



FINANCIAL PREPAREDNESS

"One of life's most painful moments comes when we must admit that we didn't do our homework, that we are not prepared." ~ Merlin Olsen

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The Science of Intelligent Achievement

To help you with your month-long [annual review](#), this month I'm writing about personal productivity and effectiveness. In 2021, I wrote about [Black Hole Focus: How Intelligent People Can Create a Powerful Purpose for Their Lives](#), which I said was the best book I'd ever read. I just finished reading its sequel: [The Science of Intelligent Achievement: How Smart People Focus, Create and Grow Their Way to Success](#). It's also five stars and a MUST READ. It's divided into three parts (Selective Focus, Creative Ownership and Pragmatic Growth) and 34 short chapters. I quote excerpts from the book below.

Chapter 1: Why Mental Energy Is Your Most Valuable Asset

"Mental energy is your most valuable asset...[but it] depreciates rapidly every day....you only get about 90-120 minutes of peak mental energy and five hours or less of 'near' peak mental energy each day....[Therefore, you should] cherish your mental energy [and] tend to it like a precious garden." Fortunately, getting enough REM sleep completely restores it.

"Mental energy is the world's hottest commodity. [Others, such as Big Tech] are going to try to steal it, drain it....but [people] do little to protect their attention....Where your attention goes, your mental energy flows."

“The first step to protecting your mental energy is to ignore the urge to give your attention to whoever or whatever is seeking your attention....Set 'no' as your default response...keep all gossip and drama out of your life, [and] walk away from energy draining people....[Instead], surround yourself with people and activities that increase your mental energy levels.” I have banished “energy vampires” from my life and try to hang out with “energy ambassadors.”

Chapter 2: How Busyness Leads to Burnout and Manipulation

“Busyness drains mental energy and prevents mastery....The human brain loves feeling busy. You get a dopamine rush every time you cross off an item from your to-do list. It doesn't matter if the item...is important or not, you still get a rush.” Being busy also makes people feel important.

Chapter 3: The Infection Known as “Other People's Opinions”

One study found that “every positive person you let into your life increases your chances of being positive by 11%, but every negative person...*doubles* your chances of becoming negative....you're biologically wired to copy the behavior [of other people]. Mirror neurons in your brain automatically cause you to copy your surroundings....you are a walking imitation,...a natural follower.” For example, if most of the people around you smoke or are overweight, you are much more likely to do or be that way as well.

Studies “show that exposure to negativity lasting 30 minutes or more peels away neurons in your hippocampus, the part of your brain responsible for problem-solving. Yes, negative opinions can literally *rot your brain*.” Negativity doubles your odds of unhappiness, increases your risk of dying young by 50%, and increases your risk of heart problems by 34%. It's also linked to poverty, reduced creativity, depression and anxiety, low self-esteem, poor performance, increased pain, loss of sleep and early death.

Chapter 4: How Small-Minded People Block Big Goals

“...your brain sees other people's goals as suggestions for what your goals should be.... Suggestions from other people are powerful because they tap into your desire to fit in.” So you need to be very “selective with who you surround yourself with” and “defy your herd mentality.”

Chapter 5: Scientific Proof That 50% of Your Friendships Are Fake

“...only 50% of your friendships are reciprocal. The rest...are one-sided or fake. Online friendship groups fare even worse....People in reciprocal relationships enjoy greater progress and overall success....true friendships can improve your life in a variety of ways.” Ditch your hundreds of fake “friends” on Facebook and make a handful of genuine friends in meatspace.

Chapter 6: How to Deal With Negative People Without Becoming Negative

Hankel recommends that you deal with negative people using the same technique that the Russians used to defeat Napoleon: create a void by disengaging and disappearing.

Chapter 7: Why You Need to Go on a Relationship Fast

Hankel says you should be very selective with who you allow in your life, which will create more space and time for “new, positive, loyal and aligned people.”

Chapter 8: Automaticity, Scaling, and the Rise of Mental Loops

“Success relies on scalability, which relies on systems, or loops. Successful people...have learned how to scale themselves really well....Scaling is what will allow you to free up your time while increasing your productivity. [Systemization](#) is what makes scaling possible.”

“...using willpower relies on making choices, and making choices impairs subsequent self-regulation.” Not only is the amount of willpower you have each day limited, but “willpower depletes mental energy as it's used, which leads to making bad decisions.”

