

## Chapter 8



# It's About Good Habits

If you look on the internet, you'll find lots of articles that begin with the words, "Research has shown it takes twenty one days to form a new habit". If you then go to find out what this research actually is, you'll be sadly disappointed. It appears that there was one study carried out in the 1960s where the author observed that it took 21 days for amputees to adjust to the loss of a limb. Therefore, he concluded, all habits can be changed in 21 days. Hmm.

More recent research, for example at University College London,<sup>22</sup> shows that it actually takes different people different periods of time to change habits. If you've been doing the "Do Less" challenges so far, then you've already begun to change your habits. In fact, it may be that the change has already taken place. In the online course I teach based on this book, I got an email from one participant saying this:

"Thank you for this. It has been immensely useful for me to be reminded to respect myself and my precious time. I had let things slip to the point where I was working from 9:00am until 1:00am routinely and most weekends. I've been on this treadmill for the past three years. I've now clawed this back to 9:00am to 6:00pm and stopped the weekends altogether. Funny how the world didn't end. Thank you for reminding me of what is important!"

And that was three weeks into what is meant to be a ten-week course. There's a changed habit for you!

Most of the "Do Less" challenges in the preceding chapters were about declining things. They showed you that it was okay to decline things. In fact, it wasn't just okay, it was good – very good indeed, in fact, in many situations. The purpose of these challenges was to get you out of the habit of reacting with a "How can I fit this in to an already overcrowded life"?

If you think about it, the habit that I was encouraging you to develop by doing these challenges was that you should react with a “Do I really have to do this?” instead of a “How can I fit this in?”

“Do I really have to do this?” is a good habit and hopefully you’re well on the way to developing it or you’re already there. But you can improve on that still further. “Do I really have to do this?” is good but it’s *reactive*. Something comes in and you decide whether you have to bat it away or not. It’s good but it’s *defensive*. It carries with it the implication that you already have a full day or a crowded life and you’d rather not make it any fuller or more crowded.

But what if, instead, you became *proactive* and *offensive*? What if, instead of thinking in terms of full days and a crowded life, you thought of empty days and a life waiting to be filled? What if instead of reacting with a “Do I really have to do this?” you reacted with a “Why should I invest my precious time in this?”

This chapter, then, contains an additional bunch of “Do Less” challenges that are about encouraging that mindset and building that habit. Make it your habit and you’ll experience the full awesome power of doing less.

## **Do Less #1 Become More Creative**

In a wonderful talk on creativity<sup>23</sup>, John Cleese of Monty Python fame explains that “creativity is not a talent. It is a way of operating.” He describes five steps necessary to engage in this way of operating. We would recognize the first two of these steps as classic “Do Less” behaviour.

These two steps involve creating what Cleese calls “an oasis of quiet”:

1. Find a place where you won't be disturbed.
2. Set aside time – he suggests 90 minutes is a good place to start – in which you are going to not do any of the normal day-to-day things that soak up so much of our time. Instead you are going to create this oasis of time and this is where – hopefully – the creativity will happen.

If you want to know what the other steps are – not to mention hearing some good “how many \_\_\_\_\_ does it take to change a lightbulb” jokes, you can watch the rest of the talk on YouTube.

## **Do Less #2 Vegetate (A Bit Anyway)**

When that internal couch potato calls, say “Yes, I'm coming”. Fridays are my night for this. No cooking, order-in, minimum effort everything. Some nice wine or a couple of beers and food that might be bad for me! Don't ask me to do anything on Friday night. I feel that, mostly, I'm a pretty productive kind of guy and I get lots done, but I turn off the productivity machine on Friday nights. Enough time for that again when the next work day comes round.

## **Do Less #3 Down Tools**

I love Fridays. In the unlikely event that I ever start a religion, its holy day will be Friday. I'll work hard, Monday through Thursday, no problem. I'll even do that on Friday morning. But come Friday afternoon I just want to have fun. In work, I'll down tools on any "proper" work and instead read things I've been meaning to read, or check out some ideas or thoughts I've had. I'll review the week and think about the upcoming week. I'll write in my diary. I'll try to let my head empty and see if any creative thoughts come rushing (or sneaking) in. I'll ask big questions like: how can I be better – in work, in life? I'll try to see things with fresh eyes. Of course, this doesn't have to be on a Friday if you don't want it to be. But pick a day, or an afternoon, to down tools – and do just that.

## **Do Less #4 Self-Employed? Fair Enough, But Not 100 Hours a Week**

If you're self-employed or run a small business (as I do myself), life can be jammed full of work-related trivia. So in order to separate what's wildly important from what isn't, make a list of the wildly important that begins with these three things in this (priority) order:

- 1 Money – don't run out of it (cash flow).
- 2 Current customers – give them your all.
- 3 New customers – find them.

Now explain to me – and more importantly to yourself – why there should be anything else on this list?

Why should I invest my precious time in this? If it isn't one of these three things then you shouldn't!

## **Do Less #5 – Say “No” When People Delegate Stuff To You**

You may feel you're in a job where you can't say "no". But look, you've got to give it a try. You'll find that the world won't stop turning. The sky won't fall, planets won't collide. So here's a way that might work for you. Instead of treating it seriously, make a game out of it.

