

55 Rules for Humans

Most of what you do is habitual and automatic. Which is fine. Saves energy. But, if you're not careful, it will make you the passenger, not the driver, of your own life.

What follows are my rules. I've divided them into four categories: the home, other people, email/phones, and day to day.

Rules don't restrict freedom. They create it. When you know the rules, you make fewer pointless choices, waste less time on decision fatigue, and move through life with more ease. But they need to be your rules—not ones forced on you.

<<Before we begin, a note>>

I do not follow every one of these fifty-five rules. I'd like to. But I'm a human man, not a robot. Instead, they act as reminders of the person I want to be.

You won't agree with every rule. Adopt what's useful, discard what's not, and add in your own. I invite you to scan.

The Home

Yes, your home is a place to relax. But it's also the place where you build your day's momentum, set an example for your children, and provide evidence to yourself of the person you will be outside.

Here are some rules to be less passive around the house.

No candy in the cupboard. You're not hungry most of the time. You're bored or tired. If you want candy, force yourself to go out and get it.

Don't restrict yourself. If you've got a hankering, walk to the gas station on the corner and buy yourself a Toblerone. Enjoy it, just don't mindlessly consume it.

Make your bed. Begin your day with a positive action. A sign that you are intent on taking care of your future self. No need to tuck in the corners. Just neaten it up a bit.

Prep your morning coffee the night before. Grind the beans, fill the kettle, and set out your favorite mug before bed. What you lose in freshness, you gain in more rapid caffeine injection into your veins.

Buy the two-ply. It's worth it.

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Mow your own lawn. Do the work that is worth doing. You will feel pride when it's done. You will stand back on the street and admire it. You will walk outside after dinner and suck in the freshly-clipped-lawn air through your nose, and it will be bliss.

Compost. Twenty-four percent of all waste that ends up in landfills is compostable food scraps and garden waste. Which is insane.

Plant veggies. Put something in the ground and watch it grow. Even if it's just a tomato plant or two. Learn to water the soil, not the plant. Improve its environment for living. Nurture it, even though it seems like nothing is happening. Smile as the sprout pushes through the dirt for the first time. Continue to care for the young, frail stem, as it struggles to survive. Then let it get wild as it takes on a life of its own. Maybe tie it to a bamboo shoot so it doesn't fall over, but let it grow however it damn well pleases.

Your house is a home, not an investment. Plan to make money elsewhere. Don't let the thought of an investment influence your decision on where to raise your family, renovate, or landscape. Homes are sacred. If yours ends up being lucrative, consider it a happy accident.

Fill a closet with cards and gifts. Stock up in advance. Buy cards from dollar stores and new toys from second-hand stores. It'll cost less, and you'll never have to run out at the last minute to get a gift.

Separate your fields of play. Separate work and home life. Both matter, but mixing them diminishes each.

Accept scratches and dents. Do not let the things that you own, own you. Especially the expensive things. Leave minor damages as they are because they tell a story.

Greet them at the door. When somebody you love comes home, stop what you're doing, get up, and meet them.

Walk them to the door. When somebody you love is leaving the home, stop what you're doing, get up, and say a proper goodbye.

Other People

The quality of relationships determines your quality of life.

Too often, we show the least amount of love to the people we love the most. When everything at home appears to be in harmony, you will be lured into taking for granted the most important relationships that you have.

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By the time serious problems arise, it's often too late. The time to invest in building strong families and close friendships is when it appears, on the surface, that it's not necessary.

Here are some rules to be less passive with others.

Buy two extra tickets. Anytime you plan to see a show or a movie buy an extra pair of tickets. It forces you to invite others.

A few examples:

We bought four annual Mirvish Theatre passes. My wife took Calvin and two neighbor boys to *Lion King*. We went on a double date with my parents to *Life of Pi*. She had a ladies' night with her mom and two aunts at *Moulin Rouge*.

Depending on your situation, one extra ticket works too.

Jason Feifer is a music fan. When he moved to New York City as a single guy who didn't know many people, he kept buying two tickets to shows. "It forced me to find someone!" he texted me.

Say "I love you" to the person lying next to you before you fall asleep. They are important. Your phone is not.

