12 Rules for Life is a collection of life principles that, if followed, are meant to improve your life. It reached the #1 spot on Amazon’s bestsellers list, and clearly it resonates with a lot of people.

Its author (Jordan Peterson, a clinical psychologist and U Toronto professor) argues that modern secularism and reliance on science has left a void in answers to important existential questions: What is the point of living? Why do bad things happen to good people? What am I supposed to do to make myself happier? Why does life have so much suffering?

Without a clear guiding structure, you might feel directionless. You may be prone to nihilism (“there’s no point to anything”), existential angst, and misery. You may blame the world for being unfair to you, while spending your time on things you know are counterproductive. You may feel stuck and unable to change.

12 Rules for Life is Jordan Peterson’s attempt to fill the void. It’s his prescription for how people should behave and how they should deal with the vagaries of life. It covers why you should stop telling lies to others and yourself, why you should stop doing things you know are bad for you, and how to pursue what is truly meaningful for you. If individuals can take charge of their lives, then society can cure its ills.

The general points in 12 Rules for Life are undoubtedly things you’ve heard vaguely in the past, even cliched – but for some reason, the way he articulates his prescriptions carries considerable power and gravity. It’ll remind you of what you didn’t know you knew. As comments a typically rational, data-driven writer: “I
actually acted as a slightly better person during the week or so I read Jordan Peterson’s book...It certainly wasn’t because of anything new or non-cliched in his writing. But God help me, for some reason the cliches worked.”

In this 12 Rules for Life book summary, learn:

- What good posture has to do with your social status
- Why it doesn’t make sense to compare yourself with anyone else
- The one tactic to become an effective listener and get people to tell you whatever’s on their mind
- More explanations on the classic stereotype of women talking about their problems with men wanting to fix them too quickly
- How to stop blaming the world for your misfortunes and take responsibility
- A solution to nihilism
Overall Summary of 12 Rules for Life

- Most humans crave order and meaning in existence, to deal with the terrifying uncertainty of the world. For much of history religion served this function (eg being a servant of God). But as secularism rises, a void remains that is filled by nihilism and empty ideologies.

- Peterson believes that there is real meaning and good in existence. Look at it this way – if real evil exists (human suffering, especially inflicted by other humans), then good is the opposite of this – it is preventing evil from happening.

- You should therefore conduct your life to produce good. This will lead to meaning. This will make your existence matter. Your actions will matter, taking care of your health will matter, having good relationships will matter.

- **Rule 1: Stand up straight with your shoulders back.**
  - There is a part of your brain that is constantly monitoring signals to figure out your position in society. How you see others, and how others treat you, affect how you view yourself. If others kowtow to you, you elevate your own impression of status. If others denigrate you, you lower your internal status.
  - If you slouch, you convey defeat and low status to others; they will then treat you poorly, which will reinforce your status. (This can be reinforced in serotonin signaling, related to depression)
  - Fix your posture to get others to treat you better, which will make you feel better and stand tall, thus kicking off a virtuous cycle.

- **Rule 2: Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping.**
  - Many people are better at filling prescriptions for their dogs than themselves. Similarly, you may self-sabotage yourself daily – by not taking care of your health, not keeping promises you make to yourself.
  - Peterson argues that you do this because of some self-loathing – that you believe you’re not worth helping. Instead, you have to believe that you have a vital mission in this world, and you are obliged to take care of yourself.
  - Nietzsche: “He whose life has a why can bear almost any how.”

- **Rule 3: Make friends with people who want the best for you.**
  - Surround yourself with people who support you and genuinely want to see you succeed. You will push each other to greater heights; each person’s life improves as the others’ improve. They won’t tolerate your cynicism, and they will punish you when you mistreat yourself.
  - Don’t associate with people who want to drag you down to make them feel better about themselves.
  - Don’t accept charity cases by helping people who don’t accept personal responsibility for their actions. People who don’t want to improve can’t be helped.
Rule 4: Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today.

- With mass media, it’s easy to compare yourself to the best of every field (looks, wealth, marriage, career) and think of yourself as miserably outclassed. But modern society is so complex that everyone has different goals – which makes comparing to other people pointless.
- Drill deeply into your discontent and understand what you want, and why. Define your goals.
- Transform your goals into something achievable today. If it’s not within your control, look somewhere else. Let every day end a little better than it started.
- If you do this correctly, you’ll be unconcerned with other people, because you have plenty to do yourself.

Rule 5: Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them.

- Children test boundaries of behavior to learn the rules of the world. As a parent, your purpose is to serve as a proxy for society. You must teach the child what is acceptable, and what isn’t.
- Children who receive no/incorrect feedback will learn the incorrect boundaries of behavior. They will be poorly adjusted and rejected by society, which will severely hamper their happiness. If you don’t teach children the rules, society will punish them for you, far less mercifully.
- Set the rules, but not too many. Use the minimum necessary force to enforce the rules.

Rule 6: Put your house in order.

- It’s easy to blame the outside world, a group of people, or a specific person for your misfortunes. But before you do this, question – have you taken full advantage of every opportunity available to you? Or are you just sitting on your ass, pointing fingers?
- Are you doing anything you know is wrong? Stop it today.
- Stop saying things that make you feel ashamed and cowardly. Start saying things that make you feel strong. Do only those things about which you would speak with honor.

Rule 7: Pursue what is meaningful, not what is expedient.

- Doing good (preventing evil from happening, alleviating unnecessary suffering) provides your life with meaning. Meaning defeats existential angst; it gratifies your short-term impulses to achieve long-term goals; it makes your life worth living.
- Think – how can I make the world a little bit better today? Pay attention. Fix what you can fix.
- Think more deeply – what is your true nature? What must you become, knowing who you are? Work toward this.

Rule 8: Tell the truth.
▪ You may lie to others to get what you want; you may lie to yourself to feel better. But deep down you know it’s inconsistent with your beliefs, and you feel unsettled.

▪ You must develop your personal truth, and then act only in ways that are consistent with your personal truth.

▪ Lies can be about how much you enjoy your job; whether you want to be in a relationship; whether you’re capable of something; that a bad habit isn’t that bad for you; that things will magically work out.

▪ Once you develop your truth, you have a destination to travel toward. This reduces anxiety – having either everything or nothing available are far worse.

▪ Act only in ways that your internal voice does not object to. Like a drop of sewage in a lake of champagne, a lie spoils all the truth it touches.

▪ Rule 9: Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don’t.

▪ People talk because this is how they think. They need to verbalize their memories and emotions to clearly formulate the problem, then solve it. As a listener, you are helping the other person think. Sometimes you need to say nothing; other times, you serve as the voice of common reason.

▪ The most effective listening technique: summarize the person’s message. This forces you to genuinely understand what is being said; it distills the moral of the story, perhaps clarifying more than the speaker herself; and you avoid strawman arguments while constructing steelman arguments.

▪ Assume that your conversation partner has reached careful, thoughtful conclusions based on her own valid experiences.

▪ Rule 10: Be precise with your speech.

▪ Anxiety usually comes from the unknown. You don’t know what the problem is, or something vague seems really scary. Specificity turns chaos into a thing you can deal with.

▪ If you had a cancer in your body, wouldn’t you want to know where it is, what it is, and how exactly to treat it? Why don’t you treat every other problem in your life with the same clarity?

▪ Be precise. What is wrong, exactly? What do you want, exactly? Why, exactly?

▪ In interpersonal conflicts, specify exactly what is bothering you. Don’t let it spiral into an inescapable cobweb. If you let everyday resentment gather, eventually it may bubble up and destroy everyone.

▪ Rule 11: Leave children alone when they are skateboarding.

▪ Modern parenting has gotten overprotective. This is partly out of protecting children from danger, partly out of a call to equalize gender treatment, to ‘feminize’ boys and lower aggression.
- Boys by nature are more aggressive. This is biological. They want to prove competence to each other. They want to inhabit that level of risk that pushes them to grow.
- Let kids alone when they push against authority, toughen up, and do seemingly dangerous things. They need it to grow.

**Rule 12: Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street.**
- Life is tough. Good people get hurt. Suffering is pervasive.
- You can hate the universe for this. Or you can accept that suffering is an undeniable part of existence, and loving someone means loving their limitations. Superman without any flaws is boring and has no story.
- Notice little bits of everyday goodness that make existence tolerable, even justifiable. Watch the girl splash into a puddle. Enjoy a good coffee. Pet a cat when you run into one.

