

The Essentials

There are over 5000 posts on my blog. That’s daunting. So trying to find the best stuff -- especially when I’m posting new things weekly -- can be an impossible task. (Heck, even *I* find it difficult at times and nobody is more familiar with this blog than I am.)

So let’s say we meet and you ask me, “What stuff should I definitely read? What’s solid, has held up over time, really works and is actually do-able for someone not born on Krypton? Or, more simply: Eric, what stuff do you believe in so strongly that you rely on it?”

My reply would be the following list of 9 posts. (10 is kinda cliche, isn’t it?)

I’ll tell you what the post is good for, provide a link to the relevant page and give you a short explanation as to what’s so darn special about this post vs. the other 5000. I’m gonna keep this relatively quick because with all these links, frankly, you have plenty of reading ahead of you already, bubba...

1) The Post I Use Multiple Times Ever Single Day

And that post would be: [5 Questions That Will Make You Emotionally Strong](#).

Some of my posts are compilations of research that I structure and explain for clarity, ease, and entertainment. This one’s different. Most of these questions were ones I developed personally after familiarizing myself enough with Stoicism and mindfulness that I had become aware of the errors in my thinking that led me to feel anger, sadness, or to go through needless rumination, etc. Whenever I feel negative moods coming on, I ask myself the relevant question from this post. (Of course, the backing for why the questions are effective is provided in the text. I don’t just make this stuff up over lunch.)

You don’t need to memorize the whole thing. It’s more an issue of a basic understanding of the errors in thinking that lead to these negative states. So don’t worry about rigorously studying the specifics. Read it a few times and focus on getting a more holistic understanding for the mindset. Then memorize the questions or put them on your phone or a piece of paper in your pocket. So when you start to feel angry, notice it. Then ask yourself: “Does the world owe me this?” Once you recognize the entitlement that leads to anger, and then respond “no”, admitting that the world doesn’t owe you anything, you can address the negative feelings by correcting the underlying beliefs that caused them, etc.

2) Everyone Has This Problem. (And Nobody Likes This Post But Me.)

When people join [my mailing list](#), I always ask them if there’s anything I can help them with. Very often it turns out I’ve already written about the subject they’re having issues with and I send them the relevant link. People frequently write back to me and say it was helpful.

However, one of the most common things people ask about is procrastination. And I usually send them this link: [Chronic Procrastination: 5 Weird \(But Effective\) Ways You Can Conquer It](#).

Nobody ever writes back and says, “Wow, that was great! It was so helpful!” Nope. Never. And yet I sincerely believe this is my best post about the subject. Is it the most user-friendly? Clearly not. But it does work.

In fact, my informal theory is that it is so obviously effective that people who really do enjoy wasting time don’t want to do it because they know it will force them to change. And they don’t want to. They want a magical solution where they do exactly what they’ve been doing, but somehow the result is different. We’re all guilty of this to a greater or lesser degree. But if you don’t really want to change, don’t waste your time. And if you do want to improve, there’s an old Russian saying I’m fond of: “If you’re going to drown yourself, don’t bother with shallow water.”

Want to stop procrastinating? Click the link and start using commitment devices. And if they fail, keep increasing the stakes until they don’t. You know what? Commitment devices are scary as all get out... but that’s why they work.

3) Stop Reading. Start Doing.

So procrastination is one of the most common problems my new subscribers are challenged by. What’s the most common issue among people who have been readers for a long time?

“I read everything you write. But I never put it into action.”

The solution? Build habits. The post I recommend? This one: [Personal Habits: How To Make Good Habits Stick, 6 Proven Secrets](#).

Pleasure reading is all fine and dandy. But if you want to make improvements in your life you need to act. And even that isn’t enough. You can’t expect to walk around algorithmically following a script all the time. Our conscious minds tire quickly. We

[“Barking Up The Wrong Tree”](#) Bonuses

spend most of our day on autopilot. To really make change over the long haul, good behaviors need to be non-conscious, automatic, and effortless, like walking or talking. So when you see a behavior you want to fix or improve, use that post to start building a habit around it. How hard is it to kick old habits? Really hard. But in this case, that can be a good thing. Become a slave to your good habits until they are second nature and then let the difficulty of quitting habits work to your advantage.

4) Breaking Those Bad Habits

When people ask about this, here’s what I pass along: [Bad Habits: How To End Them With 8 Secrets From Research](#).

I’ve been reading about and writing about breaking bad habits to some degree for almost 7 years. This post was a round up of all the most powerful tools I’d come across. Many are pretty simple tricks. (Not remotely as terrifying as commitment devices.) But they work. Imagine how much time you’d free up, how less stressed you’d be, and how much more you could accomplish or fun you could have if you banished a few of your biggest bad habits. It’s an excellent investment of your time that can pay dividends for the rest of your life, and this post has tips that can make it, well, maybe not easy – but certainly *easier*.

But now let’s talk about what you need when life decides to just punch you dead in the face...

5) What Helps Me Get Through The Toughest Times In Life

Death of a loved one. Heartache. A serious illness. Extended unemployment. (No, I am not summarizing my week, thank god.) These are some very serious things that can emotionally cripple people for weeks or months.