“Automaticity is the ability to do things without occupying the mind with the low-level details...allowing it to become an automatic response pattern, system, or habit....The more automaticity you actively design into your daily lifestyle, the more successful you will be....[This] is the only way to free up the mental energy necessary to further improve your life.”

Chapter 9: Tracking Emotions and Predicting Feelings

“Focus is the biggest differentiator between massively successful people and those who just eke their way through life....every unit of attention that you give away...decreases your mental energy levels.”

“When are your mental energy levels peaking? These are the hours you need to start protecting, the time you should be using to advance your most important...goals. When do your mental energy levels start to crash? These are the hours when you should plan activities like eating or exercise to boost your mental energy levels back up, or when you should plan to do lower energy tasks like answering emails.” When I read [Daily Rituals: How Artists Work](#), I noticed that the vast majority of them spent their mornings doing creative work, and spent their afternoons taking long walks and such.

Chapter 10: How to Label and Close Your Brain's Open Loops

“The Zeigarnik Effect [is] your brain's tendency to finish what it starts....If something you've started doesn't get completed, you will experience cognitive dissonance...[which] will distract you, deplete your mental energy, and reduce your performance....The more tasks, decisions, options, thoughts, arguments, to-dos, hopes and dreams you leave unresolved, the more they are taking up space in your brain...and wreaking havoc on your emotional well-being....Studies show that the Zeigarnik Effect can reduce your ability to

make decisions, lead to intrusive and repetitive negative thoughts, and may play a role in...general anxiety disorder.” Unleash [Marie Kondo](#) on your brain.

You can prevent this “by frequently closing your brain's open loops....first identify and gather...all of [your] open loops, [which include] every piece of incoming information in your physical surroundings and in your memory—from handwritten notes to emails and receipts,” dirty laundry and dishes, “the vacation you've always wanted to take, what college your kids will go to, the argument you had last night with your spouse, the traumatic health diagnosis you had five years ago and never recovered from....Everything. Some of your stuff will be physical...and some of it will be virtual or psychological....you need to create both a giant list...and a large pile of stuff....For most people, this gathering phase takes at least 24 hours....[But] do not start eliminating or executing tasks as you gather.”

Chapter 11: Keep It and Clarify It, or Delete It From Your Life Completely

Now make a first pass of your list “with only two options in mind: keep and clarify it, or delete it entirely....Next, go through the list of keepers...and ask: 'Is it actionable?'....If the answer is NO, then you need to remove it from the list and either delete it” (but only if you're certain you'll never think of it again) or move it to a Someday (I use [Todoist](#) for this) or Source folder.

Chapter 12: Where Millennials and Baby Boomers Meet

“Everything in your life can be taken away from you except for your knowledge, network and ability...start filling your life with experiences that create equity [ownership] for you....[and] systemize and automate your ownership by filling other people's lives with experiences that create equity for them....there are only three forms of equity: knowledge, network and ability....Start investing in experiences that expand your knowledge base, grow your network, and increase your abilities.”

Chapter 13: “Entre-Employee” and Temp-Employee Are the Only Career Options Left

“...self-employed people make up nearly three-fourths of all millionaires in the world. Business owners [i.e., people who can scale]...comprise 74% of all millionaires in the U.S....97% of entrepreneurs feel a sense of purpose on a daily basis while only 25% of employees do....over 70% of employees are 'not engaged' or 'actively disengaged' from their jobs. Ownership is what makes people feel engaged in their work and their lives....” I highly recommend self-employment, which allows you to be the master of your destiny.

“...early retirees who completely lose their sense of ownership and purpose are 65% more likely to die before the age of 60 than those who do not retire early.” If you retire without a strong sense of purpose, on average, the earlier you retire, the sooner you'll die. I plan to never retire.

Chapters 14 through 24 are about developing ownership by creating and marketing content online. It's great information, but since you probably aren't interested in that, I'll

skip over it.

Chapter 26: One Non-Negotiable Is Worth a Thousand To-Dos

The more tasks that are on your to-do list, “the less likely you are to take action....the average to-do list exhibits heterogeneous complexity. [I.e., it] contains some tasks that will take ten seconds...some that will take ten minutes...and some that will take ten hours....The average person will automatically focus on crossing off the ten-second tasks so they can receive, as soon as possible, the psychological payoff and dopamine release that comes with it. This means that tedious, yet important tasks...will stay on the list for a very long time.” This is one reason you need to [calendarize your tasks](#).