**Comments about 12 Rules for Life**

Jordan Peterson has attracted criticism for his remarks around political correctness and free speech. He also has attracted a conservative following. Much of this isn’t relevant to benefiting from 12 Rules for Life or from this book summary. If you come in skeptical because of his background, I suggest you keep an open mind, since the book’s advice is genuinely useful to a broad range of people.

I found the book’s chapters inconsistent in quality. Some (like Rule 1, Rule 9) were very clear, well-structured, and forceful. Others were confusing meanderings into philosophy and allegories, reading like streams of consciousness (as characterize some of his lectures). In this 12 Rules for Life summary, I try to structure the advice in a straightforward way, leaving out supporting points you might find useful. So if you like the summary, I suggest you read the actual book.

Jordan Peterson is Christian, and he refers to the Bible throughout, but this isn’t a religious book. Instead he argues that because similar tenets underlie a broad range of religions (Christianity, Buddhism, etc.), our human struggles are universal.

However, 12 Rules for Life is based on faith, by which I mean it doesn’t rely so much on data as it does on principles that just make sense. The book doesn’t use randomized controlled trials to prove “not lying to yourself is a good way to improve your life” (unlike the data-driven styles of Grit or How Not to Die). But given the complexities in life, not everything can be proven, and often you just have to act according to what you intuit is best. Thus acting out the 12 Rules for Life requires a bit of faith.
Premise/Introduction

Most humans crave order and meaning in their existence, to deal with the terrifying uncertainty of the world. For much of history this function was served by religion, with rules handed down by gods and supernatural surveillance of behavior. (Historians Durant agree with this). Despite differences in the beliefs, they drew on common themes, and the need for rules and order was universal. The ubiquity of this suggests something biological or evolutionary.

The developed world is moving to greater secularism, as a result of: scientific explanations of the world’s uncertainty; critical thinking around religion and the impracticality of all religions being true at once; moral relativism.

But there is no scientific code of ethics to inherit the stabilizing role of religion. In the absence of clear rules and a moral compass, people are prone to nihilism, existential angst, misery, and indulging their instincts.

In 12 Rules for Life, Peterson rejects the value of moral relativism (that good and evil are subjective opinion, every view is generally acceptable). This necessitates tolerance for all ideas to avoid being “judgmental,” and prevents adults from telling young people how to live. This also ignores thousands of years of development of virtue and how to live.

In this vacuum, many are drawn to group-centered belief instead, because it gives them identity, purpose, and a shared code of conduct. It simplifies the world.

- [But group-centered belief is susceptible to crowd psychology and escalating extremist behavior, with individuals suppressing dissent for fear of backlash.]
- It also makes conflict with other groups inevitable.
- For decades Peterson was flummoxed by the question of the Cold War – how could people risk world destruction for their belief systems?
- He concluded that people adopt shared belief to avoid negative emotions spurred by chaos; and are willing to fight to protect something that saves them from such terror.

Ideologies are defined as “simple ideas, disguised as science or philosophy,” that are unsatisfactorily simplistic explanations for the complexity of existence.

Instead, Peterson chooses to focus on individual responsibility. The central tenets are:

- Take responsibility for your own life.
- Walk the line between order and chaos, where life is stable enough but also unpredictable enough to provoke growth.
  - The classic hero must give up something to be reborn and meet a great challenge.
- Acknowledge that life is suffering. Your goal is to make progress to avoid suffering.
  - Typical overprotective adults avoid discussing suffering with their children, with the hope that it will protect them from it.
- If we lived properly, we would be resistant to the pains of existence and to the enticing lures of empty ideologies promising safety.

That Peterson’s *12 Rules for Life* have hit such a chord support the first assertion, that most people crave order and structure.
Rule 1: Stand Up Straight with Your Shoulders Back

Inequality of ability occurs through natural variation, and those higher in ability command greater resources:

- Higher position in social hierarchy
- More advantageous home locations
- More reproductive interest from higher-quality mates
- More cooperation with peers and subordinates

Recognizing your position in the social hierarchy, signaling it, and competing for position are deeply evolved, biological behaviors. Its commonality in species as divergent from us as crawfish suggests that it was strongly selected for in natural selection, very early on in life, and has a very functional role.

- Two stranger lobsters, placed in the same tank, will within 30 minutes determine the dominant and the subordinate lobster. Their subsequent behaviors match their position – one strutting, claws in the air; the other sulking, dejected, prone to flight.

The function of this signaling and recognition behavior is to distribute scarce resources between individuals, without the need for costly conflict.

- Consider the confrontation between two lobsters sizing each other up. At each stage in conflict, a lobster may yield and opt for subordinance. Failing this, the conflict escalates.
- First the lobsters examine each other’s claw and body size, and secrete chemicals indicating their health, size, and mood.
- Failing this, the lobsters may face off, making threatening advances to one another.
- Failing this, the lobsters wrestle, trying to flip the other.
- Failing this, the lobsters engage in physical combat, using claws to damage body parts.
- Similar animal behaviors:
  - Defeated wolves will roll over and expose their throats
  - Elk will wrestle with horns
  - Females let the males sort themselves out into a hierarchy, then choose the best individual to mate with.
    - [In 12 Rules for Life, Peterson adds a point about the archetypal romance of the large, powerful, aggressive male is subdued and charmed by the female, eg Beauty and the Beast.]

[This social behavior is useful for individual fitness, even if one ends up being subordinate, and thus can be selected for in evolution.]
Consider an average lobster that refused to defer to any lobster. In some cases it would actually be superior, and the other lobster would back off. But sometimes it would have its bluff called by a stronger lobster, and it would be injured or killed.

Likewise, a supreme alpha lobster would rather avoid conflict, since injury could allow an inferior third lobster to opportunistize. It also doesn’t necessarily want to kill submissive individuals, since they could be useful partners later.

From a group perspective, IF ability is concentrated unequally, and IF a group is best served by following the unequally good people, THEN hierarchies are useful.]

The neurotransmitter serotonin is thought to be the internal mediator of social status. If you feel (or are) dominant in status, more serotonin circulates in your bloodstream. [Frat leaders have higher serotonin levels than members]

- Submissive lobsters have physiologically different serotonin circuits that potentiate differently.
- Administering SSRIs (antidepressants) to lobsters makes them adopt the dominant body posture and fight longer before retreating.
- Low serotonin is associated with less happiness, more illness, and shorter lifespan [though it’s unclear what the causation is – those who are less fit and more prone to illness may naturally have lower status and thus lower serotonin.]

[If an alpha male is removed from a group and a new male given Prozac inserted, the Prozac male becomes the new alpha consistently.]

[Serotonin also seems to improve pro-social behavior and reduces aggression. Makes sense since high-status people have much to lose with violence, while low-status ones do not.]

The important part is that there is a primordial calculator in your brain that monitors signals to figure out your position in society. It recognizes behavior from others (sometimes triggered by your own behavior) and infers your social standing. It then adjusts your perceptions, values, emotions, and actions.

- The responsible part of the brain is the medial prefrontal cortex.
- If others kowtow to you, this feeds this part of your brain, elevating your internal perception of social status.
- If others denigrate and belittle you, you interpret this as low social status.
- [Keeping an alpha male monkey in front of a one-way mirror, where he can’t see the submissive behavior of other males, lowers his serotonin.]

Important connections with mental illness

- Anxiety
  - Lower status people really live in greater threat, having fewer resources available to deal with problems and emergencies.
• This restricts serotonin secretion, which raises stress levels, makes you more impulsive and reactive to situations – “you must be ready to survive.”

• You jump at more short-term opportunities that appear, not able to put them off for long-term rewards.

• [I also wonder if people with lower social status are more desperate to signal a higher level but in an unprofitable way, eg buying expensive handbags. In this state of anxiety, it would be difficult to focus on the long-term solution, eg education.]

• Depression:
  
  • [Why We Get Sick]’s hypothesis that mass media is a novel environmental trigger that makes you compare to the best of billions of other people. On this unprecedented world stage, you’re not particularly good at anything. Even worse, social media makes you compare to the highlight reel of people that you know personally.

  • In the past, being in a small tribe, you might compare to only 100 people. You might be a decent hunter and get pride from that, but then others upstage you. Depression serves a function to pause your activity and re-evaluate, so you might realize you’re better at harvesting berries instead.

  • Nowadays, it’s hard to be demonstrably good at anything, and you may not receive the subordinate signals from anyone else. Thus one might get locked in depression.

  • In this novel environment, the people who can escape this depressive atmosphere are at a relative fitness advantage (even fixing ability) and their traits will be selected for.

  • Interestingly, the modern world may also provide greater dominance signals than ever before (eg 1 million followers); but this might be counterforced by relative positioning in the ecosystem (eg Becky has 2 million).]

