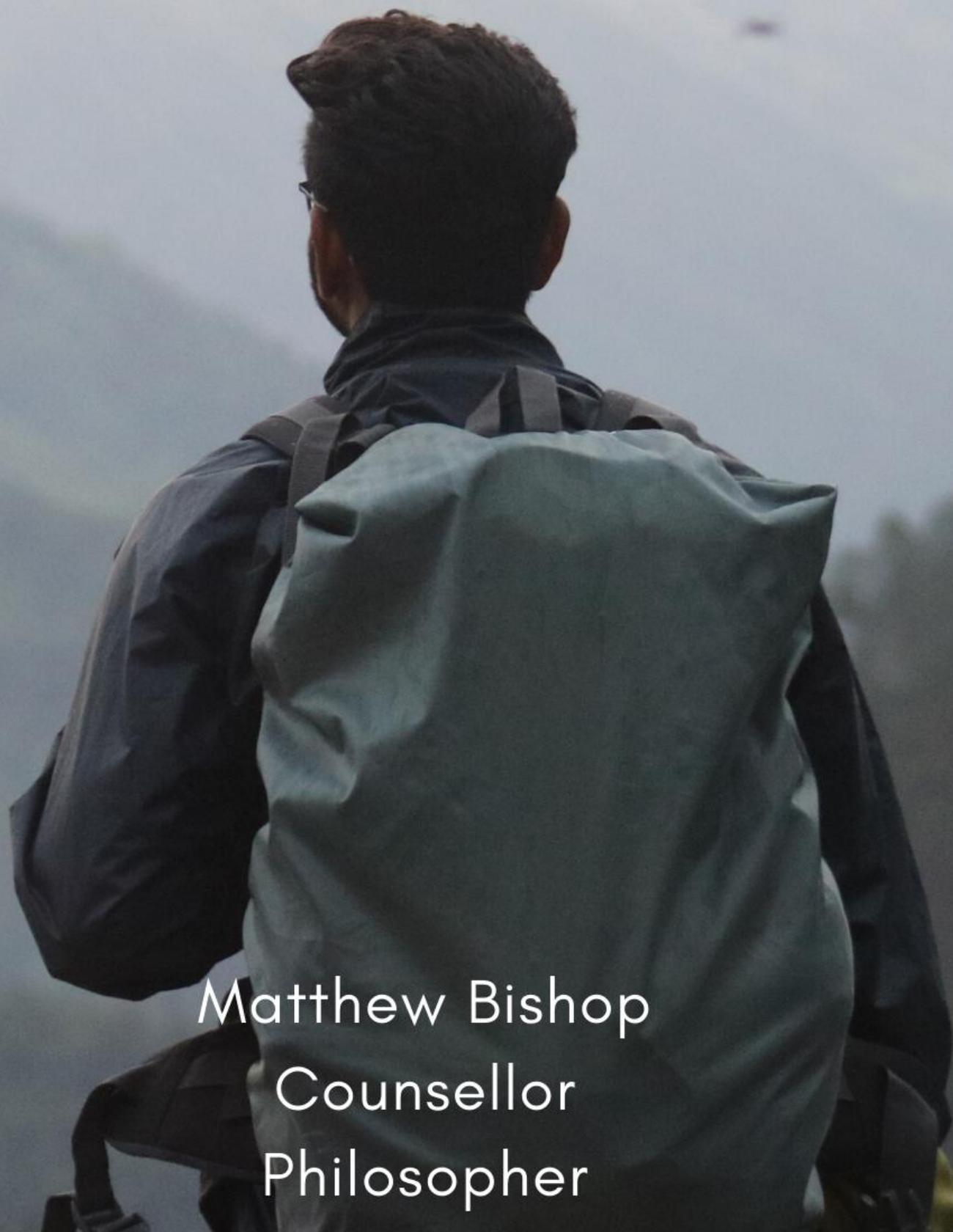


Make Your Life Good



Matthew Bishop
Counsellor
Philosopher

Welcome.

I'm a counsellor who has spent years helping people make their lives better. Before becoming a counsellor I taught philosophy at university. Drawing on both those backgrounds, I wrote this book to help you reflect on the big questions of your life with the goal of:

- Creating the life you want
- Becoming the kind of person you want to be

Chapters one and two are the core chapters. They guide you to clarify your *direction* in life - what you want out of life - and then your *purpose* in life - what kind of person you want to be, both in terms of moral qualities but also personal qualities such as confidence.

Chapters three and four are bonus chapters for those who want some further techniques and theory. Chapter three shows you how to hack your psychology - your stimulus/response patterns - and also how to courageously step into the personal qualities you want. Chapter four shows you how to create a new mindset. The latter has two dimensions: dissolving your negative mindset, and creating a new one which effectively makes your life much better.

The third and fourth chapter step into theory which I don't usually discuss in counselling, where I apply it rather than talk about it. It's worth noting also that the exercises in this book are not the core of what I do in my counselling - reading a book is very different to doing counselling, which is always deeper and more tailored, while interestingly being less simple, for we are working on the emotional life as much as the intellect. What I offer here are simply some prompts for your own reflection, and some insights and ideas for your personal growth.

If you want to work with me, whether for just a few sessions or ongoingly, you can contact me [here](#).

Matthew Bishop

Central Victoria

Spring, 2019



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Chapters

1. What do you most want to do?
2. Who do you want to be?
3. Create that life, be that person
4. Your mindset or philosophy of life

What do you most want?