“...the average to-do list [also] displays heterogeneous priority [i.e., it] lacks both context and hierarchy. This means the tasks that are most important to you 'right now' will take top priority, even if they are a low priority overall. [Also,] the tasks do not provide any information about the best time to complete [them] or how long each will take. The third reason why to-do lists prevent success is that they offer too many options.”

“Saying 'no'...helps you prioritize....This one, simple word can eliminate a lot of problems from your life.” A meta-analysis of 83 studies found that “saying 'no' increased self-control over destructive, unhealthy or wasteful activities, increased successful goal attainment, and protected against decision fatigue. Conversely, the...study linked lapses in the ability to say 'no' to a host of social and behavioral issues.”

But how you say “no” matters: “...refusing to say 'no' firmly and directly was found to be disempowering and inversely proportional to goal achievement....The key to saying 'no' more is realizing the practical cost of saying 'yes' too much. When you overcommit and let people push you around with their agendas, you damage your self-confidence and self-integrity. You also move yourself further and further from your goals.”

“...the only way to permanently protect what is truly important to you is to go beyond 'no' [so you don't have to spend time and energy making the decision] to 'never again'.... Bookending your days with non-negotiables is a proven way to infuse yourself with greater focus and a greater sense of urgency throughout the day.” For example, you're *never* going to check email before noon. “Taking a hard stance in your life with a handful of non-negotiables will force you to work within strict, pragmatic boundaries...[and] enable you to align your most important tasks with your peak hours of mental energy.”

Chapter 27: The Real Theory of Relativity and the Law of Relaxed Productivity

“...every unit of your attention that you give away to [those who are vying for it] depresses your mood, focus and motivation.” A study “found that the mind and body go through rhythms of emotion, alertness, and energy....peak performance is consistently influenced by...mood, focus and motivation.” Although these “will vary based on who you are and on your personal circumstances, they will still *always* affect your performance....[therefore,] *elevating* your mood, focus and motivation will *increase* your performance. Did you catch that? I just shared the answer to the game of life.”

To affect the quality of the day—that is the highest of arts. ~ Henry David Thoreau

“The law of relaxed productivity states: the more effective your process is, the more productive you will be. The more efficient your process is, the more relaxed you will be....The answer lies in balancing effectiveness with efficiency....A pragmatist is someone who leverages the right method in the right way, and at the right time, to achieve the right results.” So it's not just about “getting things done.”

Chapter 28: Avoiding Drama, FOMO, and “Blind Spot Ignorance”

A study found “that people are better able to point out cognitive blind spots or perceptual biases in others, but struggle to identify those same blind spots in themselves. Then, despite test scores that proved their biased perception, these people were still either unable or unwilling to recognize their blind spots....they actively chose to evade reality and live in ignorance.” You have to “have the guts to look reality in the face and make shrewd judgments based on the feedback reality gives you....When you lack...honest self-evaluation, it's easy to be led down the wrong path....[this] always has an unpleasant reckoning.” As Michael Hyatt says, “Self-awareness is the meta-skill of the 21st Century.”

Chapter 29: Preventing the Deadly Eight Productivity Pitfalls

These include “having a variable morning routine, putting small priorities first, avoiding difficult but important tasks, checking [your] phone constantly, and replying to emails immediately.”

“...each time you vary from [a] routine, you have to make a decision on what to do next. These decisions will reduce your mental energy stores....The best strategy for avoiding decision fatigue is to fill your life with healthy habits.”

“If you want to start being more productive, you need to start prioritizing....What you spend the most mental energy on is your top priority....Spend time on whatever your top...priorities are first thing in the morning. Do what's most important when your brain is at its best. Before your willpower [is] used up....start doing the thing you dread the most first.” Or as Brian Tracy says, [eat that frog!](#)

“Some tasks have very high activation energies. They take extra willpower units to start [For me, it's preparing income tax returns.]....Don't cherry pick easy tasks off of your action items just to get a quick dopamine hit.”

“...your goal each day should be to work hard for five hours and then coast. Everything you do after five hours of working is average at best....your brain is running on about half of its mental energy....[therefore,] how productive you are in life comes down to [what you consistently do during the first few hours of the work day](#). Start [making those hours count](#).”