Say "I love you" to the person lying next to you when you wake up. They are important. Your phone is not.

Strong opinion or pass. Eliminate the back and forth "what do you want to do?" "Oh, I don't know babe. What do you want to do?" For outings like what movie to see, either voice a clear preference or pass the decision to the other person—then accept their choice without complaint.

Count to ten. Nothing is ever as big of a deal as it feels like it is at the moment. Calm down. Do that thing that they teach kids where you pretend that you're holding a cup of hot chocolate and need to cool it down by blowing on it softly.

Ask "Is there time?" When you feel rushed, look at the person you love and ask them if there's time. Then give them a hug and kiss. There's always time.

Count to three. When somebody's talking to you, count to three before responding.

Invest in memories. Shared experiences with loved ones appreciate over time. Objects you purchase, on the other hand, depreciate.

Spin. This is the dumbest thing ever. But if you're mad or sad, spin. It's impossible not to smile when you spin. Try it. Spin around and try not to smile. You can't.

Beware the convincing conmen. The harder someone tries to convince you to trust them, the less you should.

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Buy dates for others. Buy movie tickets for your parents, just because. If you have a good dinner, get a gift certificate before you leave. Think of a friend who'd enjoy the place and give it to them. Offer to stuff their kids full of pizza and watch a movie with them so Mom and Dad can enjoy a night out. Most people never do anything for themselves. Give them an excuse to.

Don't lie. Ambiguity feels nice at the moment. Clarity is kind. Do not deceive anybody, ever. Do not tell white lies. Just don't. Lying degrades trust. And without trust you have nothing.

Even if it's not your fault, it's your responsibility. If something happened that made somebody else you care about upset, even if it's not your fault, even if they're overreacting, even if they misinterpreted what you did or said, if they're being ridiculous, if their feelings are unwarranted; fix it.

Bite your lip, punch a pillow, lift some weights. Get your frustration out another way. Then smile, say you're sorry, make amends, and move on. Be the bigger person.

Look them in the eyes. When your kid speaks to you, put the phone down and look them in the eyes. Even if it's just to tell them that you need a moment to finish what you're doing. Do this the moment you hear their voice.

Having one true friend is worth more than ten regular ones. Go deep, not wide.

Say the nice thing you're thinking. Don't wait for your dumb brain to talk yourself out of saying something nice to somebody else. Give the compliment.

Never resist a generous impulse. Do the nice thing for the person if you feel like doing the nice thing for the person, even if you don't know the person.

A silly story:

We had flooding in Toronto. Power outages everywhere. I went to the library to work. They were open. Had a back-up generator. The coffee shops on that block were closed.

Me addicted to caffeine. Me brain no work good with no coffee. Me need it for write words.

I arrive and see a woman outside. She asked if the library was open. I said yes and that I was going to get a coffee but coming back.

She said she wanted a coffee too.

"I'm coming back. Will let you know what's open."

I found a shop ten-minutes away. Bought two coffees—one for her, thinking I'd find her back at the library. She wasn't there.

Two nannies sat down at the table next to me.

The smart part of my brain thought it'd be nice to offer them the extra coffee. The dumb part worried that they'd think I was weird or trying to poison them or something.

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You can't control what others think. You can only control what you do, and the intentions behind what you do.

I took off my headphones.

"Excuse me," I said. "I bought a coffee for somebody, but they aren't here. Would either of you like it?"

A big smile from the one on the left.

"Yes, I love coffee. Thank you so much!"

I gave her the coffee, and I put back on my headphones, and she drank the coffee, and when she left she smiled, and she said thank you. And that made me feel good.

Keep the special things special. Limit consumption of pleasurable things—restaurants, TV, social media—to maintain their specialness. Scarcity creates appreciation.

Instead of spending twenty dollars on fast food, make your lunch. Then occasionally splurge on a hundred-dollar dinner. Get appetizers. And dessert. Lace up your freshest pair of three-stripe Adidas. Ball out. You'll enjoy it more, and in aggregate, it will cost you less.