• Those in more vulnerable positions, chronically deprived of pleasure, may also be more susceptible to drugs and alcohol.

• [There is indeed great comorbidity between anxiety and depression. They could have the same root cause (low inferred social status).]

• In 12 Rules for Life, Peterson suggests that some behavior can solve anxiety and depression.

  • Regularity of sleep and proper circadian rhythms can correct negative emotion.

  • Eat a fat, protein-heavy breakfast.

    • Anxious and depressed people hypersecrete insulin in response to carbs, which will cause hypoglycemia and cause psychological instability.

Positive feedback loops can exist here:
One infers low social status from the environment, perhaps through bullying or controlling parents. This attracts negative attention from others who treat them as subordinates, which further reinforces self-perception of low status. It also promotes stress, which is physiologically costly and can cause impulsive short-term decisions. It also encourages behavior that entrenches the low status, like refusing to ask for promotions, which continues to reinforce low social status.

Thus Peterson suggests that you need to signal your higher social status through external body language, first of all, but also internally in your self-beliefs. People will then treat you as competent and able, which will kick off a virtuous cycle.

Some experimental evidence suggests that alterations in body language can change mental perception – smiling makes you happier, adopting power poses can make you feel more confident. [The evidence here is shaky, cf. power posing/Amy Cuddy]

Thus Rule 1: Stand up straight with your shoulders back. But also speak your mind, put your desires forward, and dare to be dangerous.

This is the beginning of developing self-respect, accepting the demands of life, occupying your territory, and standing up to tyranny and oppression.

[This is a variant of “fake it til you make it.” It also corroborates the (less fundamentally useful) mating rituals of signaling status through expensive possessions and embellishing accomplishments.]

Strength of character, and capacity for destruction, are the same.

The ability to respond with aggression and violence decreases the probability that actual aggression will become necessary.

Peterson notes that PTSD in war comes not from horrific things happening to them, but as a result of witnessing their own violent behavior. This never saw their capacity for oppression and bullying, and now see history’s terrible perpetrators

Doesn’t this ignore the problem that there is such a thing as real ability, and that one’s low social status might be warranted?

Peterson acknowledges this, but suggests that there are people who prey on those who behave submissively, which could cause perception of lower status than you really deserve and make it hard to crawl out of your vicious cycle.

Instead, if you kick off the change by appearing confident, people will treat you as though you have value. You get positive responses, and this makes you less anxious, which makes you better at conversation and social interaction. As you enjoy things more, you will seek it out more, and so forth.
Rule 2: Treat Yourself Like Someone You Are Responsible for Helping

People are better at filling prescriptions for their dogs than for their pets, even though taking drugs is literally life-saving. Why?

In 12 Rules for Life, Peterson suggests the root of this is self-loathing – that we understand our faults completely, better than any outside observer, and believe we aren’t worth helping. No one has more reason to see you as pathetic, and by withholding something that does you good, to punish yourself for your failings.

▪ He uses the Biblical story of Adam and Eve as the origination of seeing good and evil, and how this original sin carries into us today. “Why should anyone take care of anything as naked, ugly, ashamed, worthless, resentful, accusatory as a descendant of Adam?”

▪ “The worst of all possible snakes is the eternal human proclivity for evil.” We know how corruptible and evil we can be, which increases loathing for mankind and self.

▪ In contrast, our pets and our children are faultless – they don’t know any better, they’re innocent, so they deserve all the help we can give.

The solution: believe that you are worth helping. You have a vital mission in this world, you are important in this world to others, and you are morally obliged to take care of yourself.

▪ You are not your own possession to torture and mistreat, because your Being is tied up with that of others, and mistreating yourself will harm others.

▪ Look at all the wonders and comforts of the modern world (electricity, running water, plentiful food), put together by people like you for the benefit of others.

▪ You deserve sympathy for merely being alive and shouldering the burden of existence.

▪ Reject virtuous self-sacrifice – don’t suffer silently when someone demands more from you than is offered in return. Then you are supporting tyranny.

This means taking care of yourself, getting healthier (physically and mentally), expanding your knowledge, pursuing goals you want, articulating your principles.

▪ You must keep the promises you make to yourself.

▪ Think – “what might my life look like if I were caring for myself properly?”

▪ Vision and direction are “irresistible forces, able to transform unconquerable obstacles into traversable pathways.” Nietzsche: “He whose life has a why can bear almost any how.”

▪ You know what your personal Hell is like. Decide against going there or creating that.

Minor points in this chapter:
• Our conceptions of categories (male/female, parent/child) have existed for so long that inevitably we mapped our cultural constructs to it.
  - Thus Order is typified as male, and Chaos as female. [More on this in a later chapter]

• In the past our cultural leaders were more concerned with survival than with objective truth, which is why they captured subjective experience in narratives.

• Why are people ashamed of nakedness?
  - This might be a cultural custom to protect our bodies from harm. Yet we get injured rarely these days – why does it persist?
  - It might also be to desist straying from your relationship. There is more temptation when a person’s body is exposed, and covering it up invites more stability. [We might habituate to it though – nakedness is only so enticing because we see so little of it.]
Rule 3: Make Friends with People Who Want the Best for You

This chapter of the 12 Rules for Life summary is similar to the adage “you’re the average of your 5 best friends,” with more focus on why you might be hanging around people you know are bad for you.

Do you have a person you spend a lot of time with, who you feel is dragging you down, doesn’t support your personal growth, and whose goals don’t align well with yours?

Consider why you’re still with this person. You may feel like you can rescue this person, especially if there’s a recognizable difference in status. But consider the other insidious, malevolent factors that could be at play:

- Why you stay with this person
  - **You have a savior complex** – the idea of rescuing another person assuages your ego and makes you feel virtuous.
  - **The person’s lower status makes you feel better about your own.** Someone whose marriage is falling apart makes you feel better about your own rocky one. Conversely, it’s intimidating for you to be around people who make you feel less accomplished.
  - You want to exercise power over someone lower. Possibly because you feel that you are yourself exploited.
  - The superficial motions of ineffective mentoring distract you from your own unwillingness to pursue a real, meaningful goal.
  - You’re too weak-willed and indecisive to leave.

- Why the other person sticks around
  - They benefit from/exploit your generosity, and when that runs out, they move on to another willing patron.
  - They want to drag you down to their level.
  - They may not realize they’re doing this, and want to believe their actions are genuine. This may be to put off the realization that they’ve given up and don’t care about improving.

**People who don’t want to improve can’t be helped.** It’s very difficult to overturn this foundational layer and convince someone to change for the better.

- Maybe they don’t believe they deserve to be helped, or they don’t go looking for it.
- They may want to repeat the horrors of their past, sometimes to feel as though they have agency over their suffering, sometimes because there is no alternative.
- They may want to continue feeling like a victim of life’s horrors, rather than taking personal responsibility for what’s under their control.

All of this is dramatized to the extreme, and Peterson recognizes that IF the relationship is genuine and there is sincere desire to improve, then it’s still worth maintaining. But this is hard to discern, so reflect and see if...
any of the above elements are true. **See if the person you’re helping accepts any personal responsibility** – it’s a red flag if if they’re merely the victim of endless external causes.

[If elements of this are true, one might suspect the intention of some practitioners in superficially good positions, like charity work, therapists, even doctors. Bad actors in these positions could really cause harm.]

The above attributes may not apply – instead, **you might all be bound by an implicit contract aimed at nihilism and failure.** You’ve decided to sacrifice the future for the present. No one mentions it, but everyone knows what the game is.

It’s much easier to fall into vice than virtue. Nihilism is easy – nothing in the world matters, there’s no point to doing anything, so why bother? It’s easier not to shoulder a burden, not to think, not to care. Pick one or two bad habits and indulge, and you can fall into a deep chasm.

Finally, studies show that **pulling a problematic person into a team lowers the team’s overall efficacy** – in essence, the team falls to the lowest common denominator. [Various mechanisms might contribute – the high performers may feel resentment at others not carrying their weight; the higher performers may have to cover for the lower performers.] In another disheartening study, at-risk youth who received counseling and academic tutoring showed worse outcomes than the control group.

**If you wouldn’t recommend your friendship to your brother, or your parent – why would you have such a friend for yourself?**

Even if the friendship isn’t a charity case, be wary of people who insidiously drag you down. They belittle your personal ambition because they’re embarrassed about lack of their own. They override your accomplishments with their own, real or imaginary.