“Every ring, beep, and alert you see or hear is one less willpower unit you have for that

day. Turn off your alerts.” Schedule your day “before you start getting pushed around by...other people....Set your own agenda. Don't stay at the mercy of other people's agenda....schedule set times during the day for when you will make and take calls, and when you will use your phone....” I know some people who think they have to stop what they're doing and answer a phone just because it's ringing, even when they don't know who's calling. No.

“Start only checking your email during set times....Your inbox is not your to-do list. It's other people's to-do list. [So reaching Inbox Zero should not be one of your goals.] The more emails you answer, the more you're working for others and not for yourself.” When you're on your deathbed, will one of your regrets be, “I wish I had processed more email”?

“*Stop answering emails right away....*you're communicating that your attention is easily obtained [and] you're training people to expect a quick response....help people understand that you *are not* immediately available. This gives you room to breathe. It gives you room to get real work done....There are no email emergencies.”

Chapter 32: How Decision Fatigue Reduces Willpower

“Studies show that the average adult can make up to 35,000 decisions a day. Each of these...takes time and energy....Decision fatigue [is] the deteriorating quality of decisions...after a long session of deliberation....You have a finite store of mental energy for exerting self-control. When your stores are empty, your ability to make good decisions [as well as to focus and concentrate] deteriorates.”

“Whenever you make a decision, your willpower suffers. Think of willpower as a kind of instinctual override, a way to interrupt your brain's automatic processing to do something else....each person has his or her own individual willpower limit and this limit is depleted by mental strain....of any kind, including...making simple, meaningless decisions....the only way to restore your willpower is to eat more simple sugars, sleep, or stop actively making decisions.” Thus, the only viable strategy for “protecting your willpower is to reduce the number of decisions you make each day.”

Chapter 33: Hacking and Stacking Mini-Habits to Success

Your net worth to the world is usually determined by what remains after your bad habits are subtracted from your good ones. ~ Benjamin Franklin

“[Mini-habits](#) are very scalable. You can turn one mini-habit into a dozen [full habits](#) by stacking routines on top of each other. The key is to use a really strong trigger, backed by a long-standing routine, to trigger a second routine [and so on]...until you have a long chain of routines that lead to a reward. The strongest trigger I've been able to find...is the simple act of waking up....My morning habit has continued to scale to include over 15 different routines, each acting as a trigger for the next. Consequently, I don't make a single decision from about 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. each day. This keeps my schedule open, my mind free, and my energy levels high....Your goal is to identify the pragmatic actions that further your greatest purpose in life and turn them into habits as quickly as possible.”

Chapter 34: Leveraging Boredom and Filling the Mental Void

“...our happiness and health rely on constant [movement](#), challenge, and growth. We are built for adventure....Mobility is the key to happiness and success....Adventure is your best investment....an experience requires three things to be adventurous.” It must be [remarkable](#), “it must involve adversity or perceived risk...[and] it must bring about growth....Adventures, not possessions or praise, make people truly happy....Your goals in life should be firm, but [your path to your goals should be adaptable](#).”

Conclusion: This includes a list of things you can do to have an adventure now, including:

- “Lead a tribe. ...leaders have a higher sense of control in their lives and [thus have] lower levels of cortisol,...have fewer health scares, and live much longer than non-leaders.” Being a leader is an adventure, all right.
- “Find a rival. Drawing a line in the sand between you and another person, a group... or an idea can sharpen your mind and energize your body.”
- “Chase. The chase itself activates the brain's reward system...we enjoy pursuing the objects of our desire just as much as we enjoy obtaining them.” As the Deep Purple song goes, “It's not the kill, it's the thrill of the chase.”
- “Be chased. Everyone wants to be desired, sought after, and appreciated for their talents and skills....the desire to be appreciated (especially at work) is one of the strongest desires people have.” The primary reason I decided to stop coaching youth soccer after seven seasons is because I didn't think the parents appreciated me. It's very disappointing to pour time, effort and money into something and then feel like nobody cared.
- “Create something. The desire to create is a primal urge....most people stop creating after high school or college and, instead, just follow orders, repeat tasks, and regurgitate information.”
- “Get unbalanced. A longevity study that tracked 1,500 people for almost 100 years found that sacrificing work-life balance to accomplish goals and live up to one's potential helped individuals live longer....there wasn't a single exception to this rule in the study.” Wow. So much for all of that talk about work-life balance.
- “Go on a pilgrimage....traveling to new places acts to expand your mind and change your perspective....walking in the morning lowers stress and even relieves pain.”

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