For instance, for a whole day decline every second request that comes your way. And if a request happens to come from the greatest of all bosses, you can choose to go for it or chicken out. But if you go for it and you succeed, give yourself a prize/reward after work or at the weekend.

## Do Less #6 – Get Your Weekends Back

In most countries, the 5 day week/8 hour day only became law during the 20th century. Before that most people worked – in factories or on the land – from dawn until dusk in summer and 10–16 hours a day in winter. And that was seven days a week! The notion that we might have had two consecutive days in a week to ourselves, to do with as we would, was a dream for most of our ancestors.

So weekends are wonderful. They're glorious. And the idea that we would blow our weekends on trivia would appall those people who fought and agitated so hard for the privilege we now enjoy.

So weekends are a time when you do really need to ask, "Why should I invest my precious time in this?"

Look back over the weekend just gone. How much of it was spent on trivia or nothing in particular? And how much on the things that really matter to you? (And please notice I'm making no judgement here about what might be important to you. If spending half of Sunday in bed asleep is what really matters to you, then go for it.)

But if your weekends are going on nothing in particular, it's time to make a change. You can do that in one of three ways:

- 1 Plan your next weekend to only/mostly contain wildly important stuff; or
- 2 As your next weekend unfolds and potential things to do present themselves, ask "Why should I invest my precious time in this"? If you can't come up with a good enough answer, say "Next"; or
- 3 Plan a completely free weekend – a blank canvas – and just see what comes up or takes your fancy. This could turn out to be another really good way of figuring out what really matters to you.

Notice too that all the same comments apply to your evenings after work. This is also a privilege that many of our forbears didn't get to enjoy. And again, no judgement. Some evenings I *will* crash in front of the telly after a tough day. But not every evening.

## **Do Less #7 – Separate Out The “Noise”**

For one week, maintain a list of all the things you did in your personal life. I don't mean things like “ate breakfast” or “had a shower” or “slept”. Let's assume that you *did* get up, washed, had breakfast, went to work and came home again. But what happened *after* that? (Or indeed before it – if you're an early bird.)

What did you do on each of the five weekdays and the weekend? Record also roughly how much time went into each of the things you did.

At the end of the week, review your list. Against each item, note whether it was “noise” and whether it “mattered”?

Are you happy with what you see? If not, you know what to do.

## **Do Less #8 – Cut Out The Crap**

Make a list of everything you have to do today (or this week) and split it into what's Wildly Important and what Isn't. Rip off the column of what *isn't* wildly important and throw it away.



## **Do Less #9 – Turn Off The Box**

Switch off your laptop/tablet/phone/TV (or anything else that glares you in the eye) at a set time every evening for a week. And stick to it. Whether this allows you more relaxation time, gets you a better night's sleep, or simply gets you focused on something else that needs to be done, notice how much better you'll feel, just from this one little change.

## **Do Less #10 – Make a List Of The Things You Want To Get Done**

Make a list of the things you'd like to do or experience or achieve in your life over the next say, six months or year. When something that might take up your time comes along, ask the question, "Why should I invest my precious time in this?"

If the answer isn't "Because it will progress one of the items on my list", then forget it.

## **Do Less #11 – Have A Free Day**

Aim to have at least one completely free day a week – or, if that's too scary, one evening. That doesn't mean you just have to sit there doing nothing (although you can if you want to of course!). But by having no plan to do *anything*, you might be surprised to see where it takes you.

## **Do Less #12 – Meditate/Clear Your Head**

No, I don't sit in a Lotus position, close my eyes and chant. (I've tried for years, and have done Yoga, but I've never been able to get myself into a Lotus position.) I just walk the dog. Or if she isn't interested I go by myself. For me, it has to be at least half an hour before the ideas start coming but then they come in droves. (They're not all sensible but they're not all stupid either.) I used to run marathons and distance running served the same purpose. So you could find your equivalent. What enables you to quiet your mind and get in touch with your subconscious?

## **Do Less #13 – Just Do The Things That Really Matter To You**

The whole book has been about working out what the right stuff is for you, and cutting out all the other crap. With the rubbish out the way, you should be in a pretty good position to do the right stuff with a clear mind. Even if they're huge, every journey begins with a single step. "*Petit a petit*", as the French say – little by little. Now it's time to get started!

We've said it numerous times – behaviour change can be difficult. It can be difficult for us and those around us. I've tried to give you a whole menu of things to try. Like a regular menu, you don't need to eat everything on it. Try different things and find what you like – what works for you. If things feel a bit weird or different or out of character, that's okay – it's only to be expected.

The thing to not lose sight of is what these changes are going to do for you. They're going to enable you to live the life you really wanted to live. Nothing short of that.

In his now famous Stanford University commencement speech,<sup>24</sup> Steve Jobs underlined the notion that death is a potent catalyst for life-altering change: "Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life."

We'll all be dead a long time. While we're alive let's make it everything it was meant to be.

“It is impossible  
you should take  
true root but by  
the fair weather  
that you make  
yourself; it is  
needful that you  
frame the  
season of your  
own harvest.”

[ – WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, English  
playwright and poet ]