This book is essentially about “the good life.” In the sense of creating *your* good life. In this chapter we’ll explore your deeper desires for your life. Then I’ll help you turn them into concrete goals. Based on them, we’ll explore (flexible) plan for taking your life in that direction.

Of course you’ll probably change your plans over time, as you grow and the world sends unexpected things your way, but a well-lived life involves the courage to know as best as you can what you really want, and to try to make that happen.

On the next page we’ll begin with a meditation. If you haven’t already, get yourself a journal or notebook and a pen before proceeding.

Clarifying your Desires

To clarify your deeper desires, take a journal and find a quiet place. We're going to do an imaginative exercise called a *deathbed meditation*. That's right: shit just got real.



Sit comfortably so that you do not strain in any way. Focus on your breathing, feeling it deepen and slow down, and count each breath up to ten. Then begin.

As you read this, imagine the scene I am describing, trying to experience it in your mind.

Step ahead in time, a short number of decades from now.

You are in a hospital room.

You are on your own.

White sheets.

The curtains are drawn.

It is night.

Bright florescent lights.

A monitor beeps quietly.

You lie on your back, wrinkled hands at your side.

Your breathing is laboured.

You cannot feel your feet.

Your body is tired and heavy.

You know you are dying.

And that you have little time.

You will die during the night.

This is your final reflection.

As you look over your life, questions form in your mind:

If I could go back in time - say, back to 2020, and start again from there - what would I do differently?

What do I wish I had done in the following years, now that it is too late and my life is over?

What do I wish I had done differently with relationships and love?

With work?

With my talents, my passions?



Take your time sitting with these questions. When you are done, open your journal and write down everything that came to mind. You might divide the page into three categories - relationships, work, passions - and maybe more, for example to include the places you want to live, but either way just write down everything; we will organise your responses in a more systematic way in a moment. It doesn't matter what age you are as you write this - unless you're on your death bed already, there is time to do certain things which matter to you.

Turning your Desires into Goals

Let's translate those desires into goals for your life. Take up your pen again and write a heading - "Life goals" - and then reduce what you have just written into a summary. Boil it down to a few or half a dozen answers. If it helps, finish these sentences:

*The things I most want **to do** with my life are _____.*

*The things I most want **in** my life are _____.*

Try to find answers which *resonate* with you as things you genuinely want. Tune into your feelings, to your gut. See how your deeper desire can be turned into goals, and that goals can be pursued just as you systematically build a career. By knowing yourself and living intentionally, you can shape the direction your life takes. Of course the point is not to get these answers perfect or create rigid goals, but rather to stimulate deeper reflection and examination which can aid you as you navigate life's twists and turns, toward something that resonates within you as truly desirable.

I just spoke about living intentionally. That means living in a way that is oriented to your goals, not only in thought, but in action. Of course, it's hard to

take action on a massive goal. So let's break down these potential life goals into parts: into medium-term aims toward which you can take action.

Medium-term Aims

Medium-term aims are precisely that: aims, which you can achieve in the medium-term, as a way of moving toward your long-term goals. For example if you want to buy a house in the countryside then you'll need to save a deposit. Getting the deposit is a medium-term aim.

Take the most important life-goals you have just written down, and think about what you need to do in the coming months and years to make them happen. Finish this statement for each of them:

In order to achieve this life-goal, a year (or whatever the time frame) from now I will need to_____.

Describe things you will be doing, the actions you will be taking, which will be putting you on the way to that life goal.

Okay, so you have defined your deeper desires, which show your ideal direction in life, and you have turned them into goals so that you can create a long and medium-term plan for how to achieve them. Now let's turn to short-term goals, which will lead you to your medium-term aims and long-term goals: actions you need to take, or habits you need to create, *now*.

Daily Action

A good rule of life is to aim at the life you really want (and at the person you want to be) and to *do the things every day which make that happen*. By "happen" I mean two things: perform actions which are means - which lead to your long-term goals - but also, do things which make your goals manifest today. The long-term is really just the accumulation of the here and now. And

while it is easy to get lost in daydreams about future actions, daily practices are in your power right now.

So take your journal and brainstorm about what it is important for you to do every day, to achieve your aims and goals. What would your typical day include? Then reduce your answers to a short list, to the essentials which you need to do, and realistically can and will do, every day to create the life you want. Write them down and put them somewhere where you can easily see them. Some of them you will do by setting aside structured time - for example exercise - while some will be changes and tweaks in what you already do, such as changes in how you interact at work. If it suits your personality to do so, then you can create plan and monitor your progress, but however you do this find a way which works for you to be persistent and consistent.

If you take this path of putting your ideal life into action now, and this week, and this month, and this year, then a short number of decades from now when you are on your deathbed and looking back, you will be much more likely to be happy with the life you created. But more importantly, you will feel such happiness way all along the journey and not just at that destination. I'm not saying, of course, that you won't suffer, or experience detours - or worse - at times in life. But life is a mixture of things we can control and things we cannot control. We all have more power to steer our lives than we typically realise or exercise.

Who do you want to be?



What kind of person do you want to be? That's the topic of this chapter.