Instead, **surround yourself with people who support you and want to see you succeed.** You will push each other to greater heights. Your goals will reinforce the others’, and each person’s life improves as the others’ improve. They won’t tolerate your cynicism and destructiveness, and they will punish you when you mistreat yourself.
Rule 4: Compare Yourself to Who You Were Yesterday, Not to Who Someone Else is Today

With today’s mass media, there is always someone out there better than you in everything you do. Your career seems boring, you wish your friends were more exciting and more attractive, you’re fatter than your co-workers, and you’re bad at sports. “Who cares if you’re prime minister of Canada when someone else is the president of the US?”

As explained in Chapter 1 of this 12 Rules for Life summary, this wasn’t the natural case for hundreds of thousands of years. We used to live in small tribes of hundreds. Chances were you were good at something, and you got serotonin signals from people acknowledging you were good. Now you might never get this feedback.

Standards are useful to guarantee a level of quality (like building bridges), and to keep pushing us up to better things. Being unsatisfied with your present world is a useful impetus to improve your situation. But it can also lead to crushing, chronic self-criticism, where you feel you aren’t capable of doing anything.

One typical response to this is nihilism and hopelessness – “there will always be people better than you – so what’s the point? The world’s going to end in a million years if not a billion – why does what I do matter?” Peterson argues that this is a cheap trick – “any idiot can choose a frame of time within which nothing matters.” This is an unreliable, worthlessly easy way to look at life.

Another response to this was to shield children from it – the delusionally positive thinking of constant praise. Trophies for everyone, you’re all special and capable of everything you want to do. This merely blinds people to the truth, and when reality hits, people are unprepared to deal with it.

Instead, In 12 Rules for Life, Peterson argues that a total reworking of your goals is needed, starting with understanding yourself as though you were a stranger.

To fix this:

1) Realize you need to focus on you, and you can’t compare to other people.
   - You’ve likely identified a single, arbitrary dimension as THE most important thing (eg money, fame), and you feel miserable that you don’t have it. But your existence is multidimensional – what about family? Friends? Personal projects?
   - Judge your success across all the games you play.
     - Your existence is so unique and customized to you, that you can’t easily compare yourself to any other individual.
     - Everyone has their own problems that are often invisible to you. You’re likely overvaluing what you don’t have and undervaluing what you do. The very people you envy might reciprocate that feeling to you.
     - There isn’t a binary condition of success and failure. There are many gradations in between. What matters is whether you can get better, not whether you can achieve binary success.
2) Drill deeply into your discontent and understand yourself.

- Genuinely want your life to improve.
  - You can’t fool yourself. If you don’t want this, you won’t be able to improve.
- Drill into your discontent and transform it.
  - **What do you want? Why do you feel this way?** [Keep asking why until you can’t answer it anymore.]
  - Articulate your desires, realize the conflict between them, and prioritize them into hierarchies.
  - How do you transform your goal so that you remove bitterness and resentment? What if you didn’t have to improve yourself at other people’s expense? What if you could at the same time make your friends and family happier? Your enemies?
- **Is the subject of your discontent within your control? If not, look somewhere else. Find something you can fix.**
  - Be truthful with people you have resentment with. They might be more amenable to the truth than you think.
  - Realize that you’re blind.
    - You’re blind to what goals you really want because you’re focusing on something very narrow.
    - You can’t understand fully how your brain works, since it’s been shaped by millions of years.
    - Metaphor to vision: our retinas have a narrow central section with high acuity (the fovea) – everything else is blurred. Similarly in life, you’re focusing on something very narrow and ignoring everything else of value.
  - Realize you may have to give up old goals to find a new direction.

3) Transform your goal into something achievable. Break it down to something tractable you can do today. Then you’ll start building ever upwards.

- Aim small, then grow your ambition.
  - **What one thing in your life can you fix right now?**
    - Let things in your life at the end of the day be a little better than they were this morning.
    - Do that for a month, then three years, and now you’re aiming for the star.
  - Negotiate with yourself and honor your commitments.
    - Pretend you’re working for your own internal boss. After you finish, the boss complains it’s not good enough and asks for 10x the work. Would you work for a tyrant like this?
- No – make yourself a deal (eg reward for doing something), and feel good about it after you finish.

- Continue to pay attention.

- Once you start looking at your new goal, you’ll start seeing new things you were blind to before – new information, opportunities.

Once you put this into practice, you’ll improve your negative emotions. You don’t get envious, since you no longer know someone else has it truly better. You don’t get frustrated, since you have learned to aim low and to be patient. **You’re less concerned with other people, because you have plenty to do yourself.**

Ultimately, Peterson believes the answer to nihilism is the “essential goodness of Being.” This comes from aiming for a meaningful goal that improves the lives of people and for a long time. “There is habitable order to establish and beauty to bring into existence. There is evil to overcome, suffering to ameliorate, and yourself to better.”
Rule 5: Do Not Let Your Children Do Anything that Makes You Dislike Them

Children aren’t born fully formed. This is partly a biological compromise with head size — too big of a head wouldn’t fit through a woman’s birth canal. This is also partly because much of human culture isn’t written in our genes — culture has developed faster than biological evolutionary cycles.

This means children need training and feedback to understand how to navigate the social world. If you’re a typical parent, your goal is likely to help your children become well-liked, functioning members of society.

Children, curious and exploratory as they are, constantly test limits to figure out where the boundaries are. Furthermore, while it’s tempting to think of them as cherubic angels, they have capacity for evil inside them. They will not bloom into perfection if left to their own devices. So if they hit you or yell in supermarkets, and you don’t provide corrective feedback, they will think it’s ok and misinterpret the boundaries of society.

Many parents, in an effort to avoid damaging their child or wanting to be their child’s friend, swing the other way and in effect outsource training to society. The problem is that society doesn’t care about your child nearly as much as you do. If you dislike your child at times, imagine how other people will react. Other people will swiftly judge and punish your child mercilessly, with nowhere near the tolerance and patience that you show your child. In school, other children will reject a temperamental, unsociable child. Teachers will run out of patience and focus attention on more pleasant children, causing learning differences. Parents will refuse her presence at their playtimes. If these habits persist into adulthood, employers will fire them; relationship partners will reject them.

All this sets off a vicious cycle of chronic maladjustment — a maladjusted child will act poorly; she will receive negative feedback from the world, often without understanding why; she will withdraw and feel rejected, causing anxiety, depression, and resentment. This further receives negative feedback from the world. This can last for a lifetime. Shielding your child from corrective feedback is in effect crippling them in the long run. And early exposure matters — a child not taught to behave properly by age 4 will have lasting social difficulties.

As a parent, your purpose is to serve as a proxy for society. You teach the child what is acceptable, and what isn’t.

This should be done with both rewards and punishment — leaving one out (most parents omit punishment) removes a tool from your toolkit. Punishments and negative emotions are natural, evolved reactions to events — sadness and shame train people to avoid the situation that led to those painful emotions. Also, a good reward program requires continuous vigilance, since the behavior needs to be reinforced quickly with the reward. Think not about having your child avoid all pain, but rather to maximize their learning at minimal cost.

In 12 Rules for Life, Peterson has 4 principles for raising kids:

- Set the rules, but not too many.
  - Some suggestions — don’t bite, kick, or hit. Don’t torture and bully other children. Eat in a civilized way, so other people are pleased to have you. Learn to share, so other kids will play...
with you. Pay attention when spoken to by adults, so they will feel eager to teach you. Be good company so that you’re invited to fun.

- **Use the minimum necessary force.**
  - Start with a glare, then verbal admonishment, then a time out, upward until they get the point.
  - Physical punishment may be necessary, depending on the child.
  - A patient adult can defeat a two-year-old, because time lasts forever when you’re two.
  - When they comply, give them a reward, like a pat on the head.

- **Parents should come in pairs.**
  - Raising young children is demanding, and it’s easy for one parent to make a mistake. Another parent helps cover for the other and limit overreactions.
  - Peterson acknowledges that single parents have an admirably difficult life, but we shouldn’t pretend that all family forms are equally good.

- **Understand your own capacity for anger and revenge.**
  - If you don’t discipline your child, resentment will build. A vicious cycle can result where you tolerate your child, but punish them later (eg don’t show them attention), which then breeds vengeance and resentment, which then gives fewer opportunities to develop the child.
Rule 6: Put Your House in Order

There is inevitable suffering in life. People are born unequal in ability and attributes. Disaster strikes unpredictably—cancer, a car accident, a mass layoff. You never get quite exactly what you want. Life is an unjust joke.

One response to this is anger at the universe, or if you’re religious, at your god. More extremely, this stretches into misanthropic thinking, and vengeance to express their outrage and spite the universe/god. Peterson argues this underlay the beliefs of the Columbine killers, who sought to punish those who had wronged them.

