

24 Ways to Improve Your Life

Summaries and
Reviews of 24 of the
Top Self-Help Books .

By
Steven Ray Marks



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Introduction

About This Book

Over the last few years, I've been rather obsessed with self help books. And psychology books. And basically trying to understand how the mind works, and how to live a better life.

Part of this was for selfish reasons.

There reached a point where I realized I wasn't satisfied with my life. I knew that no "Better Life Fairy" was going to come along and fix it. I needed to fix it myself. But I didn't know how. So I turned to self-improvement books for guidance.

Part of this was for curiosity. The more I read, the more interested in the topic I became. Which meant that I wanted to learn even more.

Part of this was professional. As I learned and synthesized the ideas, I started to develop my own philosophy regarding self-help. I launched my blog [Self Helping Yourself](#). And I was working on my book [The Weight Loss Habit: The No BS, No](#)

[Gimmick, \(Sort of\) Easy Way to Lose Weight and Keep It Off Forever](#). While the book is based on my own experiences and tactics, learning the wisdom of others could only make it better.

Eventually, I looked at the list of books I had read, and thought, “Wow, that’s a lot of books.”

There was a lot I learned from those books. A good summary of this is in the article I wrote [Thirteen Things I Learned From Reading 50 Self Help Books](#).

There were also a lot of things I tried from these books that didn’t work. And a lot that I disagreed with.

One of the things I learned was that you can make yourself happier by helping others. (See item 10 on that [list](#), “Charity and Friendliness will make you happier.”)

Something that I thought I can do to be helpful is summarize these books. Few people would want to take the time to read all of them. (Nor should you - you have better things to do in your life.)

My hope is that by providing these summaries, I can give you the benefit of the wisdom from them. And perhaps it will help you to pick out a few that would be the most helpful to you personally, or that you would find the most interesting.

I will be giving my own ratings and thoughts on these books. But every individual is different. I fully encourage you to review the descriptions of the books, and read whichever ones you think would resonate with you, regardless of my ratings.

My Personal Views on Self-Improvement

There's no such thing as a completely objective and unbiased source.

While I try to be as fair as possible in these descriptions, I think it is best that I be up-front about my own opinions on self-help. Particularly on what works and what doesn't.

My broad overarching philosophies in this respect are:

- Self-Help should be easy. [Challenging yourself doesn't work.](#)
- Improvements in your life are made by building sustainable habits.
- It is vitally important to foster a positive attitude (and avoid negativity), with respect to others, the world, and yourself.
- You can't rely on the mystical, such as prayer, visualization, putting out the right energy, the Law of Attraction, etc. You have to actually *do* things to achieve your goals.
- However, a lot of what is presented as mystical actually does work, but in non-mystical ways. Putting out positive energy makes you friendlier, so others are

more likely to help you. You're more likely to spot and go after opportunities. You're less likely to quit after setbacks. Etc.

One more note: The links to books in this guide are affiliate links, meaning I get paid when you click them and then make a purchase on Amazon. The reviews/summaries/ratings still reflect my honest opinion, and I get paid the same no matter how positive or negative my comments are. I just wanted to be up-front about that.

If you find this free book useful, enjoy the [Self Helping Yourself](#) site, or find the Five Boosts mailing list useful, please consider clicking these links as a way to support my work at no cost to you - even if it's just to click before buying something you were already planning to buy.

Types of Books

If you look at the [self-help books I've listed as resources](#) on my website, I've broken them into different categories:

Actionable Advice: These are books that give you actionable advice on specific changes you should make to what you do or how you live, in order to live better.

Attitude and Outlook: These aren't so much specific things you do as trying to reframe your view on yourself or the world.

Psychology: I consider many psychology books to be self-help books, because understanding more about our own psychology allows us to avoid cognitive traps, or even use them to our advantage.

Miscellaneous: Books that don't quite fit into any of these categories.

For this First Edition of **24 Ways to Improve Your Life**, I've focused on the *Actionable Advice* category. Future editions will expand into other categories.

Ratings

I'm giving each of these books four ratings, on a scale of 1 to 5:

Useful Advice: Is there actionable advice that you can follow which will improve your life? Factors that go into this rating include just how much advice the book contains, whether I think it's *good* advice, how easy or difficult it would be to follow, how big an impact the advice would have on your life, whether the advice would be harmful if you fail (especially for the more difficult advice), and other similar factors.