I live in central Victoria, on the edge of a town called Maryborough, so I'm local to the events of a memoir which has deeply affected me since my early 20s: Raimond Gaita's *Romulus, My Father*. I often recommend this book (which was also made into a film) and I do that for several reasons, one of which is the

sense of life which Romulus embodied and which Rai conveys. As the blurb on the back cover says:

“Romulus Gaita fled Yugoslavia aged thirteen, and came to Australia with his wife and their son soon after World War II. Tragic events were to overtake the boy’s life, but Raimond Gaita has an extraordinary and moving tale to tell of growing up with his father in country Victoria. Romulus, My Father is the much-loved story of how a compassionate, honest man taught his son the meaning of living a decent life.”

That last sentence captures the power of the book. Half way through, Rai writes that “The philosopher Plato said that those who love and seek wisdom are clinging in recollection to things they once saw. On many occasions in my life I have had the need to say, and thankfully have been able to say: I know what a good workman is; I know what an honest man is; I know what friendship is; I know because I remember these things in the person of my father.”

You might read the book as inspiration for reflecting on the meaning of your own life. I refer to it here because it’s an example of the influence which people can have in our lives when they embody the values we admire and desire. For now I'd like you to find a quiet place, open up your journal, and reflect and write about these questions:

Think about that passage from Romulus, My Father. Who has been this for you in your life?

In what ways?

What were the values they embodied?

How did those values influence you?

How has that helped you in hard times?

How has it helped you in good times, to make life better?

Finish this sentence: "The meaning of their life was...."

The aim of this chapter is to help you get more clear on who you want to be, to become more the person who is longing and striving to step forth in you. And to create a plan to make yourself into that person. And to take action, to make that happen. The first step is that clearer picture of who you want to be.

Recently one of my female clients in her early 30s realised that she and her friends hold negative stereotypes of middle-aged women. She realised with distress that this meant her own future was a bad and depressing place according to her anticipation and imagination. So I led her to reflect on the middle-aged and elderly women that she admires. We dug deep into understanding what gives them their substance as people. After doing this my client's sense of her own future very much shifted.

The philosopher Iris Murdoch famously said that we make pictures of ourselves and then come to resemble those pictures. This applies to the people we admire and hold in our mind: we become like them. They hold up virtues, and strengths, and good possibilities for life, for us by their example, which can inspire us to rise to our own better possibilities. They do this in the context of a story - a life full of the kinds of things we too face, and the things we too hope for - and so they shine a light on the path ahead of us, the future we are striving for which is always only dimly lit.

Now it's time for another meditative reflection.



Again go to a quiet place and make yourself comfortable.

Let's start by reflecting on the mystery of time.

Notice that what happened twenty seconds ago is now in the past.

And how that sentence you just read is now in the past.

And that this *word*...

...is now in the past.

Time is spinning by. Can you feel it?

Last time we stepped into the future, to your deathbed. This time we will step into the future again to your deathbed, but we will keep going. That night of mortal agony passes and you are dead. Let's keep going: days pass. Your funeral happens. A year is past. And then ten years have gone by since you have died. The world is a decade along in fashion, technology, and life. You are a mere photo on a shelf.

Imagine you have great-grandchildren.

Imagine they are asking about you, ten years after you have died.

Asking about what kind of person you were.

And somebody is answering their questions.

You can hear every word.

They are talking about who you were from 2020 onwards, because for some reason you became a different person from then on. They are describing the kind of person you became.

It's good to hear the things they are saying.

Imagine the details.

What is it about you that they are admiring?

What gave your life its purpose and meaning?

It could be your humour, your passions, your strength, your kindness, a moral quality, or something else. Imagine the details.

When you are ready, write down the things they are saying.

Take your time reflecting and writing before moving on.

...

Once you have finished writing down what they said, consider what values are expressed in their description of the kind of person you were. To help you with that, write responses to these questions.

What made you proud in their description of you?

What do you wish was different? Why?

What do you need to change about yourself to become more that person?

What do you need to do differently from today onwards?

How did your top five strengths show themselves in that way of being?

Now try to reduce the things that give purpose to your life to a short-list, a few that capture it all. As in the last chapter, boil them down so you can formulate them as a few goals or aims:

The purpose of my life is to be _____ .

You can write a single sentence, or a paragraph if you want. Here is an example of what I might write:

“The purpose of my life is to be a good man and to enjoy life. To act in ways I find admirable, for example to be honest and strong and self-assertive. And to make life good and beautiful: to create a home and relationships and work which I love, to feel good about my life even in the midst of it. And to live out my intellectual, spiritual, and empathetic passions, doing something quietly wonderful with my time and talents.”

Notice how I define my purpose in positive terms: what I aspire to be, rather than what I am not. It’s of little value to say, “I am not selfish” or “I dislike selfishness.” It is more important to *positively* define your values, because then you have something to aim at, a goal to work towards. This also means that your motivation will then be love - love of something good - rather than hate of something bad. A life based around rejection becomes a cancer in the soul. A life based on love is a life that nourishes itself.

In the previous chapter I helped you plan what you want in life as a set of long-term goals, medium-term aims, and daily actions. You can do the same with your purpose in life. Again take up your pen and answer these questions:

Life goals: *Who do I want to be as a person?*

Medium-term aims: *What will I be doing a year from now, to embody that?*

Daily actions: *What do I need to do every day, starting today, even starting right now, to embody that person?*

In my suicide prevention work I was often struck by the capacity of people to go through deep suffering, and even to be shattered by it, and then to emerge better. Pain can warp us if we let it, and it can be hard to resist that, because our psychological defenses instinctively use rejection and hate as tools to protect us. Nonetheless, as conscious beings with higher values, we can redirect our energy and choose better and genuinely stronger ways of being. I think of one client who suffered a double-betrayal that was so shattering that he attempted suicide just before I worked with him. After a period of just getting by, getting his head about the despair and rage enough that he was no longer suicidal, he became energised by his fearless leap into death and unexpected survival. He discovered that he had reserves of courage which he had never seen. He then used that courage and energy to rebuild himself from the ground up, as a much tougher and happier man than he had ever been before. This is just one example of many from my work over the years. It was through such experiences that I developed a much greater faith in the power of human beings to transform themselves. Because I have seen it done so many times, by so many people who thought they didn't have it in them.

