21st century from groundbreaking studies into human behavior. These are outlined in the 2014 bestseller *The Power of Habit*. Then came *Atomic Habits* (2018), which points out that improving any metric by one percent at a time adds up to exponential growth over the long term. What matters in the short term is the repetition, which takes your behavior out of the limited realm of willpower and makes it automatic.

Personally I like the summary in *Mini Habits* (2013): Make your daily practice "too small to fail." Ensure you exercise for five minutes every day, for example, and you'll soon find yourself eager to do more.

Sound familiar? Take small, sweet steps to accomplish your goal!

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2. Change your mental maps.

Time to enter the world of sports cliché. "If you believe it, the mind can achieve it": These motivational-poster words are attributed to the NFL's Ronnie Lott, but also reflect what nearly every self-help book has tried to tell us since *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). In achieving any goal, basically, you have to thoroughly visualize your preferred end result, then work backwards in precisely-planned steps.

The planning part is key. Take it away and you get the semi-spiritual mumbo jumbo of *The Secret* (2006), which itself was a rewrite of *The Science of Getting Rich* (1910), which was based on the 19th century's "mind over body" movement. But science tells us there is no "law of attraction" (though there is a psychological explanation for why we might think we see examples of it).

The plan is how you get to your goal, and the process may take years. You're playing the long game.

Emotional connection to your visualization is how you acquire "mental toughness" to get past the hurdles that make us want to quit on the way to anything worthwhile.

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3. Struggle is good. Scary is good.

The Stoic philosophy dates back to the 3rd century B.C. And it's still enormously popular, cropping up not just in [*The Stoic Challenge: A Philosopher's Guide to Becoming Tougher, Calmer and More Resilient*](#) (2019), but in more or less every other modern self-help tome.

Stoicism is not about being unfeeling, but about shifting your mental framework so that you expect and even welcome the worst instead of fearing it.

Throughout history there are many similar attempts to rewire our expectations — such as the Buddhist principle, [stolen](#) by [controversial](#) academic Jordan Peterson, that says [life is suffering](#). Once you accept this, the next level is not simply to expect it — but to rush headlong into the things that make you afraid.

"You must do the thing you think you cannot do," said Eleanor Roosevelt. This is [often rendered](#) as the version that appeared in the famous "sunscreen" [advice column](#) and [song](#): "Do one thing every day that scares you." Which, with its nod to daily habits, is probably the most succinct self-help sentence ever.

This leads us to what we might call "self-scare" books, with titles like [*Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*](#) (1987), which the author of the meta-self-help book [Help Me!](#) judged her most effective read. You don't have to quit your job, plunge into ice-cold ponds or face the embarrassment of public speaking as she did, **but getting your ass off the couch and putting butterflies in your stomach is a necessary part of every stoic self-help plan.**

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4. Instant judgment is bad.

It's hard to explain this common self-help rule without slipping into clichés. How often have you been told to take a deep breath and count to 10 before reacting to some perceived slight? Or to keep an open mind? Or to walk a mile in someone's shoes? Or to question your assumptions? Or that it's probably not about you? "Be kind," says a quote from a Scottish author that is often misattributed to Plato, "for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

Call it empathy, call it compassion, call it playing devil's advocate, call it examining your privilege. It's all one and the same purpose — avoiding a rush to judgment about your fellow humans. Evolution has hardwired us to see patterns and make snap decisions. Which is useful when saber-toothed tigers are charging our cave, but not so much in a tight-knit multicultural society.

That's bad news for us, but good news for every self-help author who gets to remind us, repeatedly, in too many books to count.

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5. Remember the end of your life.

As we pass what would have been Robin Williams' 69th birthday, let us recall the "[carpe diem](#)" scene from *Dead Poets' Society*. "We are food for worms, lads," says Williams; a line that is now almost too poignant to bear.

