

motivation



THESE HABITS WILL DRAMATICALLY IMPROVE YOUR LIFE

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In Hans Christian Andersen's fable *The Red Shoes*, a young girl longs for a pair of pretty red shoes. She ultimately tricks the blind woman who cares for her into buying her a pair. Her love for the red shoes causes her to give them priority over the more important things in her life, and, as often happens in fables, karma is not on her side. The shoes become firmly stuck to her feet and force her to dance non-stop, to the point where she almost dies from exhaustion and starvation.

We can scoff at the little girl's foolishness, but, in real life, we often do the same thing—we chase after the things that we think will make us happy and don't realize that we're heading down a dangerous path.

One study found that the people who experience the greatest job satisfaction aren't the ones in the big, fancy offices; they're the ones who approach their work as a calling, even when that work involves menial labor.

Another study found that simply seeing fast-food logos makes people impatient. It's not that there's some intrinsic characteristic of fast food that makes people impatient; it's the habits we've come to associate with fast food, such as always being on the run, eating on the go, and never slowing down enough to enjoy a healthy meal, that bring out our impatience.

We have to be very careful in choosing our pursuits, because our habits make us. Cultivating the habits that follow will send you in the right direction. They'll help you to lead a more meaningful and fulfilling life, whereby you cultivate the best within yourself.

Stay away from people who erode your quality of life. If merely seeing a logo for a fast-food company can make you feel impatient, just think how much more impact a toxic person can have on your life. They might be unhappy about your decision to stay away from them, and they might tell you very loudly just how unhappy they are, but isn't avoiding them worth the cumulative effects of years of their negative influence? There are always going to be toxic people who have a way of getting under your skin and staying there. Each time you find yourself thinking about a coworker or person who makes your blood boil, practice being grateful for someone else in your life instead. There are plenty of people out there who deserve your attention, and the last thing you want to do is think about the people who don't matter.

No more phone, tablet, or computer in bed. This is a big one, which most people don't even realize harms their sleep and productivity. Short-wavelength blue light plays an important role in determining your mood, energy level, and sleep quality. In the morning, sunlight contains high concentrations of this blue light. When your eyes are exposed to it directly, it halts production of the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin and makes you feel alert. In the afternoon, the sun's rays lose their blue light, which allows your body to produce melatonin and this starts making you sleepy. By the evening, your brain doesn't expect any blue light exposure and is very sensitive to it. Most of our favorite evening devices—laptops, tablets, and mobile phones—emit short-wavelength blue light brightly and right in your face. This exposure impairs melatonin production and interferes with your ability to fall asleep, as well as with the quality of your sleep once you do nod off. As we've all experienced, poor nights' sleep has disastrous effects.

The best thing you can do is to avoid these devices after dinner (television is OK for most people, as long as they sit far enough away from the set).

Appreciate the here and now. Gratitude is fundamental to peace and happiness—not wealth, glamour, adventure, or fast cars, but simple appreciation for what you have. Just because you can't afford champagne and caviar doesn't mean that you never enjoy a meal. Hot dogs and beer on the back deck with your friends taste just as good. So, don't fool yourself into thinking that you need something that you don't currently have in order to be happy, because the truth is that if you can't appreciate what you have now, you won't be able to appreciate the "good life" if you ever get it.

Realize that things aren't always as you perceive them to be. This goes along with appreciating the here and now. That person you envy because they seem to have the perfect life might be dealing with all kinds of problems behind closed doors. That "perfection" could be a total mirage. Your employer's decision to move the office might seem like a huge hassle when you first hear about it, but it could end up being one of the best things that ever happens to you. You're not omniscient and you're not a fortune-teller, so be open to the possibility that life might have some surprises in store, because what you see is not always what you get.

Get started, even though you might fail. Most writers spend countless hours brainstorming their characters and plots, and they even write page after page that they know they'll never include in the books. They do this because they know that ideas need time to develop. We tend to freeze up when it's time to get started because we know that our ideas aren't perfect and that what we produce might not be any good. But how can you ever produce something great if you don't get started and give your ideas time to evolve? Author Jodi Picoult summarized the importance of avoiding perfectionism perfectly: "You can edit a bad page, but you can't edit a blank page."

Get organized. People joke about new ideas being in short supply, but I think that the one resource that's really scarce is spare time. Do you know anybody who has some? Yet we waste so much of it by not being organized. We touch things two or three times before we do something with them (like tossing the mail down on the counter then moving it to the table so we can cook dinner) and once we've put them away, we spend even more time looking for them. Have a place for all of those little things you need to take care of when you get a minute, whether it's your child's permission slip for a field trip or an overdue bill, and then get to them in a timely manner; otherwise you'll be searching through a huge stack of stuff for the one thing you need.

Start a collection of the things that truly resonate with you. Have you ever come across a quote or a meme that so perfectly summed up your feelings that you wanted to keep it forever? You know that it's in one of those coats you wore five winters ago, and you really hope it's not the one you gave to Goodwill. When you come across something that resonates with you—whether it's something that expresses who you are or who you want to be—have a central place to keep those gems. It doesn't matter whether it's a spiral notebook, a leather binder, or a folder on Evernote, have a place to collect the things that matter so that you can revisit them regularly.

Do something that reminds you who you are. We all joke about having "me" time, but what is that, really? It's making time for those activities that we feel most authentically ourselves doing, when all the masks are off and we can just be. Whether it's going for a run or dancing around with your 80s favorites blaring at top volume, make time for those moments. They're incredibly rejuvenating.

Say no. Research conducted at the University of California in San Francisco shows that the more difficulty that you have saying no, the more likely you are to experience stress, burnout, and even depression, all of which erode self-control. Saying no is indeed a major self-control challenge for many people. "No" is a powerful word that you should not be afraid to wield. When it's time to say no, emotionally intelligent people avoid phrases like "I don't think I can" or "I'm not certain." Saying no to a new commitment honors your existing commitments and gives you the opportunity to successfully fulfill them. Just remind yourself that saying no is an act of self-control now that will increase your future self-control by preventing the negative effects of over commitment.

Stick to realistic goals. How many people start January by proclaiming, "I'm going to lose 30 pounds by March!"? Big, scary, crazy goals can be incredibly inspiring—until you fall short, and then, instead of inspiration, you're left with disappointment and guilt. I'm certainly not suggesting that you stop setting goals that push and challenge you, just that you try to stick within the bounds of reality.

Bringing It All Together

Your character is determined by your attitude and how you spend your time, and so is happiness. Stop chasing the things that you think will make you happy, and start realizing that your peace and happiness are entirely up to you. 📌

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