Be quiet for a moment and listen. Is there a clock ticking in your house? Look at your phone, is the time now different from when you sat down and started reading? Every second that passes you are closer to death. So I invite you to picture the best version of who you could be. And the best life you could live. Why not try making that a reality? There's literally nothing better you could do. And don't worry, you'll soon get a chance to rest in peace. But for now, make something beautiful or good or courageous or worthwhile or even simply happy out of the rest of your life. I'm not talking about changing the world, and for crying out loud I'm not talking about changing other people. Nor am I talking about anything which might impress others. Rather I'm talking about your private life, and your inner world, the actual life you live.

In the next chapter I'll show you two techniques for developing the qualities to be who you want to be and to create the life you want.

Create that life, be that person



Imagine that on your deathbed, you realise you never did the things which really matter.

Imagine that when your great-grandchildren ask about you, there's nothing to tell.

The last two chapters are the core of this book. We've focused on getting *clarity* about what you want in life and who you want to be. It's enough for you to finish the book at this point if you want. However if you want to explore some techniques for creating those changes, read on. I offer two practices which are quite effective. The wonderful thing about them is that, not only do

they lead to a better life in the long-term, but they make life better right now. These two are called *Be That Person* and *If/Then*.

Be That Person

Method actors become a character by embodying the qualities of the character, both inwardly and outwardly. They practice thinking, feeling, acting, dressing, and so on, like the character. In a sense they become that person. This is also an effective technique for developing the personal qualities you want.

The power of this technique can be seen in an exercise I sometimes do with my clients. I start by asking them to feel as depressed as possible. I get them to fully embody that and, after a few minutes of being slumped in their chair, eyes dim, breath shallow, I ask them to remain in that posture while feeling joyful. Typically they can't do it. Then I have them shake off that feeling, perhaps through jumping and smiling. I wait fifteen minutes while we talk about other things, and then without connecting it to the prior exercise I ask them to stand up and embody a victory stance, entering into feelings of confidence and joy. I then ask them to maintain that posture and body language, while feeling depressed again. Once again, they struggle. They struggle to feel joy in the depressed posture, and they struggle to feel depressed in the joyful posture. They struggle even though they easily created each of those feelings a moment before. How we think, how we feel, how we act, how we dress, talk, and hold ourselves, all of these are in a feedback loop with each other. By changing some of them, we can cause change in the others. And if we do that enough, it becomes a habit: we embody a new way of being. So if you are wanting to increase your strengths or develop new qualities in yourself, such as the ones you described in the previous chapters, then read on.

The first part of this technique involves:

- breaking down the qualities you want into their parts,

- Then focusing on the parts that you can *enact*.

Imagine that you are a shy person and want to become confident. You might ask yourself: if I were confident how would I hold my body - my posture, my hands, my feet, my shoulders, and so on? How would I breath? What would I be doing with my face - my eyes, mouth, et cetera? How would I talk in terms of tone, pauses, et cetera? What would I be thinking if I were confident? What aspects of my environment would I notice? What might I be wearing? We could keep going, but see how I am breaking confidence down into its parts, with a specific focus on those aspects which you can enact. With this technique you can analyse any personal quality you want and come to embody it.

You can use the experiences of your day as opportunities to step into and develop the personal qualities you want. Think of all the interactions you engage in on a daily basis. To stick with our example, imagine that the issue is shyness and you want more confidence. And imagine that when you speak with the service station attendant you do so in a soft voice, looking down and mumbling your way through the interaction. Well, from now on practice looking them in the eye. After some practice and when you are more confident with eye contact, add the practice of speaking in a low, confident voice while smiling. After you are better at that, add more things: try chatting to them for a brief moment, like one of those confident and social people. At first this might feel odd, fake. But don't worry, soon enough you will became a different person at the service station. Eventually, as you lose your attachment to your old story of "I am shy," and your old practices of shyness, the feeling of freedom and success you will lead you to take even more courageous leaps, and your growth will expand. And that's the point: the service station example is a banal one, but it's a stepping-off point for becoming confident in more challenging contexts, such as dating, work, whatever. Begin small and build, build, build. This works. You will not only change how you act, but your feelings will change in time too.

If/Then

Viktor Frankl was one of the great psychotherapists of the 20th century. But that came later. In 1944 he was a Jewish prisoner in the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz. There his parents and pregnant wife were murdered, but he survived. He wrote of his experiences in his powerful memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning*. At one point in the book he writes, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." That is the core of the next technique: changing our psychological programming.

Much of our behaviour is on auto-pilot, an automatic response to a stimulus: a particular situation will trigger a particular reaction in you without you even thinking about it. Clearly this is a problem when your reaction is bad or unhelpful or not as good as you want. But as Frankl points out, there is a space for self-awareness between that stimulus and your response, where you can choose a different response. By becoming aware of this space and using it, you can train yourself out of your old habitual reactions and create new, better ones. You can hack your mind and reprogram it. This is what the *If/Then* technique is all about.