But there is still potential for redemption, to learn from misfortune and do good despite it. Many who are abused by their parents in turn abuse their own children; but most choose not to.

Before blaming the universe for your misfortunes, first consider—what personal responsibility did you have in your misfortune? Did you do everything within your power to improve your situation, or were you a passive accomplice to your sabotage?

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn served as a Russian soldier in WWII. He was then arrested and imprisoned by his own people. He got cancer. His misfortunes seemed out of his control. Then he wrote The Gulag Archipelago, at great risk to himself, to expose Soviet prison camps and the flaws of Lenin’s thinking. He realized his unquestioning support of the Communist Party contributed directly to his misery, and he decided to correct his mistake.

Look at it this way—if your suffering is your own fault, then you can actually do something about it. If it’s entirely the universe’s fault, then reality itself is flawed, and you are perpetually doomed. Which worldview would you rather espouse?

Peterson argues lack of preparation is a sin. When times are good, we get complacent and forget our commitments and responsibilities. Then when disaster strikes, we omit our personal responsibility in causing it. We may learn our lesson and soldier on, but inevitably we forget, and so the cycle repeats.

The New Orleans flood, Peterson argues, could have been prevented with legislation passed in 1965. By Katrina in 2005, only 60% of the work had been done. In contrast, the Netherlands protects its borders with dams built to withstand a once-in-10,000-year storm.

Before blaming the universe, or a political faction, or an enemy, put your own house in order. Have you taken full advantage of every opportunity available to you? Are you working hard at your career? Your relationships? Outside of work to improve yourself?

Are you doing anything you know is wrong? Stop it today. Stop when you feel when an inkling that you should stop. Stop saying things that make you feel ashamed and cowardly; start saying things that make you feel strong. Do only those things about which you would speak with honor.

“If you cannot bring peace to your household, how dare you try to rule a city?”

As you continue doing this, you will continue discovering further wrongs that you can right. Your life will become simpler and more honorable. You’ll stop filling your head with lies and resentment. Then you might
see existence as naturally good and worth maintaining. You’ll become resistant to the trials and misfortunes that do appear. And imagine if all people did this – how magnificent would the world be then?
Rule 7: Pursue What is Meaningful, Not What is Expedient

So suffering in life is inevitable. The universe can be unfair. In a hundred million years, nothing we do will likely matter. What does one do in the face of this knowledge?

One response is to take the expedient path. Indulge short-term pleasures and put off long-term commitments. Do what feels the best today – indulge your basest desires all the time. Even lie, cheat, and steal to get what you want. Do these things even if you know it makes your future self worse off than better.

Of course, we know this is what we shouldn’t be doing. We know we should be doing the hard things today to make our lives better in the future. We should suppress our immediate impulses to bring future rewards, like studying today and putting off partying to become a medical student.

One obstacle is our powerful biological instincts – they kept us alive in the Stone Age, but they’re counterproductive today (overeating 100,000 years ago helped us survive a period of famine; today is leads to obesity). But on a higher conscious level, it’s hard to answer: why? How do we define what’s good and worth doing, and what isn’t?

In 12 Rules for Life, Peterson tackles it this way: it seems intuitively true that certain things can be defined as Evil – most abhorrently, conscious human malevolence. Auschwitz, mass shootings, enslavement, knowing torment of others – these are all things most people believe are bad, even without having to read a philosophy book. You likely believe the world is better off without these things happening.

If there is such a thing as Evil, then Good must be the antithesis of Evil – Good is whatever stops Evil from happening. Good alleviates unnecessary pain and suffering.

In the most extreme of cases, literally fighting evil is good – as typified in the Union’s antislavery stance in the Civil War, and the Allies’ anti-Holocaust stance in World War II. But all actions exist on a spectrum, and resolving even little bits of bad are good. This could mean counseling a friend to get out of a bad situation. This could mean improving your own health, so that you have more ability and time to do good. This could mean empowering others to do good – even by helping people understand what good and evil is, like Peterson is doing.

Doing good has Meaning. When you act with Meaning, you will attain more security and strength than would be granted by a short-sighted concern for your own security. What you do will matter to you. In turn you’ll feel better about your existence, and the evils and injustices of the world are more tolerable, because you know they can be overcome. Remember Socrates who, believing his principles to be right, retained the strength to speak true at his trial and accepted his death with resolve.

If you’re the type to bemoan your existence, Peterson argues doing good is the salve – by doing good, you are compensating for the sins of your existence and those of humankind.

Meaning is the mature substitute for expedience. Expedience rejects responsibility; it doesn’t have the wisdom or sophistication to look ahead and plan carefully; it has no courage or sacrifice; it’s the easy way out. Meaning regulates impulses and recognizes the value of making the world better. By providing deeper meaning, Meaning gratifies all impulses.

Ask yourself – how can I make the world a little bit better today? Aim up. Pay attention. Fix what you can fix.
Even more deeply – what is your true nature? **What must you become, knowing who you truly are?** How can you make the world a LOT better, if only you made certain changes in my life? Something valuable, given up, ensures future prosperity.

**The greater the change you want to make, the greater the sacrifice might be.** Inverting the question – what is the greatest sacrifice you can make, that of what you love most – and what good will come of it? In so doing, you change the structure of reality in your favor.

The above is his main point, but in the chapter Peterson describes two other topics:

### The Historical Rise and Fall of Meaning

Self-sacrifice and delayed gratification have been part of human teachings for a long time, and the discovery of its utility goes back even further. Picture in the Stone Age that a tribe brings down a mammoth, and they engorge themselves until they can’t possibly eat any more. (This after all promotes storing fat to help ride through rougher times of less plenty.) But then they have leftover food. They learn that they can go through the labor of preserving the food today for the benefit of having food tomorrow. Even better, they can give this food to a neighboring tribe and expect a return of favor in the future.

(Note this only works when existence and civilization is stable enough that the promise of future reward can be fulfilled.)

These sacrificial behaviors promoted survival, and they gradually became ritualized and dramatized, customs inherited through generations. They became enshrined in moral narratives and religious texts, like the Temptation of Christ. Wandering through the desert for 40 days and nights, Satan tempts Jesus with hedonism (relieving hunger by creating his own bread), egoism (jumping off a peak and relying on God to save him), and materialism (ruling the kingdoms of Earth). Jesus rejects all these temptations of evil and immediate gratification. Instead he reaches for a higher goal, of transcending desires to do good.

[In one interpretation, these temptations are different paths for Jesus to become a Messiah by demonstrating supernatural powers. He can easily alleviate physical hardships; he can relieve Roman oppression by seizing the kingdoms. Jesus rejects these options – he wants to undergo his trials without powers that ordinary humans don’t have, in effect becoming a practical role model for humans. Instead of making bread for everyone, he typifies a mode of Being that can forever solve the problem of hunger – rejection of immediate gratification and the temptations of evil.]

However, Christianity had a few weaknesses:

- It failed to sufficiently address the problem of suffering in the present day, which helped give rise to science and alchemy.

- Jesus had already died to relieve all of mankind’s sins, thus freeing people from personal moral obligation.
- The Protestant switch to salvation through faith, not by works. This is meant partially as an expression of equality, so that kings couldn’t lord their salvation over their subjects. However, this move devalued effort in this life, since one couldn’t earn salvation anyway.

Nietzsche argues that humans killed God, and they would have to invent their own values in the aftermath. However, ideologies like fascism and communism filled the void instead.

In *12 Rules for Life*, Peterson argues that the individual must be constrained and molded by a disciplinary structure, before she can act freely and competently. As secularism rose, a void in disciplinary structure grew; filling it was nihilism and susceptibility to new utopian ideas, like fascism. Hence this book, providing a reworked structure for people to follow.

**Order and Chaos**

(also partially from Rule 2)

Chaos is unexplored territory. It’s the things and situations we don’t understand. It’s where you go when you get fired; it’s the threatening stranger on the street; it’s the scary audacious goal you’ve wanted. It’s also the realm of possibility and where new ideas form.

Order is explored territory. It’s stability and structure. It’s your plan for the next day, the comfort of tradition, the customs we use to treat each other. Yet it also can mean concentration camps, fascism, and, less extremely, lack of growth.

We like being in Order. We don’t like when we are forced to leave Order for Chaos, like when tragedy strikes, you’re cheated on by your partner, you’re fired. But Order isn’t enough – there are still vital things to be learned.