But bear it we must, because the foreknowledge of our own demise isn't just what sets humans apart from animals. It's also one of the most useful tools in the self-help arsenal. Sufi poets originated the phrase "this too shall pass;" Julius Caesar made a servant whisper it in his ear when he entered the gates of Rome. [Socrates](#) gave us the [memento mori](#). Why does it work so well? Because when we remember we're going to die, the inane squabbles of daily life tend to fall away, revealing a sudden clarity of purpose. "When a man knows he is to be hanged," 18th century wit Samuel Johnson [wrote](#), "it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

So how do we seize this day? By listing and doing the most important things, the sooner the better. [Someday Is Not A Day in the Week](#) (2019) tells the story of the author's father, who dreamed his whole life of visiting every U.S. National Park, then died of a stroke in a hotel bathroom on his way to do exactly that, one week after his retirement.

If that's your fate, what would you do differently?

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6. Be playful.

On Being Awesome: A Unified Theory of How Not to Suck (2017) has one of the more unusual beginnings of any self-help book: A description of nerdy Celtics fan Jeremy Fry rocking out to Bon Jovi's *Living on a Prayer* on the stadium cam, a viral video viewed nearly 19 million times. Why? Because Fry was behaving as awesomely as we wish we all could, throwing caution to the wind, fully expressing himself in front of thousands.

It wasn't that Fry was dancing like no one was watching, to name another cliché. It's that he was dancing *with everyone*, fully aware they were all watching, and loving it. Here's where *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* and its ilk come in handy, by reminding us of one essential truth: Life is *way* too short to give any f*cks whatsoever about what other people think of you when you're living your best life. And paradoxically, others are drawn to you when you behave like that.

What's more, you should actively cultivate your quirks. An increasing number of creative self-help books make this explicit, such as Felicia Day's *Embrace Your Weird* (2019). "The things that made you weird as a kid are the source of your creative powers," says James Victore in *Feck Perfuction: Dangerous Ideas on the Business of Life* (2019). "These are the base elements of who you are. Not perfect. Not trying. Just yourself." And as Buddhists will tell you, just being yourself without effort is the best way to leave that troublesome ego at the door.

No matter how difficult your task is, you can always make it playful.

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7. Be useful to others.

What is the oldest piece of self-help advice? In the loosest definition, it's probably the Golden Rule — treat others as you would want to be treated — a basic principle which appears to have emerged independently in every culture in the world. The rule dates to at least the 6th century B.C. in China and Greece, and around 2,000 B.C. in Egypt. There are many more ways to say it, from "love thy neighbor" to, in the words of a 2020 self-help title, *[Just Don't Be An Assh*le](#)*.

But the Golden Rule can trip you up if your neighbors don't want to be treated the way you do. You can become an asshole by being overly helpful, too.

So a better way to think is in terms of *usefulness*. "The purpose of life is not to be happy, it is to be useful," [wrote](#) Ralph Waldo Emerson, and it's as true now as it was in the 19th century. Being useful to others doesn't just give us a warm and fuzzy feeling, one rooted deep in our tribal evolution. It also allows us to employ our particular talents, our quirks, and it gives them a direction.

Find the thing that makes you *you*, then use it in a way that will help as much of humanity as possible: This is as close as we get to the meaning of life.

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8. Perfectionism = procrastination

Over the years I've bought an armful of books to tackle procrastination, ironically waiting for a rainy day to read them. I also sought books that dealt with my perfectionist behavior. But it wasn't until I read *How to Be an Imperfectionist* that one simple fact became clear: They were one and the same problem.

Perfect results are impossible in this world, so if you're expecting them, of course you're going to procrastinate. Perfectionism isn't playful. It won't let you embrace your flaws, or the notion that habit change is supposed to be slow and easy, so if anything you overreach — hello, New Year's resolutions! — and end up failing to change your habits at all.