As an aside, let me say that we're entering a point in this book which might get too technical for some people. If you feel that way, don't worry - I'm providing the background theory for some practices of change. If this theory and detail interests and helps you, then great. If not, I trust that the first part of this book has been helpful.

Let's break the technique down:

- Consider a *behaviour* you want to change and what the change looks like.
- Consider the *context* in which you want that change to occur.

Now take the second - the context - and call it the IF.

And take the desirable new behaviour and call it the THEN.

The technique is simple: IF that situation occurs, THEN you perform the new behaviour.

And every time the situation occurs, you perform the new behaviour. Over and over.

The result is that in the context of the old stimulus, you habituate a new response. A response which becomes a habit - a new automatic response. Freud referred to this as soldering, noting that our stimulus-response patterns are often arbitrary and can be broken and soldered in a new way. After soldering on a new response, what previously triggered a bad response now triggers the new, good one. You've hacked your psychology. You've rewired your brain. You've created a new way of being.

Let's take an example.

Situation: Person is rude to me.

Old response: I get angry (or depressed, or anxious - whatever it is for you).

This becomes:

Situation: Person is rude to me.

New response: I recognise that their rudeness is about them, not me, and so I don't get drawn into it, even inwardly.

Sounds simple? Yes it is. But it works. It's simple, but the trick is that you need to *do it, you need to maintain the practice.*

Now let's analyse this technique with examples from your own life so you can use it on yourself. Open your journal and draw two lines from top to bottom, dividing the page into three columns as per the photo below. Title the first column *situation*, the second *negative response*, and the third *positive response*.

In the *negative response* section, write down some negative or neutral actions you want to change. Spread each one out by a few lines.

In the *situation* section, write down the context in which those negative responses occur - the situation or stimulus which triggers it.

You can do those two sections in either order: starting with the situation and then the negative response, or the negative response and then the situation - whichever makes more sense for you.

Now in the third section, write out what you want your new, positive response to be.

Situation	Negative Response	Positive Response
Computer Malfunctions	Crack the shits Complain to others	Breathe, perspective Smile, focus on fixing problem
Traffic is heavy	Stressed, judgemental, pull dangerous manoeuvres	Breathe, perspective Accept out of my control, take pleasure in driving with courtesy
Many bills come at once	Typically I will	

Remember Frankl's words? "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." The stimulus is the situation you have chosen. And the space is represented by the line dividing the sections. It symbolises your ability to pause, reflect, and step into a different response instead - the positive one.

So how do you put this into practice? Imagine an example:

Situation: You enter into a situation - for example at the service station - where usually you become shy.

Negative response: You feel the anxiety rising, such as a tightness in your chest and breathlessness, which leads to actions such as speaking in a weak, mumbling voice while looking down.

Positive response: You take a deep breath. Then, from that calmer place, you look the attendant in the eye and do the kinds of things we discussed a moment ago: smile, speak strongly, wish them a good day, and so on.

The beautiful thing about this technique is that the situation which previously was an obstacle to you being your preferred self, now becomes the means for you to become that person. What stood in the way becomes the way. Furthermore, as you deepen this practice you will realise that the real problem is not bad things or difficult people *out there*, but rather the fact that you let your reactions be determined by things outside yourself. With these techniques you have the power to take radical ownership of yourself, to choose how you will act based on your own preferences and values. You can turn yourself into the person you want to be, rather than letting yourself be turned into somebody.

Now you can design your own practices, tailored to your life. Put this book down and reflect on some stimulus and response patterns that you would like to change. Consider ones which occur daily or at least often. Then take your journal and set them out according to the three categories: situation, negative response, positive response. Try to enact some of them and see how it works for you.

Something which will help you in this technique is the book which I most recommend to my clients to help them with many of life's problems: *The Happiness Trap* by Russ Harris. This book will guide you in becoming less reactive so that you can choose values responses instead.

Okay, so let's finish by putting the two techniques from this chapter together to see how that might look. Imagine that you are trying to become become

more successful in your career. Imagine that your work involves management. You are competent, confident, and friendly, but...you lack something. A colleague suggests that the problem is you're not really present, not interested enough in others to make them feel valued. You decide that your goal is to develop more *presence* in your interactions with others. And so, taking your cue from the first technique - BE THAT PERSON - you start by breaking presence down into its elements which you can enact. That is, you get clear on what it is to be present, and that might look like in your context. Then you start enacting those elements in your workplace, and you do that by applying the IF/THEN technique. For example you decide that whenever you encounter certain staff or clients you will use that situation - the stimulus - as a prompt to start brief conversations in which you really pay attention to the other person, asking them about themselves with honest interest and genuinely hearing their answers. Over a short period time and by means of this exercise, you increase and expand your way of being present with others so that it becomes one of your habits at work.

You can use these practices for any quality you want to develop, in any context of your life. The great thing about them is that they are self-reinforcing, so that in time it becomes a pleasure to do them and you feel more inclined to do so. For example, being shy doesn't feel good (it is an experience of anxiety), but being confident feels good and you want more of that feeling. Not being present may feel fine, but as you practice being interested in others, you may find that they are more interesting than you realised, and that it feels better to connect with others, and you want more of it.

Now we'll move to the next and last chapter where we'll add one more aspect to all of this: mindset development.