But a few years back I came across something that helped people get through all of these types of challenges faster and reemerge stronger. And it was so stupidly simple I could not believe it actually worked. But then I saw the research that backed it up. It wasn’t a study. It was *hundreds* of studies over 30 years. Professor Jamie Pennebaker’s work on the power of expressive writing isn’t debated. It changes lives.

So when people write to me and they’re dealing with a serious crisis or tragedy, I send them this: [How To Deal With Anxiety, Tragedy Or Heartache – 4 Steps From Research](#).

Like I said, it’s absurdly simple: write about what’s bothering you for 20 minutes a day for four days straight. There are some tweaks and tips to optimize it, but for the most part,

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that’s all you have to do. And after a little time, results pretty consistently show that those who do the writing are happier, sleep better, get better grades in school, and even cope better with chronic or terminal illness.

But let me get personal for a second: I’ve used this myself on a few occasions. And while it was scary to start, the results were impressive. I recovered from emotionally trying times faster and got on with life. Next time life drop kicks you, just click that post and do some writing. Sounds silly, but it works miracles.

6) Take Care Of Your Brain

We often analogize the brain to a computer. That’s not accurate and it’s also not a good idea. Our brains play by very different rules than your MacBook does. And we’d all do much better if we got to know those rules a little better. Because you’re not going to teach your brain a lesson; if you don’t give your brain what it needs it’s going to teach you a lesson.

Luckily, plenty of people are curious about the rapid developments that have been happening in neuroscience. And maybe that’s why this is my most popular post of all time: [New Neuroscience Reveals 4 Rituals That Will Make You Happy](#).

And all four tips in there are ridiculously simple: showing gratitude, labeling negative feelings, making decisions and touching other people. We often want magic pills and high-tech solutions but pretty consistently what I have seen is that the biggest benefits come from the simplest things: exercise, get more sleep, meditation, etc.

Your brain is not going to “change its mind” about what it needs. If it doesn’t get it, you’ll suffer. But luckily, your brain’s needs are pretty simple.

7) If You’re Excited About Something, Would It Help To Know What It Is?

Mindfulness, mindfulness, mindfulness. It’s all the rage. Everyone thinks it’s great. Everyone is trying to be more mindful... And the vast majority of people can’t really give you a decent definition of it. (This, my dear reader, is never a good sign.)

Not that mindfulness is bad or a sham. Tons of research shows those benefits everyone raves about. It really is a good thing to incorporate into your life. But a lot of people are getting bad information or, frankly, no information.

So when people ask me about becoming more mindful, I send them this: [How To Stop Worrying](#).

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Yeah, yeah, I know the title is about worrying. Don't get hung up on that. This is the clearest explanation of the “what” and “how” of mindfulness that I've put together and the studies that back it up are from a professor at Harvard Medical School. You're in good hands.

I meditate daily and I find it very helpful. Just understanding that the torrent of thoughts in our heads is not real life – that only that which you can touch is real life, is a game changer once you fully internalize it. To know that thoughts in your head are merely thoughts, that those worries, fears, anger or sadness only exist as long as you entertain them has made a huge difference in my life. If you don't have any sort of mindfulness practice in your life, it's something I strongly recommend.

8) Lessons From The #3 Psychotherapist Of All Time

In my “quake” book list, I mentioned the work of [Albert Ellis](#). His contribution to psychotherapy is considered greater than that of Sigmund Freud. The work he did ended up becoming part of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy which has been shown to be valuable in treating all kinds of issues from depression to anxiety.

But that sounds all heavy duty. Maybe you just deal with a little frustration. But the work that Ellis did can help there too in a big way. And so when people say they frequently feel frustrated or are quick to anger, I send them this: [The Secret To Never Being Frustrated Again](#).

It's a very clear and simple explanation of how to overcome frustration (or a variety of negative moods) by questioning the beliefs you have that underlie those emotions. The biggest offender here? Ellis hated the word “should.”

Often when you say “should”, you're telling the universe that it needs to bend to your will and comply with your demands. *“It should not be raining!” “Traffic shouldn't be this bad!”* You have the irrational belief that the world owes you a rain-free, traffic-free existence... and so your reward is? Frustration, anger and negative emotions, because you are not entitled to a discomfort-free existence. That's crazy talk.

But if you recognize your irrational beliefs and correct them, the negative emotions go away.

9) Let's Finish Up By Talking About Death (YAY!)

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In the [book](#) I talk about how modern American culture seems to have no place for death. We want to act like it doesn't exist, like it will never happen. And when you bring it up, people get sad or angry. (Oh brother, what am I getting myself into here? I knew I should have just ended with a picture of a cute puppy...)

But a little thinking about death (just a smidge, okay?), can lead to a much better life.

When people write to me asking about the BIG questions (meaning, purpose, what to devote one's life to, etc.) I point them to this post: [The Top Five Regrets of the Dying](#).

When people are nearing the end of their lives, what do they most regret? These are the answers. Again, some people may immediately feel like this is sad or morbid. Doesn't have to be.

You're not dying. You still have time. You can still avoid (or correct) the most common errors in life. And that is pretty awesome. It's like having the answers before the test. And this is that big test called life. (More like a “final exam”, really.)

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I hope these posts help. Bookmark them, print them out, get a tattoo, whatever works for you. I wish you the best.

PS: Please don't tell me you're still sad I talked about death. Well, if so...