Interesting Ideas: How unique are the ideas in this book? Are they something you wouldn't have thought of on your own, or are they obvious? How different is it from what you'd read in other self-help books? Or was it the first to suggest something that lots of other books copied? Does it change your perspective? Is it something that even people who don't feel like they need to improve their life would find fascinating?

Content Density: In some books, every sentence is a golden nugget of wisdom. Some books could have been a two page essay, and everything else is padding to justify it being book-length. And for some books, once you read the title, you know everything you need to. How worthwhile is it to read the entire book versus a summary?

Overall: Combining the other three ratings, plus other qualities and intangibles, to get one rating of whether I recommend this book.

Summary of Ratings

Here is a quick reference guide to the ratings I gave to the books covered here.

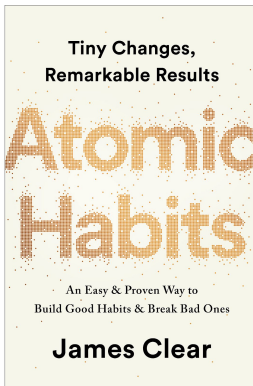
Again I remind you that these ratings are only my personal opinions. Moreover, four numbers cannot give any sort of reasonable picture of the contents of an entire book.

In the summaries, I tried to give a fair representation of all books, including those I didn't care for. I encourage you to read those summaries before making any sort of judgement on any of these books.

Book	Author	Useful Advice	Interesting Ideas	Content Density	Overall
Atomic Habits	James Clear	5	2	4	4
Better Than Before	Gretchen Rubin	4	5	5	5
Deep Work	Cal Newport	2	3	2	2
Dollars and Sense	Dan Ariely and Jeff Kreisler	4	5	5	4
Emotional Intelligence 2.0	Travis Bradbury and Jean Greaves	3	3	5	4
The 5 Second Rule	Mel Robbins	1	2	1	2
The Four Tendencies	Gretchen Rubin	4	5	4	5
Getting Back to Happy	Marc and Angel Chernoff	3	2	4	3
The Happiness Project	Gretchen Rubin	3	4	4	4
How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big	Scott Adams	2	5	4	2
How to Win Friends and Influence People	Dale Carnegie	5	4	3	5
Make Time	Jake Knapp and John Zeratsky	3	3	5	3
Make Your Bed	Admiral William McRaven	1	1	2	1
Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics	Dan Harris	4	2	4	3
Mind Hacking	John Hargrave	2	4	5	3
The Nature Fix	Florence Williams	2	2	1	1
Outer Order, Inner Calm	Gretchen Rubin	3	2	3	3
The Power of Habit	Charles Duhigg	4	5	3	5
SuperBetter	Jane McGonigal	4	5	5	5
The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People	Stephen Covey	4	3	3	4
Ten Percent Happier	Dan Harris	2	2	1	2
The Weight Loss Habit	Steven Ray Marks	5	5	5	5
When	Dan Pink	5	5	4	5
When to Jump	Mike Lewis	2	2	2	2

Books

[Atomic Habits by James Clear](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 5

Interesting Ideas: 2

Content Density: 4

Overall: 4

Summary and Review

[Atomic Habits](#) is a how-to guide on changing habits. It's premise is that you should take small steps every day to build or reinforce good habits

(or break bad ones), which will build up over time.

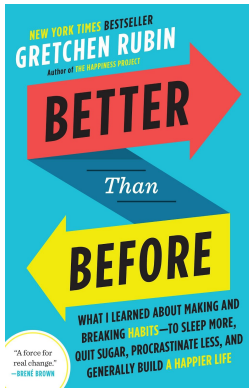
The "Atomic" in the title means small, or a single unit. Clear's approach is that by focusing on small habits, you will get 1% better every day, which will lead to compound growth of self-improvement.

I fully agree with this approach, and think this is a great book if you haven't read a lot of self-help. But if you have read a lot of

self-help, you'll likely have seen most of the ideas in this book elsewhere. Particularly in [Charles Duhigg's *The Power of Habit*](#).