Your mindset or philosophy of life



In this final chapter we'll move from goals and techniques, to the big picture: your *philosophy of life*, your *mindset*. You can do the exercises in this chapter, or you can merely read it to get a sense of how your mindset can be broken down into parts which you can shape. Mindset is vital both for facing hardship well and for making life better - it is a source of resilience, hope, confidence, happiness, possibilities, and so on. Hence it's worth spending some time considering what your particular mindset is like, how it functions in your life, and in what ways you might change it.

Why is your mindset such an important part of your life?

Because your thoughts shape your *emotions and actions*.

And because you are, in a sense, your thoughts, emotions, and actions, this means that over time your thoughts shape *who you are*.

And so also your thoughts shape what *your life looks like*.

And here's the thing about all this: Your thoughts are something you *choose*.

That is, you can examine your mindset, choose a better one, and habituate it in place of the old one.

You can choose how you and your life come to be.

Not that you can choose everything about yourself or your life - there is much also that is out of our hands, of course - but nonetheless there is much you can do, you can craft yourself and your life.

To do that you need to learn the craft of personal development, including mindset development. And to practice it consistently. In this chapter I will show you how to craft your mindset.

Mindset is a modern word for something ancient: your philosophy of life. There's a big connection between mindset development and practical philosophy, which is why books like Ryan Holiday's *The Obstacle is the Way* are so popular. These days philosophy is mostly done by academics, whose passion (or obsession) is theory. But ancient philosophy was done by people who did philosophy as a way of becoming more emotionally strong, more decent as a

human being, and with making life go well. My counselling is deeply enriched by philosophy, and hopefully you can see why. I began my youth as a rural, working-class, high-school drop-out from a hard background of hurt, and while working in a factory I discovered ancient Greek philosophy. That changed my life. Among the philosophers who moved me most and gave me direction in life, many were citizen-soldiers, while some were also craftsmen (Socrates), some businessmen (Zeno, the founder of Stoicism), some slaves (Epictetus), and one an emperor (Marcus Aurelius). These were people who knew how hard life could be, and how good we could make it, at least within ourselves.

These philosophers, who belong to a movement known as [Stoicism](#), have shaped Western thinking for two and a half thousand years. Even today many psychologists, when they help people improve their mental health by guiding them to change their negative thinking, in order to change their negative emotions and behaviour, are doing something which has clear roots in Stoicism. But the Stoics went further, beyond negating problems, to creating a good life. We will use Stoicism and its modern psychological variants, to help you craft your philosophy of life - your mindset - as a vital ingredient in you transforming yourself and creating your good life.

I mentioned that my favourite Stoic philosophers are Marcus Aurelius, who was one of the greatest emperors of Rome, and Epictetus, who was a cripple and a slave. You can see from their lives that these men understood the challenges of life. So it's interesting to note that one of Epictetus' core teachings was that "people are disturbed not so much by things in themselves, but by their beliefs about such things." That is, it's not so much the situation which disturbs you - another person in that same situation might not be disturbed - rather it's how you see the situation. There is an incredible freedom and power in this idea. Indeed, the psychologist Albert Ellis used it to transform modern psychology. At the heart of his approach, Ellis developed a formula for applying Epictetus' insight which he called the *ABC Model*:

A = activating Event (the thing that happens).

B = Belief.

C = Consequences (such as how you *feel* or *act* in response to what happens).

“People are disturbed not so much by things in themselves, but by their beliefs about such things.” People are disturbed (that is, they suffer negative emotional reactions or *Consequences*) not so much by *activating Events*, as by their *Beliefs* about those Events. It is your beliefs, more than the events, which lead you to your reactions. The word belief is used broadly here, to include perception, perspective, interpretation - how you see and interpret.

Another way of picturing this is to think of it as an equation: $A + B = C$. That is, it is an event + your beliefs which most determine your reaction, rather than the event purely within itself.

Now, the problem in life is that we often act as if $A = C$, as if there is *only* the Event and the Consequence:

Activating Event: somebody is rude to me.

Consequence: therefore I get angry.

Absorbed in anger, we assume that our reaction is the natural and logical one, the one which any reasonable person would have. We forget that, while we get angry, yet another person gets depressed, a third anxious, and a fourth might even experience a positive emotion...all in response to *the exact same event!*

What leads different people to respond to the exact same event in such different ways? It is B: the Belief.

To illustrate the difference that belief makes, here are three examples of the *same event*, but with three *different beliefs* which each lead to three different consequences:

1.

Activating Event: somebody is rude to me.

Belief: Rudeness expresses somebody's attempt to stand over me, and must be fought against.

Consequence: I get angry.

2.

Activating Event: somebody is rude to me.

Belief: people will always be rude to me and there is nothing I can do, I am helpless while others are cruel, and I will always suffer this way.

Consequence: I get depressed.

3.

Activating Event: somebody is rude to me.

Belief: their behaviour is their weakness, it says nothing about me and need not effect me.

Consequence: I don't feel much in response nor do I react to them - I shrug it off, perhaps with a slight shake of the head or an easy smile.

Pause for a moment and let that sink in: many of your negative emotions and behaviours, which feel caused by things outside your control, which feel necessary and written into reality, are in fact somewhat arbitrary, and you can change them!

The ABC Model is the coding behind how you feel, what you do, and how your life comes to look. And many of the problems in your life and in you can be changed by the consistent application of the model. You can diminish the power of negative emotions, the presence of unwanted behaviours, as well as the life trajectory that results from them. And you can instead create positive emotions and behaviours, and a better life for yourself.