The ideal place is to be right in the middle. To have enough Order to feel tethered, but enough Chaos to be challenged and learn new things. This is where meaning is to be found.
Rule 8: Tell the Truth

This rule discusses not only lying to others, but also lying to yourself and obscuring your personal truth. Peterson guides on how to develop your personal truth and act consistently with it. This 12 Rules for Life summary chapter is fairly abstract, but try to see if its principles resonate with a specific problem you have in life.

Why You Lie

Day to day, you may lie to the outside world to get what you want and to avoid pain. You tell lies to appear more competent, to gain status, to be well-liked, to prevent conflict. This is you manipulating the world.

On a deeper level, you may lie to yourself about what you want. You might have a dream life envisioned by your younger self, without probing carefully into whether you really want it (career and retirement goals are common examples here). You may entertain ideas about what you really want, but deceive yourself into thinking they’re impossible to reach or undesirable after all. You then act in ways that you paper over with more lies, but deep down you know it’s inconsistent with your beliefs, and you feel unsettled.

Beware of the big lie, in Hitler’s terms, something so large and audacious that you cannot accept someone would intentionally fabricate it. This could be about who to blame for your faults, or what you should do with your life.

You may not be actively misleading other people, but merely lying by omission. This isn’t any better. If your boss does something you dislike, not confronting her about it is still lying – you’re acting inauthentically, not in accordance with your beliefs. If you habitually avoid conflict, don’t complain when mistreated, and suppress your own ideas, you’re still lying to yourself. This makes you feel weak, because your existence has little real meaning. You’ve become a tool to be used, obliterating your independence.

Even worse, on a meta level, you may be in denial about lying to yourself. You may believe that your truth is the only truth, and that no amount of new knowledge can change what you believe. That all important facts have been discovered, and that everything will work out perfectly.

Your lie may begin with protecting yourself from reality. You may believe reality is intolerable and must be distorted. You want to avoid that short-term pain.

But after a certain point, the lies take on a life of their own. First you start with a little lie, then support it with further little lies. Then you distort your thinking to avoid shame of those lies. Then those lies become necessary and become ritualized into unconscious action. The longer you lie, the more you believe it, and the harder it is to undo.

All this may work in short term, but ultimately you will run into failure. If you betray yourself, if you act out a lie, you weaken your character. If you have a weak character, adversity will bulldoze you. You’ve already trained yourself to allow things that you disagree with by failing to react the first time.

This leads to bitterness. Because you are avoiding pain and fabricating your world, you are likely to avoid personal responsibility for your failures. You will blame the world as unfair, and other people as getting in your
way. It’s not hard to take this one step further to believing “they must be stopped,” and another step further into revenge.

All this applies to many levels of existence. You may be lying to yourself about what you want to do with the rest of your life. That you enjoy a job that actually bites against your being. That you continue relationships you know are toxic, under the guise of convenience or comfort. That you’re not capable of something, that it’s not worth trying, even though deep down you know you really want it. That a bad habit really isn’t that bad, or actually good for you. That things will get better on their own and things will magically work out without your involvement. That you know what you’re doing in life, when really you’re too scared to confront uncertainty.

Clearly this leads to bad outcomes and misery. What do you do?

How to Tell the Truth

First, develop your personal truth. Figure out what you really want and why. If you don’t know what you want, you can start with tradition and work from there. Your truth is truly personal to you based on you and your circumstances.

Ambitions based around developing character and ability are better than status and power. You can lose status; you carry character whereever you go.

[Note that because people have different truths, it by nature necessitates different goals from others, which also makes comparisons to most other people pointless.]

Confronting this will likely be painful. Error requires sacrifice to correct it. Serious error requires serious sacrifice. This may mean accepting weaknesses you didn’t want to confront earlier. It may mean having conflicts with people you were lying to before. This is the cost of correcting an error.

But once you develop a personal truth, it gives you a destination to travel toward. An ambition reduces anxiety, because having either everything or nothing available are far worse options.

Next, keep an open mind to new information and adjusting your truth. Be willing to learn from what you don’t know. While tradition is a good start, it may no longer apply if the circumstances have truly changed. Putting yourself in new situations will literally grow your brain. Transform your values as you progress.

Then, act only consistently with your personal truth. Speak in a way that makes you feel strong, not weak and sick. Act only in ways that your internal voice does not object to. A lie spoils all the truth it touches. It’s like a tiny drop of sewage in a bottle of champagne.

Stand up for your beliefs. If you say yes when you want to say no, you weaken your resolve and become habituated to violating your beliefs. You will lack the strength when you really need it. Instead, when you say no, you transform yourself into someone who can say no when it needs to be said. Nietzsche said that “the strength of a person’s spirit” is “measured by how much truth he could tolerate...to what extent he needs to have it diluted, disguised, sweetened.”

Again, all of this applies to many levels of existence. From the deepest level, it means defining what you want to do with your life, and shifting your time and energy to achieving progress in that direction. It means
defining what kinds of relationships you want with people, and reconstructing ones that don’t meet your wants. It means doing something about things you disagree with in the world – how a country is moving, a policy your employer enacts, how you see a stranger treat another stranger. It means telling your friend or partner what you really think, at the expense of a conflict for a longer-term gain.

What do you do when you don’t know what to do? Tell the truth. At the very least, you will be trusted for being honest, and you’ll feel the strength that comes with authenticity.
Rule 9: Assume that the Person You are Listening to Might Know Something You Don’t

People talk because this is how they think. They explore past events, discover how they feel about it, simulate the world, and plan how to act in it. They can figure out what stupid things they shouldn’t do, then not do them. They formulate the problem they are struggling with, before designing a solution.

Some people can think alone and have internal conversations with themselves. This is more difficult than talking out loud with another person – it requires you to model other points of view (in effect being multiple people at the same time), have the models disagree, and resolve the disagreement. This is demanding, requiring you to tolerate conflict and adjust your perceptions of the world internally.

Thus, many people prefer to talk to a listener. They organize their brains with conversation. Thus rises the classic stereotype in how men and women treat conversation differently. Women want to converse as a mode of thinking, going over their day and struggles they’ve faced. In response, men want to design efficient solutions and move on. This expediency robs the speaker of their ability to think, and it signals dismissal of the importance of what the speaker has to say. Instead, the speaker feels a need to formulate the problem in conversation. They need to be listened to and questioned to ensure clarity in the formulation. Only then is there a problem that is solvable.

As a listener, you are helping the other person think. True listening is paying attention and accepting what the person has to say. Sometimes, you don’t really have to say anything – the person solves her own problem merely by speaking aloud. Just by giving sympathetic responses, you signal that you value the speaker, that her experiences are important and deserving of consideration. Other times, you serve as the voice of common reason, helping ground the person and revealing what the other person is ignoring.

“We outsource the problem of our sanity.” (Peterson argues this is why it’s an ethical imperative for parents to raise their children to be socially acceptable – being spurned by society reduces willing conversation partners and can lead to madness.)

If you listen without premature judgment, people will tend to trust you and tell you everything they’re thinking.

Listening to someone else can often be helpful in improving your own life. It’s far better to learn from another person’s experiences and mistakes than to suffer them yourself. Therefore, approach each conversation with the belief that your current knowledge is imperfect (if your life isn’t perfect right now, this must be true), that you have something to learn from this, that the other person’s experiences are valuable. Without genuinely believing this, you will find it difficult to carry a fulfilling conversation [hence why I think conversations with parents can be so frustrating – neither party earnestly believes the other is wiser].

The best conversations occur when all parties are listening to each other, trying to solve a problem together, and build to a synthesis greater than what each person started out with. All act with the premise that they have something to learn. This constitutes active philosophy. Everyone leaves with an improved worldview and better knowledge of their conversation partners.
In contrast, these are common examples of poor listening that lead to lack of connection and synthesis:

- Attempts to establish hierarchy – a game of oneupsmanship in telling a better story, appearing to have a better life
- Monologues enforcing one’s viewpoint without opening paths for replies. These are often meant to shut off thinking in the listener.
- Absentmindedly thinking about what to say next, rather than addressing what is being said
- Stubbornly disregarding what is being said, out of fear of being changed

Sound familiar? We all do this at one point or another, often to great discontent.

Here is the most effective listening technique: summarize the person’s message. This has very helpful effects:

- You take the time to genuinely understand what is being said, rather than skirting over it on the surface
- You extract the moral of the story, discarding the meandering paths that are a natural consequence of thinking aloud. This forms a successful, lightweight memory.
- You avoid strawman arguments. Normally you might pick up a single element and distort it to absurdity. This is obviously counterproductive. If you understand the core of what is being said, you will more likely find the value in it.
- You strengthen your arguments further against challenge. By stating your opponent’s viewpoint better than she can, you build a steelman (as opposed to a strongman). If you can successfully defeat the steelman, you can develop even stronger, more well-reasoned beliefs.
- You give the person a chance to correct what you said, or emphasize something you didn’t

Assume that your conversational partner has reached careful, thoughtful conclusions based on her own valid experiences. Assume that they want to engage with you as a voice of reason, not oppress you. Reflect their viewpoints back to them, and only then share your own viewpoint.