See Also: [The Power of Habit by Charles Duhigg](#)

[Better Than Before by Gretchen Rubin](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 4

Interesting Ideas: 5

Content Density: 5

Overall: 5

Summary and Review

[Better Than Before](#) ties

self-improvement to habit formation.

Rubin explains that in times of stress, we fall back on our predetermined habits, whether those habits are good or bad. So it's important to form good habits. She also emphasizes the importance of scheduling: Blocking out specific time on the calendar for the good habits we want to form and keep.

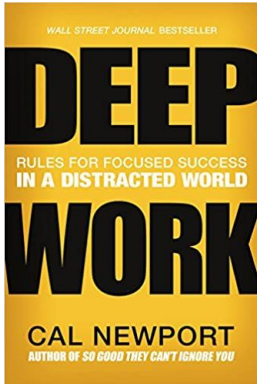
What's most unique about Rubin's approach is that she divides people into *Four Tendencies*, based on how they respond to inner and outer expectations. An Upholder follows both inner and outer expectations. An Obliger follows outer but not inner expectations. A Questioner follows inner but not outer expectations. And a Rebel follows neither inner nor outer

expectations. Understanding your tendency will help you in habit formation, and life in general. For example, an Obliger might make commitments to others, while a Questioner would make sure she understands the benefits for herself.

[Gretchen Rubin](#) is one of my favorite self-help authors, and this is my favorite book of hers. I like that she doesn't take a one-size-fits-all approach, and understands that what works for some people doesn't work for others. There's a lot of wonderful advice in here, along with guidance on how to select which pieces of advice are right for you.

See also: [The Four Tendencies by Gretchen Rubin](#); [The Happiness Project by Gretchen Rubin](#); [Outer Order, Inner Calm by Gretchen Rubin](#); [The Power of Habit by Charles Duhigg](#)

[Deep Work by Cal Newport](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 2

Interesting Ideas: 3

Content Density: 2

Overall: 2

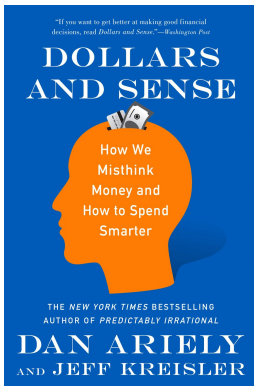
Summary and Review

[Deep Work](#) argues that people do their best at cognitively demanding tasks when they can engage in long uninterrupted periods of intense focus. Distractions like e-mail, work chats, social media, multitasking, responding to your boss, etc., prevent people from performing at their best. So you should set up your life to give you these long uninterrupted periods.

The issue with this book is that it's only really relevant for high-level knowledge workers who can set their own schedule, as well as the schedule of those around them, and don't have anyone relying on them for time-sensitive matters. That's not a high percentage of people. Most who read this book will just end up thinking, "Gee, it sure would be nice if I could do that."

The other problem with this book is that I have my doubts whether the central premise is actually correct. I know a lot of people swear by the Pomodoro technique of using short periods of intensely focused work interspersed with short breaks. Both sides could point to evidence as to why they are right, and I suspect different techniques work for different people. (I do think they're both correct in that multitasking and constant distractions will degrade your performance. But many people don't have enough power over their work environment to avoid these.)

[Dollars and Sense: How We Misthink Money and How to Spend Smarter by Dan Ariely and Jeff Kreisler](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 4

Interesting Ideas: 5

Content Density: 5

Overall: 4

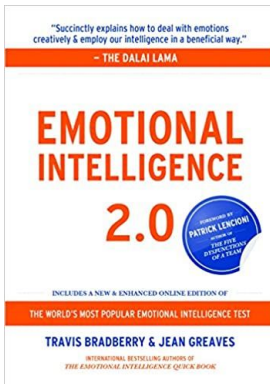
Summary and Review

[Dan Ariely](#) is known for his psychology/behavioral economics books in the [Predictably Irrational](#) series. In this much more pragmatic book, he talks about ways people behave irrationally when it comes to money. By identifying these cognitive traps, he helps you avoid them, and instead make better decisions. This isn't so much an investment guide - you can find tons of those of varying quality*. This is explaining how you should think about money in general, both so you will have more of it, and so you will be happier with respect to everything that involves money.

