

GOOD LIFE PRACTICE

*A Quick Start Guide to
Mindful Self-Regulation*

Dave Mochel

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Top Five Reasons Not to Read This Book:

1. There is nothing new here. The principles and practices presented in these pages have been around for a long time – some of them for thousands of years. The purpose of this book is to make these principles and practices accessible and applicable in modern life.

2. I am not enlightened. I am a recovering reactive, anxious, perfectionist who needs these practices as much as anyone. Like any other human being, I lose sight of what is most important in the demands and distractions of daily life, and I benefit from practicing what is in these pages.

3. This is not a feel-good book. One of the realities of life is that it contains discomfort. Ironically, finding acceptance for this allows you to experience greater joy as you discover that you are capable of incredible things even when life feels really hard.

4. It is not a quick fix. The subject of this book is a practice – an approach to life that takes time and effort. If you are looking for a breakthrough, an epiphany, or a one-time transformation that will carry you for the rest of your life, then this book is not for you.

5. You don't need fixing. This is not a self-improvement book. One of the goals of this book is for you to realize that you are already enough as you are. You can discover the authentic confidence that comes from knowing that you have always had what you need to deal with whatever shows up.

So Why Read This Book?

Being human is messy. Many of us look shiny on the outside and feel a bit scrambled on the inside. Sometimes we are lonely in a room full of people. Sometimes we feel dissatisfied even when we have everything we need. Sometimes we try to control situations that are completely beyond our influence. And sometimes we try to escape normal human feelings even though we know they will return.

I often think it would be easier to be a badger. I don't know for sure, but I don't think badgers spend a lot of time worrying about being a badger. I think they follow their urges for survival, make more badgers, and sleep. Maybe they have some social gatherings from time to time – to be honest, I did no research on badger lifestyle before writing this part. While badgers may not live a glamorous life, it seems relatively straightforward.

On the other hand, humans are animals with hopes, dreams, and regrets. We are both blessed and cursed with the knowledge that we are human. We can create art and poetry, we can

send people to the moon, and we can take care of strangers who are suffering. But we are also capable of yelling at small children about the importance of kindness, worrying about whether we are enough, and protecting our ideas and opinions as if we were protecting our physical selves.

If you find that being human sometimes feels like a bit much... If you are tired of feeling like CNN on the inside while trying to look like Facebook on the outside... If you would like to find just a bit of grace and clarity... If you would like to be more present, purposeful, positive, and connected when the challenges of daily life arise, then this book was written for you.*

* Whenever "you" appears in this book, it refers to all human beings – including me. Don't take anything in this book personally. We are all neurotic – this is something that I love about our species.

Endorsements for Dave's Work

You are changing lives – I know you have changed mine for the better.

~ Matthew Briger, Owner, Sola Salons

The retreat you led was one of the most valuable and important things I have done. You gave us tools to find our common ground, even when others may frustrate or challenge us.

~ Tina Rivera, Teacher, Denver, Colorado

We are more open, more trusting, and just plain more effective as a result of working with Dave.

~ Alliya Rivo, Teacher, New York

I've used the word "transformational" at least ten times since the workshop, and had extremely positive experiences practicing mindful self-regulation.

~ Nick Machol, CEO, Machol and Johannes

The techniques and tools Dave has shared with me had an immediate and sustainable impact on my relationships, my business results, and my general wellbeing.

~ Dan Greenleaf, President, Home Solutions

Dave is one of the few people who inspire me to be a better person.

~ Greg H. Kubicek, CEO, Holt Inc.

Dave has taught me how to respond to my emotions in a profoundly positive and productive way.

~ Alexx Temena, Designer, Oakland, California

I have never seen anyone combine science, wisdom, and practical application in such a remarkable way.

~ Beatrice Alexander, Chicago, Illinois

Gratitude

*If the only prayer you ever say in
your entire life is thank you,
it will be enough.
~ Meister Eckhart*

To Marnie –

*Thank you for teaching me the value of doing the
next right thing. Also, thank you for reminding me
that I am funnier in person than I am in writing –
and that I could work on that.*

To Keller and Eli –

*Thank you for the constant reminder that we can
all grow as long as we live. I am deeply grateful
for your kindness, humor, inspiration, love, and
support. Thank you for the joy of being your
father.*

To my teachers in all forms –

*Thank you for your courage, compassion, wisdom,
and guidance that continue to make all the
difference in my life.*

Acknowledgments

*Life doesn't make any sense without
interdependence. We need each other,
and the sooner we learn that, the
better for us all.*

~Erik Erikson

The list of resources and further reading at the end of this book is a testament to the contributions of so many who have shaped my thinking.