Related: When you argue with someone – separate, and think, “What have we done to contribute to what we’re arguing about? However small, however distant, I made a mistake somewhere.”

Misc points:

- Good lectures are actually conversations that happen to be given to many individuals at once. As a public speaker, you should talk with individuals. Make eye contact with a specific person, note her confusion or acceptance, and modify your conversation accordingly. Then switch to another audience member.
Rule 10: Be Precise with Your Speech

When you have a problem, there is often the temptation to paper it over, to think the problem will go away by itself. It’s easier to keep the peace and avoid the anxiety, despair, sadness that will come with confronting your problems. It’s easier to pretend the problem doesn’t exist, then to admit it does, and the pain that accompanies it.

Maybe you hate going into work everyday. Maybe you can’t stand the way your girlfriend chews. Maybe you stare blankly at the ceiling each morning, unable to drag yourself out of bed. Maybe you feel a simmering level of rage throughout the day. You don’t know exactly what it is, but it’s more pleasant not to think too hard about it and try to get through another day.

Left unaddressed, this will lead to a great failure, and you will regret not having acted sooner.

Specificity turns chaos into a thing that you can deal with. If you have a vague unease, you will struggle with it until you define it explicitly and give it material form. Once you precisely identify the issue, you will likely realize that you were far more afraid than you should have been, and you have a specific target to confront.

If you have a cancer in your body, wouldn’t you want to know where and what it is as soon as possible so you can do something about it? Why don’t you treat every other problem in your life with the same urgency and clarity?

Give structure to the chaos through specific speech. If you speak carefully and precisely, you can make order from the chaos, develop a new goal, and navigate to it.

Precision sorts out the uniquely terrible thing from all the other, equally terrible things that did not happen. If you have a pain in your abdomen, you start with a vague set of terrifying possibilities. Then you go to the doctor, who collapses the possibilities into a single, clear diagnosis. You feel less anxiety, certain now that it’s addressable, and you laugh at your previous anxiety. Why are your other concerns and problems any different?

You cannot move in life without aiming at a direction. Random wandering will not move you forward. It will make you disappointed and frustrated and resentful.

Be precise. What is wrong, exactly? What do you want, exactly? Why, exactly?

Endure the sharp pain of specificity and confrontation instead of the chronic vague dull ache of negligence. Once you identify it, things will get better.

Interpersonal Conflicts

Many issues of this sort have to do with interpersonal relations, particularly with your romantic partner. Communicating what you really think risks immediate negative emotion – resentment, jealousy, frustration, hatred. So it’s easy just to pretend you’re a saint, try to move on, that “it’s not worth fighting about.”

In a marriage, there is little that is not worth fighting about. Do you really want an annoyance tormenting you every day of your marriage, for the decades? All it takes to ensure a chronic plague is to do nothing.
The longer you wait, the more the little problems form a thick interrelated cobweb. Each small unresolved resentment piles onto the next one, aggregating into a ball of hate, sometimes with its object blithely unaware. You behave poorly, which makes the other react poorly, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle. Each argument becomes difficult to extricate from all the other problems – hence the stereotypical couple’s argument invoking insults from months, years past.

Instead, **specify exactly what is bothering you.** Share this with the person. It’s far better to do this earlier than later. If you let everyday resentment gather, it may eventually bubble up and destroy everyone.

Focus the argument only on the specific thing that is bothering. Promise to solve just that one issue – the other problems will have their due time. Then, one by one, you reveal and solve the issues, thus clearing the cobweb.

**Keep asking why.** You can’t clean out a dental cavity without digging out all the rot from the very bottom. Maybe she finds his laugh annoying because she doesn’t want him to be happy when she isn’t because she thinks he held her back from her ambition because they agreed to center their lives around his career but she now regrets it because she saw how it ate at her mother and ruined her parents’ marriage and now she resents all men in general for not having to bear children.

**The World in Abstraction**

Day to day we perceive the world with vast simplifications, happily unaware of the complexities underlying the surface. **We perceive only what is enough for our plans to work and for us to get by.**

When everything works according to plan, we don’t need to peer under the surface. We drive a car, indifferent to how an engine transmits power to the wheels, the labor that produced the car, the electricity that powers the street lamps. We just care that the car functions to get us from point A to point B. We abstract away the world to simplify our lives, because there is too much complexity to understand in ways that aren’t immediately useful.

**When the world doesn’t work properly, you have to peer into this complexity.** This is chaos. Chaos provokes anxiety. You have to figure out what’s wrong, find a mechanic who can fix it, think about how to just a mechanic, figure out how much the unexpected cost will eat into your financial plans. You may plunge further into chaos: are drivers more dangerous now? Am I incompetent as a driver? When the simplified world breaks down, the complex world that was hidden away becomes obvious.

This happens with relationships too. In a stable romantic relationship, both people have their roles and identities, their history, their conception of the future. If one partner cheats on the other, all is shattered. How could this possibly have happened? Who is this person I’m living with? How could she have done this? What part of the happy past needs to be rewritten?

**Precision of aim and careful attention protects us when things break down.**
Rule 11: Leave Children Alone when They are Skateboarding

[Depending on your viewpoint, this can be a controversial chapter as Peterson bemoans the “postmodernist” interpretation of gender as a social construct, and its assertion that biological differences between men and women do not exist.]

The summary of this meandering and confusing chapter is this: modern society desires gender equality. When gender equality means equal opportunity, rights, and treatment, this is good. However, it can be taken too far – like denying any biological difference between males and females, and insisting that behavior and outcomes be equal in every way. (Peterson explains how this thinking arose from Marxist thinking.) This is not supported by biology, and believing it could be counterproductive. This can promote raising boys to “feminize” them, making them less independent and more agreeable. This is counter to their nature and can cause adverse consequences.

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The Flaws of Complete Equality

Some postmodernist thinking claims that all of gender is entirely a social construct, that it was popularized by men to oppress over women. This began with roots in communist ideals that all people should be equal, that the rich exploited the labor of the poor and contributed little, and that social structures were put in place by the rich to oppress the poor. When experiments implementing this largely failed in the Soviet Union and China, the Marxist ideals were rewritten from the idea of oppression of the poor by the rich, to oppression of everyone by the powerful.

When extended to its logical conclusion, this promoted skepticism of every cultural construct and hierarchy as merely constructed by the powerful to continue their oppression – science benefits only the scientists, gender classification benefits only the males, management benefits only the managers, measurement of skill benefit only the skilled. Each of these artificial constructs are made up to selfishly benefit the powerful and to exclude others. This means everything in the world is largely up to interpretation.

Peterson decries the nihilism in this approach, the rejection of all categorizations as done only for power reasons. Surely power and corruption play some role in hierarchies, but they aren’t not necessarily the only role or even the primary role. Believing counterproductive ideas may be dangerous, if it limits cooperation and peaceful completion and contravenes biological roots evolved over millions of years.

The idea of complete equality itself is flawed. In general, pursuit of any valued goal produces a hierarchy – some people will be better and some will be worse. Absolute equality would require sacrifice of value itself. In modern well-functioning societies, the hierarchy is based on competence and ability, not power. The best predictors of long-term success in Western countries are IQ and conscientiousness.

Take the most diehard egalitarian, and see if he wants to find a more reputable, more skilled doctor when he gets sick. See then if she believes in a hierarchy of skill that is not merely an artificial construct.

There is a perverse but understandable logic to the argument that all hierarchy is socially constructed. Its believers desire for all inequalities to be eliminated, on the basis of fairness. But – IF some inequalities are
hard-wired into our genes, or have functional purposes (like identifying the spectrum of skill), or result from free will (females may, given completely equal environmental treatment, just enjoy nursing more than males do), **THEN proposing obliterating these would sound unreasonable.** It would mean opposing free will, or overwriting biology. On the other hand, **if all hierarchies and inequality are merely artificial social constructs, then destroying them is justifiable.**

In other words, find someone who insists that all hierarchies are artificial constructs, and you’ll see someone who cannot stomach the idea of inequality in any sense.