I think Ariely is brilliant, and it absolutely is worth following his advice when it comes to money. It will make you better off financially, happier, and less stressed.

* I'm not a financial adviser, but before I got into self-improvement, I went to Economics graduate school and was a high-level Accountant, so a couple quick pieces of advice regarding investments, and investment guides/advisers: 1. Never buy an individual stock, unless it's for fun with money you can afford to lose and you're treating it like a trip to Vegas. Any adviser/book/guru/website that tells you to buy individual stocks is incompetent and not someone you should listen to. 2. Never buy actively managed mutual funds, because index funds are superior in every way. Any adviser who avoids telling you about index funds or tries to convince you to buy actively managed mutual funds instead is trying to line their own pockets with your money, and you should run away. (If you don't know what index funds are, Ariely explains it in the book. Or any financial adviser can tell you. And if they can't/won't, find a different adviser.)

[Emotional Intelligence 2.0 By Travis Bradbury and Jean Graves](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 3

Interesting Ideas: 3

Content Density: 5

Overall: 4

Summary and Review

According to this book, people's Emotional Intelligence, or EQ, is a huge factor in determining their success - far more important than regular intelligence or IQ. This is something that is often ignored. But it is something that people can improve with diligent work.

The book splits EQ into four categories: Self Awareness, Self Management, Social Awareness, and Relationship Management. It includes a code to an online test to assess your EQ in each of these areas overall, and many exercises to help improve them. The heart of the book are these exercises, which are so numerous and content-dense that it's hard to summarize them.

One issue was that the assessment test was wildly inaccurate. It missed problems I know I have, and invented problems that were so far off the mark as to be comical. That's only a problem if you take the test seriously. But I think most people know what areas they need to improve on, which is why they were reading the book in the first place.

The bigger problem is that the exercises are so numerous and burdensome that readers are more likely to get overwhelmed than actually use them. Under my theory that self-improvement needs to be [easy to be effective](#), the way to get the most out of this book is to choose one specific aspect of your EQ that you want to improve, then pick one or two exercises related to that. Keep practicing just those exercises until you feel like you've made improvement. Then move on to another area and different exercises. But don't try to do more than one or two exercises at once, or else you'll end up quitting and accomplishing nothing.

[The Five Second Rule by Mel Robbins](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 1

Interesting Ideas: 2

Content Density: 1

Overall: 2

Summary and Review

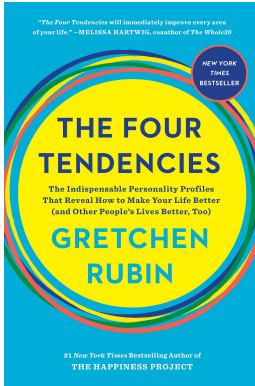
[The Five Second Rule](#) by Mel Robbins

says that if you have an instinct to act on a goal, you should move within five seconds. Once you actually take a physical motion, you're much more likely to keep going. This will prevent you from falling prey to any of the psychological tricks you might employ to talk yourself out of it. And the more you take action, the more courageous you'll become.

This is one of those books where a few-sentence summary tells you all you need to know. And I'm not really a fan of this advice. If your problem is that you're paralyzed with indecision, her strategy could be helpful. But if your problem is that you're overly impulsive, immediately acting on any whim is the exact

opposite of what you should be doing. And if you have any of the infinitely varied other problems that people could have, whether or not you should immediately act on an idea is going to depend on the specific idea.

[The Four Tendencies by Gretchen Rubin](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 4

Interesting Ideas: 5

Content Density: 4

Overall: 5

Summary and Review

[Gretchen Rubin](#) builds on the ideas she established in [Better Than Before](#), classifying people based on how they respond to expectations. An Upholder follows both inner and outer expectations. An Obliger follows outer but not inner expectations. A Questioner follows inner but not outer expectations. And a Rebel follows neither inner nor outer expectations. She includes a handy quiz on how to identify which tendency you fall into.