Having said that, I do want to specifically mention some of the researchers whose work has been the most influential, including David Eagleman, Richard Ryan, Carol Ryff, Sara Lazar, Todd Kashdan, Ed Diener, Ruth Baer, Richard Davidson, Kristen Neff, Roy Baumeister, Richard Tedeschi, Sonia Lyubomirsky, Michael Posner, Stephen Joseph, Robert Emmons, Barbara Fredrickson, Ed Deci, Brene Brown, Robert Kurzban, and Mark Leary.

I also want to express my deep appreciation to Jon Kabat-Zinn for teaching me about the power of mindfulness, Cheri Huber for deepening my understanding of compassion, Marnie Woehr for consistently demonstrating the importance of doing the next right thing, Sandy Ellis for living as a model of unconditional love and kindness, Alexx Temena for being an invaluable source of constructive feedback, Jay Fields for helping me see the need for self-compassion, Sara Caputo for showing me the value of a plan, and my Mom and Dad for instilling in me a curiosity about how and why human beings do what they do.

Finally, I have to give a shout out to my clients – many of whom have given me permission to share parts of their stories in this book. Their humor, courage, and humanity give me hope for us all.

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*It is much simpler to buy books than
to read them and easier to read them
than to absorb their contents.*

~William Osler

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The Beginning

*The journey of a thousand miles
begins with a single step
~ Lao Tzu*

In my mid-twenties, I punched a wall hard enough to break several bones. The ache in my hand on rainy days is a great reminder of why I practice.

I learned many things when I was growing up, but how to work effectively with the discomfort and uncertainty that comes with being human was not one of them. I thought that a good life was the result of getting circumstances to be just right – the right career, the right friends, the right vacations, the right amount of approval and admiration from others...

In the absence of the control over the universe that I desired, I thought the answer was to appear like I had it all together. I tried really hard to look happy on the outside even though I was struggling on the inside.

My lack of life skills and my increasing anxiety eventually created a perfect storm that I now refer to as a nervous breakthrough.

Breaking my hand helped me realize two things:

1. Something needed to change
2. I did not know how or what to change

Fortunately, I found many great teachers. They came in the form of colleagues, students, family members, counselors, researchers, and authors.

For the past three decades, I have been studying scientific research and wisdom related to human development, neuroscience, and wellbeing in an attempt to understand the building blocks of a good life. My goal has been to pull together what I have learned and put it in an accessible form that is applicable in daily life.

As a coach and consultant, I train individuals, teams, and organizations in the practice of mindful self-regulation – the subject of this book. I love what I do, and feel deeply grateful that I have this opportunity.

The purpose of this barebones guide is to help you start practicing. While philosophies, epiphanies, or intentions can be helpful, it has become clear to me that on their own they are not enough to create lasting change.

Consistent practice over time, on the other hand, can create absolutely incredible results. And unsexy as it sounds, it is repeated behavior over time that makes the biggest difference.

To that end, in these pages you will find questions to ask yourself and practices to engage in. Rather than reading through quickly and then putting it back on the shelf with your other self-help books, I encourage you to go through the annoying, boring, and humbling experience of practicing something new.

This book is organized into two parts. *Part One: The Human Condition* puts forth some context for what it is we human beings are all dealing with. *Part Two: Good Life Practices* presents a host of exercises you can incorporate into your life if you choose.

The book is small – designed to be carried around. The chapters are brief – designed to give you portions you can digest and put into practice. I tried to write the shortest book I could – if I were a more skilled writer, it might have been shorter. I am sure that you will be left with questions – you will find the answers in your practice.

The reason I harp on the idea of practice is because practice allows you to see what you are really capable of. And I can promise you that you are capable of more than you think – we all are.

Someone in one of my classes once told me that the statement “you are more capable than you think” sounds like “ self-help, motivational garbage.” Ouch, but fair enough.

To be clear, when I say “you are more capable than you think,” I am referencing the fact that you have a human brain that purposely hides things from you that you are capable of.

While this may seem like a cruel trick, it does this to protect you. As far as the survival portion of your brain is concerned, you have lived this long

without changing it up, so why start now and take the risk of stepping into the unknown?

Full disclosure – there was a time in my life when I thought that if I practiced really hard, I would get somewhere and be done. I brought my perfectionism to my practice and used it as another opportunity to be dissatisfied. Over time, I came to realize that life is just one continuous opportunity to practice. You can think of your practice as your life or your life as your practice – either one works.

One of the great challenges of being human is that we do not know when our time is up. We might have sixty seconds, sixty days, or sixty years. We just don't know. This uncertainty leaves us with the incredible opportunity to practice, to grow, and to love – right up until the point we die, whenever that is.

It is my sincerest hope that you find something helpful within these pages. I wish you well in your practice of a good life.

PART ONE:
THE HUMAN CONDITION

*Life is like playing a violin solo
in public and learning the
instrument as one goes on.
~ Samuel Butler*

Being Human

People are just people, and all people have faults and shortcomings, but all of us are born with a basic goodness.