So, to summarise thus far: the ABC model was developed by a psychologist, who took it from Stoic philosophy and applied it as a treatment for mental illness. But we can use it as a tool both for understanding our mindset more broadly, and for creating a much better one. To do that, think of the:

Activating Event as the whole of life as you encounter it.

Belief as your *philosophy of life* or *mindset* - your beliefs, your attitude, as a whole.

Consequence as your whole life: your experience of life, your feelings and actions, and who you come to be and what your life comes to look like.

A) You exist in the world and encounter it as so many events - so many things, happenings, people, possibilities.

B) You interpret and experience that encounter through the lens of your beliefs. Beliefs about particular things, and about life as a whole.

C) You respond to that encounter through the lens of those beliefs.

A bad set of beliefs - a bad philosophy or mindset - can reduce your whole life to a living hell. Imagine that you have a fearful and so defensive (aggressive) outlook. As a response to whatever happens in life, you'll become angry, bitter, despairing, and so on. Naturally that way of being will cause others to react to you in negative ways, and you will interpret those reactions as well through your twisted lens, and your problem will spiral. A negative mindset becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, a negative downward spiral.

A good mindset on the other hand can take you further into strength, meaning, and happiness than you ever hoped. The world then looks very different, containing possibility, friendliness - whatever is contained in your thinking. You will respond to people and events in ways which make things better and which create feedback loops, positive upward spirals. You will respond to risks with courage. You will respond to obstacles with creativity and action. You will respond to evil with good. You will respond to the good by enjoying it and creating more good. To the degree you achieve this, you will become an engine for improvement no matter what the circumstances - you will become somebody who makes life better - others will be more attracted to you, and you will love and enjoy life more. Through your mindset you are in a feedback loop with the world.

Let's finish this book by putting this knowledge into practice. Let's develop your mindset by integrating the ABC model and the IF/THEN technique.

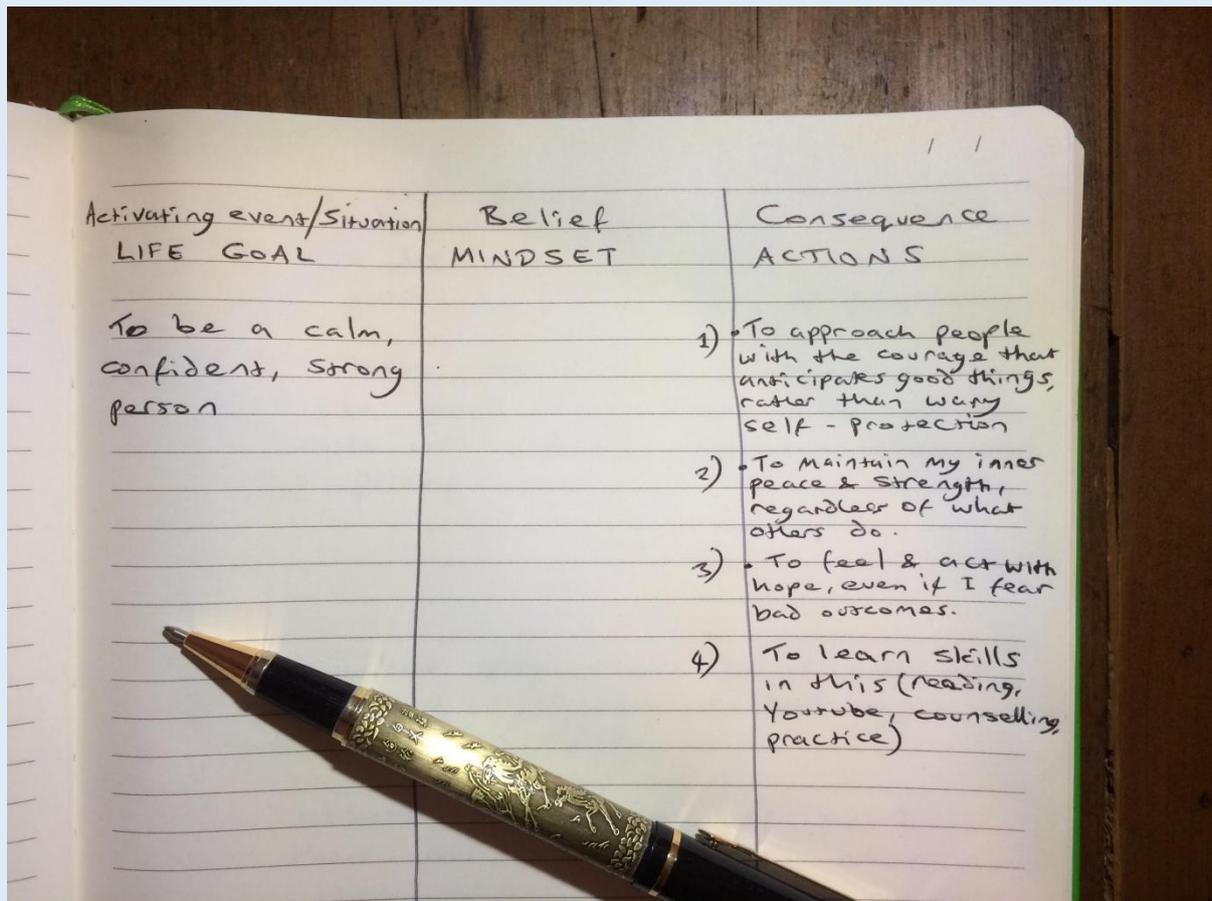
Open up your journal. For a warm-up exercise you're going to apply the ABC model to what you wrote in the last chapter, where you divided the page into situations, negative responses, and positive responses. Go to that page and in each case divide the situation and its responses according to the ABC model by reflecting on and writing down the Belief (B) which lies between the situation (A) and each response (C):