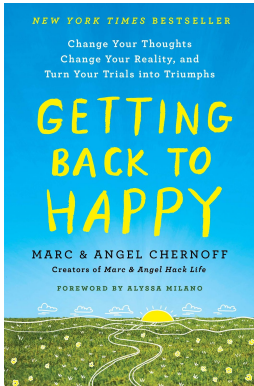
Rubin suggests that once you know your tendency, you can better plan how to live your life. An Obliger might tell someone to give them deadlines, or join a class so someone is expecting them to show up. A Questioner might take a little extra time to understand the reasons behind a rule, so they'll be better able

to follow it. She also has a lot of helpful advice on how to deal with others based on their tendencies. How to phrase requests, and how to not get frustrated when they handle things differently than you'd like.

I think that anytime you try to separate people into neat buckets, there's going to be exceptions. One major flaw in Rubin's system is that it doesn't account for people with mental health difficulties. How someone with ADHD, anxiety, or depression issues responds to expectations isn't going to neatly map to this framework. But despite these flaws, there's a lot of useful advice here in how to more effectively deal with your own life, and how to better interact with others.

See also: [Better Than Before by Gretchen Rubin](#); [The Happiness Project by Gretchen Rubin](#); [Other Order, Inner Calm by Gretchen Rubin](#)

[Getting Back to Happy by Marc and Angel Chernoff](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 3

Interesting Ideas: 2

Content Density: 4

Overall: 3

Summary and Review

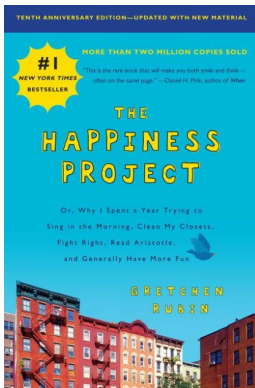
Marc and Angel Chernoff's [Getting Back to Happy](#) is based on lessons they learned from their personal journey.

They reached a rock-bottom moment where they were depressed and realized their life was nothing like what they wanted. They managed to turn things around and become wildly successful self-help gurus.

They focus on rituals (which is the term they use for habits), prioritizing, letting go of what's holding you back, self-love, accepting change and uncertainty, finding motivation, relationships, and forming a positive environment.

Their approach is rather scattershot and generic, without much of a unifying theme. However, I do agree with most of what they say, and they present it in an easy to follow way. If you've read a lot of self-help, you won't find anything you haven't already seen. But if you're new to the genre, this is a good overview of pretty good advice.

[The Happiness Project by Gretchen Rubin](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 3

Interesting Ideas: 4

Content Density: 4

Overall: 4

Summary and Review

In [Gretchen Rubin's](#) first self help book, she describes her personal experience where for a year she spent each month making a concerted effort to improve a specific aspect of her happiness. The idea was that “be happier” was too vague a goal to be useful. Breaking it down into smaller goals, and giving each of them specific actions, where she could measure the results, would be much more helpful.

For example, her goal in February was to improve her marriage. Her actions were to quit nagging, don't expect praise, take time to be silly, don't make her husband her dumping ground, give proofs of love, think of small treats or courtesies, and leave

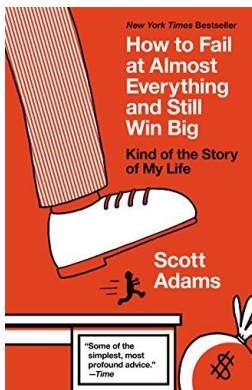
things unsaid. She made a daily chart for how she did in each of those things.

The twelve monthly goals were: Boost her energy; Improve her marriage; Work on career and leisure; Be a better parent; cultivate friendships; challenge herself; spend money to boost happiness; consider matters of spirit; spend more time with books; find psychological shortcuts; lighten her attitude; act with greater love.

Rubin is an engaging writer, and this well-written book catapulted her to the upper echelons of the self-help world. The idea of spending each month working to improve one aspect of your life is certainly interesting. However, I think that keeping a daily chart on how you did in seven different actions or qualities is probably going to be too burdensome for most people. If you try your own happiness project, I would suggest you simplify it to be something that you'll be more likely to maintain for the full year.