~Anne Frank

Have you ever been stuck in traffic? Maybe you found yourself gripping the steering wheel tightly, practicing some new sign language, or crafting stories about the other drivers. Maybe you beat yourself up for not having left earlier or tortured yourself with disaster scenarios resulting from being late. Or...maybe you practiced being grateful you have a car to drive. Maybe you spent your time wishing that the drivers around you would arrive at their destinations safely and have a healthy and happy life. Maybe you marveled at the fact that you have thumbs....

Traffic doesn't happen to you. You are the traffic. Has this ever occurred to you? There you are looking around at the other drivers feeling like a victim, and they are looking at you feeling the same way. We are participants in the traffic.

Life isn't happening to us. We are participating in life. How we participate makes a huge difference – for us and for everyone around us. This is how it is being human.

Being human is complicated. We are bombarded by urges and thoughts that are connected to automatic behaviors. Sometimes this leads us to do stuff that does not align with what we really value.

Have you ever yelled at a small child about the importance of kindness? I have. There you are, standing over this little human being while you lecture him in a stern (and maybe loud) voice about how crucial it is that we treat other people with kindness and respect. Despite the conflict between the content and the tone of your message, you feel justified and satisfied – as long as you don't look too closely or too long at the child's face.

We can call it hypocrisy or we can call it humanity. All of us have gaps in our lives between our values and our behavior. This is because the human nervous system has a complicated evolutionary history. Our drive for survival can feel like it is in conflict with the values that give life meaning. At some level we are all neurotic, compulsive, irrational and hypocritical. We can develop a sense of humor, honesty, and compassion about this, or we can pretend that we are immune to being human.

Because we are human, we have a great tendency to:

Get distracted and triggered by the events of daily life and lose sight of what matters most

Limit ourselves by becoming attached to circumstances we like and avoiding circumstances we do not like

Exhaust ourselves by resisting life as it is and trying to control circumstances that are outside our control

Because we are human, we have a great capacity to:

Work peacefully with whatever shows up in life

Focus powerfully on what is important and what is needed

Practice the relationship to life that we seek

We can learn to work more skillfully with our humanity. We can grow our capacity for a good life with daily practice. A large body of research on human wellbeing points to some skills that are fundamental to a good life. These skills are strengthened with practice.

This practice may seem abstract at first. However, practicing mindful self-regulation is as real and concrete as practicing a tennis serve, a song on the piano, or arithmetic.

This practice may seem awkward at first. This is completely normal. Right now, if you asked me to serve a tennis ball over the net and into the opposite court, it would look a lot like a cat taking a shower – a lot of frantic movement and strange

noises. This is not because there is something wrong with me; it is because I have not played much tennis at all. If I continued to practice, there is good reason to believe that I would look and feel less like a desperate caged animal on the court. The same is true for you and the practice of mindful self-regulation.*

The bottom line:

Because we are human, we have areas of our lives where our behavior does not align with our values. We have a profound ability to align our life with our values – it just takes practice.

*This is not to say that you will look or feel like a desperate caged animal when you practice mindful self-regulation – I just needed a metaphor.

Practice

*Under duress, we do not rise to
our expectations - we fall to
the level of our training.*
~Bruce Lee

“It is the same every morning. He resists getting up, forgets his socks or his lunch, I yell at him, and he goes to school with both of us feeling crummy.” Julie told me this with tears in her eyes. Each morning she would cross her fingers and tell herself that it was going to be different. Then the feelings of frustration would arrive and she would go through the same routine. After all, she had been practicing it for a long time. Rather than continue to hope that tomorrow would be different, she began to practice accepting that the feelings of frustration were going to show up. This allowed her to focus on what she was going to do when they did. She became quite skilled at recognizing the sensations early, feeling her feet on the ground, taking a breath, and bringing to mind how much she loved her son. From this place she was able to hold him accountable and support him without a battle.

We get what we practice. When we are angry, we experience anger. When we are loving, we experience love. This wisdom has been around for a long time. The Law of Karma translates into “We get what we practice.” The Golden Rule tells us that when we “Do onto others as you would have them do onto you,” you also get the benefit of whatever you are doing.

What do you imagine the world needs more of? Practice that. If you would like more love in your life, then the most direct route is to practice being loving. If you want acceptance, gratitude, kindness, or joy in your life, then the most direct strategy is to practice being accepting, kind, and joyful.

We get better at what we practice. Your brain is constantly rewiring itself to become more skilled at what you do repeatedly. Modern science tells us that your brain is continually building or dismantling connections based on what you do. Skill is a matter of connectivity in your brain. The stronger and faster connections are, the more comfortable and automatic a behavior becomes. This is true for physical, emotional, social, and mental skills. Deliberate, conscious practice is the

quickest path to building new connections in your brain.