Situation	Negative Response	Positive Response
(A) Computer malfunctions	(C) Crack the shits Complain to others (B) Everything will turn to chaos	(C) Breathe, perspective Smile, focus on fixing problem (B) This happens often & I always handle it.
Traffic is heavy	Stressed, judgemental, pull dangerous manoeuvres (B) I'm going to be late & be judged. People are idiots.	Breathe, perspective Accept out of my control, take pleasure in driving with courtesy (B) This is out of my hands. I want to be mature. Safety is more important. We're all in the same boat.
Many bills come at once	Typically I will	

When it comes to your current negative responses, you are describing beliefs you already have. These beliefs might be conscious, but often they are not - they have gone underground in your mind, so to speak; they are assumed, unnoticed, unconscious. Nonetheless they shape you, in the same way as background coding shapes what you see here on the screen. To discern them you may have to use implication: your reaction to the event will imply what the belief is. For example if you feel angry, it suggests beliefs around threat and risk. If you feel depressed, there may be beliefs around helplessness or hopelessness.

By contrast, when it comes to your new positive responses, you are not *discovering* what beliefs you have, so much as *choosing and creating* them. Mindset development is above all an act of free choice and creation. My own criteria for what beliefs I choose is that they should be 1) as *true* as possible, and 2) as *good* or beneficial as possible. So for example, if two beliefs seem equally true and yet one is pessimistic while the other is optimistic, then I choose the second one, given that optimism serves me better.

Okay, so you can see from the above exercise how negative beliefs lead to negative responses, and how positive beliefs create good ones. Now we're going to get to work on *creating* your mindset. We'll continue to use the ABC Model to guide you, and we'll use your life-goals, medium-term aims, and daily actions. I want you to go to a new page in your journal and divide it into three sections. Title the first section *Activating Event or Situation*, the second *Belief*, and the third *Consequence*. Then add a second title to each section: first *Life Goal*, second *Mindset*, and third *Actions*. The photo below gives an example:



You can see that I'm playing with the categories here, by equating life goals and events. In this version, write down your life goals, spaced out on the page. In the photo above you have the goal of becoming a calm, confident, strong person. Next, as per the photo, write down some of the corresponding daily actions or medium-term aims, such as making a project of approaching people with greater courage instead of your old fear-based shyness.

As you may have guessed from the image, I'm now going to ask you to write down your beliefs - your mindset which will lead from goals to actions. As an example of the attitudes you might write down in response to 1, you might include statements like:

"While I need to be prudent about who I trust, nonetheless there's a lot of good in others, and I will encounter it I look for it."

In response to 2 you might include:

“What others think and do is out of my control, but I can control my perspective and actions.”

And also

“I am able to hold my own regardless of what others do, I have plenty of strength within me, if only I will use my courage.”

This is one way of understanding and creating your mindset. As I’ve said, it enables you to craft yourself, your life, and even how your world comes to look.

Of course, I should finish by adding that you can’t change or control everything about your yourself, your life, or events. However, as I often point out, even in the face of the uncontrollable you have a certain control: the power to choose how you will respond, for example to choose the attitude you work at adopting. At Alcoholics Anonymous people recite The Serenity Prayer:

Grant me the courage to change the things I can,

The serenity to accept the things I cannot,

And the wisdom to know the difference.

The Serenity Prayer is pure Stoicism. You will encounter things in life which you cannot control. Your mindset will be vital then so you can live well with those unchangeable things by maintaining your strength and values and mindset. Not only that, but a powerful mindset will enable you to create change even in the face of the seemingly unchangeable. For as as Marcus Aurelius wrote, “The impediment to action advances action, what stands in the way becomes the way.” But of course much of life is something you can change, and that’s the truth to a far, far greater degree than you probably realise (another thing I am fond of saying: life is far more out of our control than we realise, and also far more in our control than we realise). The overarching message here is that it

doesn't matter which aspect of life you encounter - the controllable or uncontrollable - either way you can become transformative. It comes down to your mindset.

If all of this seems complex, don't worry. In reality I don't get my clients to do these exercises, though I often point out the basics of the ABC Model so they can recognise how it is their thinking and reaction which is the real problem and way forward. This book is an opportunity to set that out in greater detail. The important thing is that you become alive to how your thoughts and attitude shape your life, and how you can change them for the better, and how this can transform your life more broadly.

Conclusion

We've explored what you want in life. We've explored who you want to become. We've explored two fundamental practices for making those goals happen. And we've looked at your mindset which guides and shapes and creates who you become and what your life looks like. The longer I have worked as a counsellor the more I have been struck by our capacity to rise to our challenges and create lives of courage and worth. That's why, despite all the suffering and confusion of life, it's good to be alive. It's also why we should hope and strive: we each have far greater capacity than we realise to make our lives good and satisfying. I say this from experience, from what I've seen in the years of my work. I hope this book helps you on your own journey of becoming the person you want to be and creating a good life for yourself. Good luck.

Matthew Bishop

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For more on what I do see [here](#) and follow me on social media. I provide counselling to help people with their problems or goals, and to develop greater strength, meaning, and happiness more broadly.