See also: [*Better Than Before* by Gretchen Rubin](#); [*The Four Tendencies* by Gretchen Rubin](#); [*Outer Order, Inner Calm* by Gretchen Rubin](#)

[How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big](#) [by Scott Adams](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 2

Interesting Ideas: 5

Content Density: 4

Overall: 2

Summary and Review

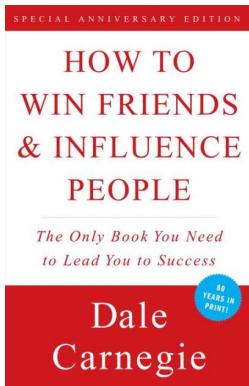
This book by [Scott Adams](#), the cartoonist behind *Dilbert*, is half autobiography, half self-help. He recounts how he became enormously successful, and attributes that to the various strategies that he lays out for the readers.

Chief among these strategies is to focus on systems rather than goals. If you focus on putting the right systems in place, then good things will happen in your life. Whereas if you focus on goals, you're much less likely to achieve those goals, or any other good things.

He emphasizes the importance of developing a *talent stack*. It's better to be pretty good at multiple complementary skills than to be the best at one thing. He has tips toward building a success-oriented attitude. Plus some rather non-standard diet advice, and downright bizarre theories about how we're living in a computer simulation that you can manipulate through the use of affirmations.

This book is a mix of good advice, totally bonkers off-the-wall stuff, and everything in between. The idea of systems-not-goals is very powerful, and something that quite a few self-help authors have picked up from Adams after this book came out. Whereas the tips on manipulating the computer simulation that makes up reality - wha? There's also the issue of Adams giving what I call super-achiever advice, as I explain in my [Don't Challenge Yourself](#) essay. He has huge amounts of talent, willpower, confidence, entrepreneurship, energy, and fearlessness. You shouldn't expect that what works for him is going to work for you.

[How to Win Friends and Influence People by Dale Carnegie](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 5

Interesting Ideas: 4

Content Density: 3

Overall: 5

Summary and Review

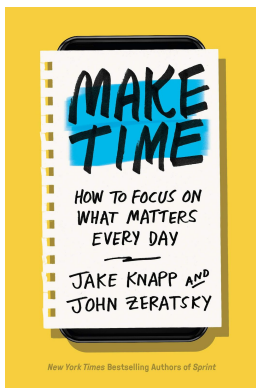
Probably the oldest self-improvement book that is still relevant today, and still one of the best. Carnegie clearly lays out why kindness, friendliness, and benevolence are good not just for their own sake, to make a better world, for altruistic reasons, or because they make you feel good, (though all of those are true). They are the best course of action for pragmatic reasons as well - they lead to better outcomes for you.

He explains how nobody ever wins an argument. How agreeing with people will make them want to agree with you. How genuinely caring about someone makes them care about you. How being interested in them makes them like you. Why you

should be willing to admit you are wrong, even if you think you are right. And many other brilliant pieces of advice to improve interpersonal communication.

This is the single book that has had the biggest influence on my life, in terms of actively changing the way I thought and behaved. I highly recommend it to everyone.

[Make Time by Jake Knapp and John Zeratsky](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 3

Interesting Ideas: 3

Content Density: 5

Overall: 3

Summary and Review

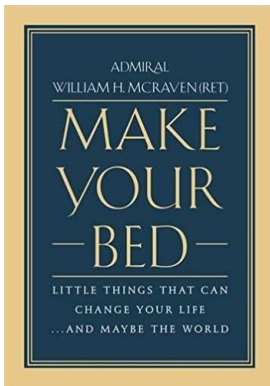
Make Time recognizes that there are only so many hours in the day, and is about how to remove the unimportant distractions so you can focus on what you really care about. It contains 87 individual strategies to do this, of varying degrees of effectiveness and practicality.

The main idea is to avoid the “busy bandwagon” of doing a lot of stuff without having much to show for it. Instead, you should pick a “highlight” of the most important thing you want to do each day, and block out a specific time for it so you can maintain “laser focus.” You should also avoid “infinity pools,”

such as TV, social media, video games, or the news, which can consume as much of your time as you let them.