We are always practicing something. Your brain does not care whether you want to get better at something, it only cares that you do it. When you sleep at night, your brain organizes itself to get better at what you did during the day. This is how a habit is formed. When you argue, you get better at arguing. When you listen, you get better at listening. When you complain, you get better at complaining. When you treat yourself or others harshly, you get better at that. When you treat yourself or others kindly, you get better at that...

New practices can be uncomfortable. Learning a new skill requires practice, and practice requires effort. Your brain likes to save energy, and it connects what you have done in the past with your current survival, therefore it can be resistant to trying new things.

This is where New Year's resolutions go to die. Don't believe me? Try this – clasp your hands together with your fingers interlaced. Now change it up so that your fingers are in a different

order. Feel the difference? Try brushing your teeth with the other hand...

There are several ways your brain tries to steer you back to your familiar way of doing things.

It uses discomfort. It creates some discomfort when you do new things or think about doing new things.

It uses rules. It tells you that "you can't," "you shouldn't," or "you aren't that way."

It forgets. It conveniently forgets to put things on your to-do list or your calendar.

When you have a hiccup in a new practice, it uses this as a reason to give up and go back to the old behavior.

Knowledge is not practice. One clever strategy that your brain uses to avoid adopting new practices is to use knowledge as a substitute for practice. For example, knowing that exercise is good for you does not give you the benefits of exercise. However, knowing that exercise is good for you can give you an excuse not to exercise. Knowledge is not practice – practice is practice.

You are practicing something right now.

The awareness and acceptance that you are always practicing something can be incredibly useful. You can catch on to the ways that your brain steers you away from new behavior and back to old behavior – even when that old behavior is not working for you. You can take complete responsibility for whatever you are practicing without judgment or blame.

The bottom line:

Be careful what you practice, because you are going to get better at it.

Ask yourself

What is something that you practice regularly that really works for you?

What is something that you practice regularly that is not really working for you?

A Good Life

My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style.

~ Maya Angelou

Growing up, I worked on a farm in the summer putting up hay. Temperatures in the barn could easily reach one hundred and twenty degrees. A conveyor belt carried heavy bales from a wagon outside to a hole high in the wall of the barn. The bales dropped around us and kicked up clouds of dust and chaff that filled the air, stuck to my sweaty skin, and seemed to coat my entire throat. My arms were exhausted and covered with red scratches from hauling the bales into place. I was miserable. Steve, a farmhand in his fifties, stacked the hay at an unimaginably fast pace. Sweating more than anyone I had ever seen, he never stopped smiling. I vividly remember a moment when we were resting and waiting for another wagon to pull up. Steve looked over at me grinning and said, "Isn't this great!?"

A good life can contain it all. A good life contains joy, discomfort, loss, triumph, disappointment, surprise, routine, upset, love, anger – the whole deal. Being well is not about suppressing or avoiding some feelings and clinging to others. Bringing awareness and acceptance to whatever shows up allows you to learn from it, and to choose a response that is aligned with your values, goals, relationships and commitments.

This is not new. The concept of the good life has been around for thousands of years – before the Internet, smart phones, and salted caramel dark chocolate. Wisdom from lasting traditions such as Stoicism, Humanism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism all speaks to the importance of embracing the miracle of existence and working with it, rather than trying to bend it to your will.

The pursuit of happiness leads to more pursuit, not happiness. Many of us were taught – directly or indirectly – that the secret to happiness, satisfaction, and fulfillment is “success” – going to the right school, having the right career, getting the right people around you,

and so on. The idea is that if you can get circumstances to be the way they are “supposed” to be, then happiness will follow.

Having the “right stuff” does not remove the fundamental challenges of being human. Having access to more material resources than at any time in human history has not squelched our anxiety, dissatisfaction, stress, depression, or loneliness. In fact, these psychological challenges are on the rise despite our increasing wealth, greater access to conveniences, and the development of incredible technology.

No matter how successful you are, you cannot arrange your life to avoid all discomfort. You cannot get people, emotions, and circumstances to be just the way you like them. The reality of being human is that you have a nervous system that creates a whole range of sensations – some of these are pleasant and some are not.

A good life contains both purpose and pleasure. Having a sense of purpose is just as vital to wellbeing as being able to enjoy pleasant

experiences. Growth, meaning, contribution, and learning are fundamental to a good life, and these can be practiced even when life is not comfortable. There is an asymmetry between purpose and pleasure – while connecting with purpose often makes life more pleasurable, focusing on pleasure often makes life less purposeful.

A good life embraces the challenge and the miracle of being human. Life often does not show up in the way we want it to. The choice to embrace this or fight against it has an enormous impact on the quality of our lives. We can learn to live wholeheartedly with the fact that life is both miraculous and challenging.

The bottom line:

A good life often boils down to peaceful and powerful relationship with whatever is happening.