Mindless television liquefies your brain. Same as social media. But good TV is wonderful. And social media can be a great way to meet new and interesting people you wouldn't otherwise cross paths with. There's a lot of everyday magic in our world. It's up to you to maintain it.

Give the gift. If you come across something you feel like somebody you know would enjoy, buy it for them. Don't second-guess it. Don't wait for an occasion like a birthday or anniversary.

Weekly date night. It doesn't need to be a big thing. Paddle boarding on the river with sandwiches, a walk and a shawarma, rock climbing followed by a shisha bar. Just a few hours to connect.

Weekly dinner with neighbors. Do not be passive in building relationships with your neighbors. Do not let it finish with a quick chat about the weather while your kids play at the park or a sheepish smile while you rake the leaves. Invite them for dinner. Throw a few extra hamburgers on the grill this Wednesday.

Fifteen minutes with each child, each day, one on one. Play Lego. Read books. Have a Nerf gun battle. Doesn't matter.

Email and phones

When it comes to phones, discipline doesn't work. They are too addictive. The device has been designed to hack your primal brain.

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Children should see you in control of your technology, not letting your technology control you. If you want them to be responsible with their screen time, you must be responsible with your screen time. Control your technology, or it will control you. Do it for them. Do it for you.

Here are some rules to become less passive with your phone and email.

Leave your phone at the door. Don't let it enter your home. Set up a charger and a comfy chair at the door. When you come home, plug it in.

Use it as much as you want, but it stays plugged in by the door. Most of the time you'll be too lazy to get up and walk there to mindlessly scroll social media. But if you really want to, you can.

Don't put your phone on the table. When you set your phone down at the table, it sends a psychological message that the people you are with are not the most important people to you right now. Flipping it upside down is not more polite.

Keep it in your pocket and put it on Airplane Mode to take away the temptation of knowing there's a message when you hear or feel a vibration. Or, better still, put it in your bag out of sight.

Don't hold your phone while talking. It's a visual cue that the person you're talking to isn't as important as the phone.

Set your phone to black and white. Removing color makes social media less addictive.

Sunlight before screen light. Start your day by connecting with the physical world, not the digital one.

Use folders and filters. Create folders within your email for each kind of task (receipts, invoices, inquiries, and so on). Use automated filters to get new emails out of your inbox and into each folder. Process each folder individually. This way, your brain stays in one place at a time. Less bouncing around from topic to topic means less cognitive load, higher efficiency, and a reduction in brain fog.

New subject, new email thread. Messy email inboxes kill willpower, sap energy, and waste time. Don't hit reply if the topic changes. Every new topic gets a new subject line and therefore a new email thread.

Touch it once. When you open an email or message, deal with it immediately. Don't mark it unread for later. Either handle it, delegate it, or schedule when you'll address it.

Day-to-day

It's up to you to decide how you want to show up in a world determined to distract, confuse, and corrupt you. One that tells you to have values but rewards you for turning your back on them. Being a

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good person, however, is not that hard. The hard part is that most people won't notice when you're doing it right.

Here are some rules to help you exist every day as the person you want to be.

If the light is red, wait. Don't jaywalk. Just wait. Even if there are no cars. Red lights are opportunities to pause and take in your surroundings. Don't take out your phone. Maybe, look around. Notice stuff. Daydream. Play I Spy.

Leave two reps in the hole. Leave something in the tank—two reps, two hours, two favors unspent. Burnout is failure. Keep your cup half full. The ones who last are the ones who know when to hold a little back on any given day so that they can show up the next day.

Bring a water bottle. Better for the environment. Cheaper. And better for your health. All it takes is the littlest planning.

Play the game. Most of us suck at doing leisurely things guilt free (which is crucial), even if we know it's okay. Pickleball, gin rummy, Tuesday night trivia at Trixie's. Don't feel shame. Games are good, so long as they aren't all you do. (Credit to Mike Doehla.)

Bring a book. Reprogram yourself away from grabbing your phone whenever there's a moment of down time like waiting for a bus, your kids, or a customer to walk into your store.

A smart book, a good bad, a trashy book—doesn't matter. As Naval Ravikant said, "Read what you love until you love to read."

It's okay to read a page or two at a time. Practice that. Worst case, you'll forget the page you read and have to reread the same page. Which is fine.