The problem with the book is that many of the strategies are things that normal people just aren't going to do. They're things like "Get rid of your TV," "Don't use social media, ever," and "Give up sugar completely." Many of the suggestions are also based on the assumption that the readers are high-level knowledge workers with the power to set their own schedule and no time-sensitive responsibilities, which describes very few people. Though there are some good pieces of advice mixed in. Like limiting social media to certain times, avoiding the news, or becoming a fair-weather-fan so you don't waste time watching your favorite sports team when they're doing poorly.

[Make Your Bed by Admiral William McRaven](#)



Useful Advice: 1
Interesting Ideas: 1
Content Density: 2
Overall: 1

Summary and Review

Admiral McRaven recounts life lessons learned from his time in the Navy SEALs. The idea behind the titular “make your bed” is that starting every morning with a completed task will give you the energy to complete many other tasks throughout the day.

Other pieces of advice are to work hard, never give up, don’t let fear stop you, dig deep inside yourself, get help from loved ones, don’t give in to self-pity and depression, and act with integrity.

While the stories he tells about his SEAL training are interesting, the advice he gives is rather generic. And he doesn’t give any

insight into *how* to implement any of this advice. He just tells you to do them. This book essentially boils down to “You can be a super-achiever if you are a super-achiever,” and is not particularly helpful.

[Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics](#) by Dan Harris and Jeff Warren

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DAN HARRIS
AND JEFF WARREN WITH CARLYE ADLER



MEDITATION
FOR FIDGETY
SKEPTICS

"If your mind has a mind of its own, this is the book for you! With humor, generosity, and devastating candor, Dan Harris makes meditation make sense."
—MARK EPSTEIN, M.D., author of *Going to the Sun Without Falling Apart*

Ratings:

Useful Advice: 4

Interesting Ideas: 2

Content Density: 4

Overall: 3

Summary and Review

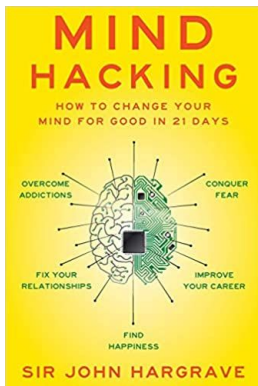
In a follow up to his book [Ten Percent Happier](#), [Dan Harris](#) goes much further in depth about meditation. Framed in the story of a cross-country road trip he took to promote his *Ten Percent Happier* app, he discusses the science and benefits of meditation, and explains why it's for everyone, not just new-age hippies. He discusses how it's easy for beginners to start meditating, and relieves any fears or concerns people may have.

Additionally, the book gives dozens of specific meditations for the reader to try out, suitable for different contexts, situations, time commitments, and skill levels.

There are bajillions of beginner's guides to meditation that you can buy or find online. I've [written one myself](#). But Harris's book is an excellent resource to take you from someone who has never meditated before to someone who is highly adept.

See Also: [Ten Percent Happier by Dan Harris](#)

[Mind Hacking by John Hargrave](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 2

Interesting Ideas: 4

Content Density: 5

Overall: 3

Summary and Review

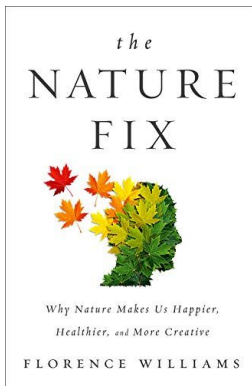
[Mind Hacking](#) recounts [John Hargrave's](#) efforts to improve his mental outlook, after he realized drugs, alcohol, and a propensity toward pranks were steering him toward disaster. Using his computer science background, he tried to reprogram his brain as if it were a computer. This led him to create his own system that is a mix of mindfulness, habit formation, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, visualization, self-measurement, and a bunch of other random stuff thrown in.

This makes it a very difficult book to summarize. There's so many different ideas, and they're all over the place. A lot of the suggestions are interesting, and some of them are helpful. But

most of them are not going to be easy for people to follow. Perhaps Hargrave's mind works like a computer, but most people's minds work like a human.

Moreover, the book drastically overpromises what it can do for you. The notion that you can "overcome addictions, conquer fear, fix your relationships, improve your career, and find happiness," all in 21 days, is wildly unrealistic. Hargrave is no doubt a super-achiever, but I strongly suspect that the gains he saw from following his own advice took years, not three weeks.