**Accepting Inequality**

Instead of bemoaning a narrow hierarchy (eg in management position), instead celebrate the complexity of culture that allows for a large number of games and successful players. That different people can have very different levels of success in different dimensions, and so one’s outcomes are incomparable to others. Trying to compress everyone into completely equal outcomes – regardless of biology, behavior, and personal preferences – may be destructive.

Within gender, Peterson maintains **there are clear biological differences between men and women** – men tend to be more interested in things while women are more interested in people; men are more disobedient and women are more agreeable. The variation among individuals is very high – the most [adjective] of one gender is more [adjective] than the average person of the other gender, but the general trend is true. And in societies with more social freedom (eg Sweden) the gender imbalance in certain professions is magnified.

When it gets down to it, even with equal opportunity, what if women just want to nurse and teach more than men, and men want to design bridges more than women? **Should we force equality in ways that wouldn’t naturally arise? What are the costs and benefits of this type of policy?**

The idea that gender is a construct used to exert power has led to continuous (Peterson calls unfair) attacks on men. Men’s accomplishments are considered unearned due to their privilege by being born males; their ambitions make them plunderers. Men are attacked as oppressors, when there is little historical evidence that the patriarchy was deliberately designed by men to subjugate women and assert dominance.

Instead, Peterson raises consideration of another possibility – that women, by nature of sexual specialization, have to bear children; and that when they get pregnant, they need more protection than usual. In a time when humanity faced many more existential threats, with higher probability of death and higher risk inherent in unwanted pregnancies, different legal treatments of men and women may have arisen.

This also explains why women tend to prefer mates who are at equal or higher social status levels, while males are more indifferent (this is true across cultures). This leads to the unfortunate depletion of possible mates for high-status women. Women who have to care for infants don’t want an adult male baby to look after as well.

**In 12 Rules for Life,** Peterson wants society to be amenable to the idea that boys and men want to prove their competence, to friends and to romantic partners. Boys want to skirt at the edge of danger, where life is challenging enough to grow. This is why friends tease each other and have hazing rituals, subjecting
newcomers to social stress – they are evaluating character and determining who can be trusted, who has a strong spine, who is entertaining.

Peterson decries the neutering of male independence in the sake of gender equality, which instead breeds parental dependence and later social weakness. “If men are pushed too hard to feminize,” they will still feel their biological urges and will lash out in other ways, like adhering to violent, fascist ideologies. “Men have to toughen up. Men demand it, and women want it.”

**Modern parental overprotection robs men of this opportunity.** Don’t remove risk from life – let children optimize for it and improve their competence. Let boys (and girls) push against authority and toughen up and do some seemingly dangerous things. Leave children alone when they’re skateboarding.

[Frankly I haven’t heard much of what Peterson is railing against (the “feminization” of boys and restriction of their independence). I might just not be exposed to the social circles that suggest this.

Peterson doesn’t give much here to pushing women to be more assertive like men, as Sheryl Sandberg does in Lean In. His analogous recommendation for girls would be to allow them to remain submissive as biology wills it – this may have been too controversial, or he may not actually believe this.]
Rule 12: Pet a Cat When You Encounter One on the Street

Suffering in life is guaranteed. It’s a tenet in every major religion, and it’s obvious from everyday life. Outcomes are unequal. People are born with different abilities. Some people get worse treatment than others. Peterson’s daughter suffered from unexplained juvenile rheumatoid arthritis for decades, enduring years of chronic pain and risking amputation. There is little more to question the sanity and justice of the world than having an ill child. **What kind of god would allow this to happen?**

One response to this, as stated above, is to hate your god or the universe for these outcomes. Stretched to its extreme, this becomes hatred of existence, and the desire to destroy existence itself. When practiced, this leads to genocide and mass murders. Clearly this is evil, causing suffering in the name of suffering, and not the right response.

Another response, which only partially mitigates the suffering, is to acknowledge that **limitation is critical to making existence meaningful**. When Superman was created as a comic book character, he had infinite powers and could overcome any situation. This became boring. There was nothing for him to struggle against, so he couldn’t be admirable; no lesson for him to learn, so he couldn’t grow. They had to make him weak to kryptonite to make his stories anywhere near interesting.

Peterson could have wishes for her daughter to have an indestructible metal skeleton, or an inhumanly high threshold to pain. But then her daughter would be changed to a different person, even a monster. What can be loved about a person is inseparable from their limitations.

There are also coping mechanisms for dealing with suffering. **Segregate worrying about the problem to a predetermined schedule** – not at night, or else you can’t sleep – then promise not to think about the problem outside scheduled times. This conserves your strength and allows you to deal with the rest of life, which doesn’t care what problems you’re facing.

**And notice little bits of goodness that make existence tolerable, even justifiable.** See the girl splash happily into a puddle with her rain boots. Enjoy a particularly good coffee or book or conversation. Pet a cat when you run into one.
Coda: What Shall I Do with My Newfound Pen of Light?

This 12 Rules for Life summary ends with Peterson’s questions and answers about life he wrote to himself. They’re a useful summary of the spirit of the book.

What shall I do tomorrow? The most good possible in the shortest period of time.

What shall I do next year? Try to ensure that the good I do then will be exceeded only by the good I do the year after that.

What shall I do with my life? Aim for Paradise, and concentrate on today. (Aim for the highest future goals, but focus on the concerns of the moment.

What shall I do with the stranger? Invite him into my house, and treat him like a brother, so that he may become one.

What shall I do with a fallen soul? Offer a genuine and cautious hand, but do not join it in the mire.

What shall I do with the world? Conduct myself as if Being is more valuable than Non-Being.

What shall I do with a torn nation? Stitch it back together with careful words of truth. (Speak facts about our existence, not one-sided ideologies, so that we can find common ground and proceed together.)

What shall I do when I despise what I have? Remember those who have nothing and strive to be grateful.

What shall I do when greed consumes me? Remember that it is truly better to give than to receive.

What shall I do when my enemy succeeds? Aim a little higher and be grateful for the lesson.

What shall I do when my infant’s death? Hold my other loved ones and heal their pain.

What shall I do in the next dire moment? Focus my attention on the next right move.

What shall I do to strengthen my spirit? Do not tell lies, or do what you despise.

What shall I do to ennoble my body? Use it only in the service of my soul.
Misc Points

We end this 12 Rules for Life summary with miscellaneous points gathered throughout the book but don’t fit the major themes.

- It’s better to render your children competent than to protect them.

- Many questions should be inverted. Why do people get depressed? -> Why aren’t we depressed all the time?

- Interesting to think of evolutionary behavioral economics – why loss aversion? Possibly because in our resource starved time, losses were more punishing than gains were good?

- The Ben Franklin tactic of asking someone for a favor for them to think well of you. The classical psychology explanation is that this is invoking cognitive dissonance – “I must like this person, otherwise I wouldn’t be doing him a favor.”
  - Peterson suggests the effect is more that the doer of the favor has a chance to show her virtue, and that she now has a chance to ask the other for a favor, which increases their trust.

- Model for rise of theology:
  - Action came first
  - Implicit, unrecognized value came next
  - People observed the successful succeed and replicated their behavior
  - The behavior becomes passed down on common wisdom, and distilled into narratives/ritual.

- Christianity’s salvation through faith, not works, was meant to equalize humans, so that kings couldn’t claim greater salvation than commoners.
  - [It also likely had the effect of strengthening conviction of the lowliest people, who otherwise would bemoan their chances of getting into heaven.]

- An idea uses the human psyche and body as a vessel for action. In this way it acts like a virus. Dawkins talks about this

- Changing behavior often requires an act of faith (without proven results) to kick off a virtuous cycle. Christianity and belief systems may give this to break the activation energy barrier.

- “Social reformers frequently don’t like the poor; they just hate the rich.”

- If you can’t understand why someone did something, look at the consequences, and infer the motivation

- People who are too agreeable can get resentful when they don’t get the recognition they think they deserve. They don’t ask for what they want, because “if they cared about me, they’d know what to do,” This is toxic thinking. Instead, speak up for yourself, gather evidence, and stand fast

- Effective rhetorical techniques used by Peterson:
• Distill the concepts into single easy behaviors (rules) that can have virtuous cycle effects

• Connect the teaching loosely with inspirational speech
  
  ▪ “to stand up straight with your shoulders back means building the ark that protects the world from the flood.”
  
  ▪ “thus strengthened, you may be able to stand, even during the illness of a loved one, and allow others to find strength alongside you when they would otherwise be overwhelmed by despair.”
  
  ▪ It just sounds invigorating, even though it’s not rock solid logically

• Using the length of history for justification for his beliefs, providing weighty power – “our ancient brains have evolved the male/female association for millions of years.”