Again, there's a Japanese principle at work here: *wabi-sabi*, the acceptance and love of imperfection in all things. How do you put it into action? You get started, no matter whether you're ready. Sometimes you learn best by doing, by throwing yourself in at the deep end.

Or as Voltaire once observed, “The perfect is the enemy of the good.”

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9. Sleep, exercise, eat, chill out. Repeat.

Being human means accepting the limitations and maintenance of our meat sack. The Roman poet Juvenal put it best: *Mens sana in corpore sano*, a healthy mind in a healthy body. We need to eat (not too much, not too often, and the right stuff). We need to sleep (between 6 and 10 hours, depending on our age and our DNA) and to pay attention to our chronotype, which we can't change no matter how many times we read self-help books like *The 5 A.M. Miracle* that promise to make us a morning person.

And yes, sorry, we need to exercise daily. It really is a silver bullet that boosts our resilience while reducing pain, inflammation, depression, and the stress hormone cortisol. A ton of self-help books, not just the Buddhist ones, also recommend meditation and mindfulness, with good scientific reason.

And then there's *The Importance of Living*, a popular 1937 American self-help book by a Chinese immigrant named Lin Yutang, which recommends just chilling out, loafing, going with the flow. One whole chapter is devoted to the best posture while lying in bed

Which isn't to say that you shouldn't strive to do more, find your purpose, visualize your goals, etc. etc. But if you don't make room for the simple pleasures, ideally with your cortisol-spiking smartphone as far away as possible, you will never be fully refreshed and restored and ready to give back to the world. It's also vital for your sense of humor, says Yutang, who offers this formula:

"Reality + dreams + humor = wisdom."

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10. Write it all down.

No matter which self-help guide you follow, you aren't going to get far without writing. You need to hone a plan. You need to visualize. You need to make lists. David Allen's 2002 classic [*Getting Things Done*](#) offers the best system I've ever seen for a to-do list, and it can be boiled down to this: Capture literally everything you think you might have to do or want to do, now or in the future. Then for each item, either do it immediately (if it takes less than 5 minutes), defer it (to a specific date or a "someday/maybe" list) or delegate it (if you're lucky enough to have people to do stuff for you).

You can and should write in a freeform and spontaneous way too, even if you're not a writer. That's the advice of Julia Cameron, author of the 1992 bestseller [*The Artist's Way*](#), which introduced the concept of "morning pages." In the first hour of your day, before your brain has a chance to fully wake up and censor itself, write three pages by hand. The subject: anything that comes to mind. Invariably, the first two pages are full of crap like "I don't know why I'm doing this, it's boring," before the third page hits on some surprising epiphany.

Then there's the gratitude journal. The concept still makes me roll my eyes, but it's hard to deny the science of it: The simple act of listing things we're grateful for every day has been shown to [rewire our brains and improve our mental health](#), even after just a few weeks of the practice.

Writing it down makes it real!

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11. You can't get it all from reading.

If you read an author who claims you can get literally everything you need from their book or article, that's not self-help. It's a cult. Luckily, almost all writers admit the limitations of reading in a well-rounded life improvement program. At some point, you need to put the book down and do the work. And you need to recognize your limitations. You will always backslide.

Even the most self-reliant of us need help to get as far along that road as we can. That's the final stage of *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, where we move from the rebellious teenage stage of independence to an adult understanding of interdependence. Plenty of self-help authors suggest nominating an "accountability buddy" to keep you honest, while you do the same for them.

If you're lucky enough to have someone who will call you on literally all of your shit, hang on to that person for dear life. But friends, co-workers and family who love you are naturally going to be wary of telling you everything you can't see for fear of the reaction, just as you would be with them. So a better solution, say it with me now, is to see a therapist. You can read all about Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in books such as the bestselling *Feeling Good* (1980), for example. But you can't put it into practice until you're talking to a professional who can apply it to your particular case.

Ultimately, this too is part of the meaning of life:

Not just to be useful to others, but to be strong enough to let others be useful to us.