Don't drink your calories. Sugary drinks have huge amounts of hidden calories. Ordering soda at restaurants or drinking it at home must be reserved as an occasional treat.

Default to trust. The speed you gain and energy you save from not worrying about being occasionally taken advantage of outweighs the small costs when it happens.

↑ trust = ↑ speed and ↓ cost

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Call me an ignorant optimist, but you rarely get ripped off—and when you do, it's usually small (though perhaps more meaningful to them). That tourist tax on a foreign taxi ride? Insignificant.

Of course, verify the big stuff. I know a guy who got scammed by his accountant who pocketed his tax payments. The thief went to jail, but the guy still owed the IRS \$100,000 plus penalties. Thankfully, such cases are rare.

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My wife hates it when I overpay for beach sunglasses because I won't haggle. Maybe some people are genuinely bad, but I choose to believe everyone has good intentions in their own minds. So yes, I'm an easy mark. Which is fine. It's not worth my time or energy to care.

Work, or do nothing. When something is hard or uncertain, the tendency is to distract yourself. To do practically anything else but the thing you sat down to do. This rule is simple. When facing hard tasks, set a time limit (two hours) and give yourself only two options: do the work or sit quietly doing nothing. No distractions allowed.

Order the first thing. Don't look at entire menus at restaurants. Open it and order the first thing that looks good. The moment that you decide between two appealing options, regret will arise if your chosen meal is disappointing. Close the menu and continue your conversation or, if by yourself, read a book.

Celebrate process wins with people you love. Design rewards that keep you going irrelevant of any outcomes so that you don't give up. No matter how good of a job you do and no matter how hard you try, it might not work out in your favor *this time*. But if you continue to show up the right way, consistently over a long-enough time horizon, good things will reliably happen. So before you start a difficult project, identify one-to-three milestones. Book a celebration with somebody you love after each.

Ten and five. Anytime you're ten feet from another person, make eye contact and smile. When you're five feet from them, say hello. Sometimes they'll think you're weird. Most of the time they'll smile back. Stole this one from the hospitality industry.

It's not a fire if you don't know about it. It's hard to ignore a problem if you know about it. So, don't know about it.

If you're with your family on a day off work. Don't just "check in." Because then if you see something going on you'll feel like you need to fix it.

When you wake up in the morning, resist the urge to look at your phone. The world didn't blow up overnight. I promise. Even if it did, checking your phone won't make a damn difference. May as well enjoy a snuggle with your wife and scramble some eggs before the impending apocalypse.

Read the book before watching the movie. Movie adaptations ruin books if you watch them first but bring them alive if you watch them after.

If a book is bad, stop reading it. If it's good, read it twice. Great readers quit books they don't like, hop around ones they do, and reread a few gems yearly.

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If the author that wrote the business book needs to make money from their book, don't read it. A good book contains a lifetime of wisdom. Don't read books from people who think that selling you their book is a way to achieve their lifetime of wisdom. You want to learn after the fact, not be part of the experiment.

The best investment you can make is in your own health. You have one body. If it doesn't work, nothing you buy matters. Everybody's got a million problems until they've got a health problem. Then they only have one problem. Pinch pennies elsewhere.

Safety third. Be safe, but venture out. Jump in the water, just remember to wear a life jacket.

Strike the iron when it's hot. Too often we put our all into a project only to take our foot off the gas as things are heating up. It's reasonable; you're tired. Don't quit ten feet from the finish line. Stay up all night. Sleep less. At the end of the day, you'll want to proudly say that you've done all that you can do. Gave it your all. Left nothing on the table.

Show up or don't. Are you in or not? Stop messing around. Decide what you want to be serious about and take it seriously. Recognize the tradeoffs, accept them gladly.

Don't check a bag. Pack less. Figure out what you don't need. If you can't carry it, don't bring it. If you want to bring more than you can carry, go to the gym and lift some weights.

Nothing is never nothing. Even the smallest patch of grass has an entire microecosystem. Stare at it. You'll see. It's really quite amazing.

Calvin's rule. When you see a sunset, stop what you're doing, shut up, and watch.

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