[The Nature Fix by Florence Williams](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 2

Interesting Ideas: 2

Content Density: 1

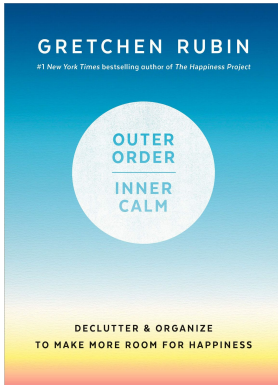
Overall: 1

Summary and Review:

The thesis of [The Nature of Fix](#) is that spending time outdoors will make you happier and healthier.

Williams presents evidence, scientific papers, case studies, and reviews of other cultures' attitudes toward the outdoors. Perhaps you may find that interesting. But in terms of what is useful for improving your life, the one-sentence summary above is sufficient to get you all the value you need from this book. Spend more time in nature and you'll be happier and healthier. That's it.

[Outer Order, Inner Calm by Gretchen Rubin](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 3

Interesting Ideas: 2

Content Density: 3

Overall: 3

Summary and Review

[Gretchen Rubin](#) turns her obsession with decluttering into a book, after a friend remarked that cleaning out her fridge gave her the confidence to find a new job. Rubin suggests that having a neat and tidy home will improve your mental state, reduce stress and anxiety, and give you a better sense of self-efficacy. Beyond this thesis, the bulk of the book is a kind of Marie Kondo-light, with tips on decluttering, getting rid of unneeded items, and organizing your home to be more efficient.

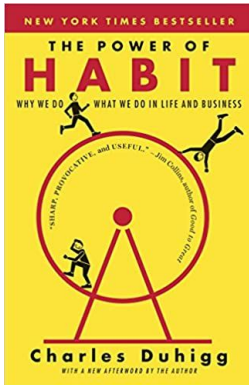
She suggests reviewing each of your possessions and asking if it's something you need, use, or love. If not, get rid of it. It helps to do this with a friend to keep you on track. Don't keep

something because it was a gift - the person who gave it to you probably doesn't know if you still have it. If you're saving something because you might use it or repair it in the future, set a deadline, and get rid of it if you haven't used/fixed it by then. Make sure everything has a place, and that things you use often are accessible.

While I adore [Gretchen Rubin](#), I think this is a rare misfire. Her central premise, that having a tidy home will improve your mindset, is only true for certain kinds of people. And her specific advice on decluttering wasn't particularly original. However, the book is fairly short, and if the premise intrigues you, it's worth a quick read.

See also: [Better Than Before by Gretchen Rubin](#); [The Four Tendencies by Gretchen Rubin](#); [The Happiness Project by Gretchen Rubin](#)

[The Power of Habit by Charles Duhigg](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 4

Interesting Ideas: 5

Content Density: 3

Overall: 5

Summary and Review

[The Power of Habit](#) completely transformed the self-help genre.

Essentially every worthwhile self-improvement book that's been written since it came out builds on its ideas. It explains how habits work, how they guide our lives, and how to change them.

The key idea is that habits have a *habit loop*, which consists of a cue, routine, and reward. A habit is formed by repeating these enough to create neural pathways in the brain. The more you repeat the loop, the stronger the pathways are, and once formed, they never go away. So forming habits takes repetition, and changing them takes finding ways to substitute new

routines into the existing loop. This isn't a matter of willpower, grit, gumption, or character. It's immutable biology.

This book totally changed the way I thought about self-improvement. It heavily influenced my [own book about weight loss](#). (I lost the weight long before I read this, but figured out my methods through a mix of trial-and-error and luck. *The Power of Habit* gave me the theory to explain *why* my methods worked.) I highly recommend it for everyone.

The only flaw in the book is that much of it is focused on the habits of organizations and societies, which is interesting but not very useful. However there's individual advice sprinkled into these sections, so you still need to read them.

Also, when you read this book, be sure to read the appendix. This has an example/walkthrough on changing a habit, and is probably the most important and helpful part of the book.

See Also: [Atomic Habits by James Clear](#); [Better Than Before by Gretchen Rubin](#); [The Weight Loss Habit by Steven Ray Marks](#)

[Superbetter: The Power of Living Gamefully](#) [Jane McGonigal](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 4

Interesting Ideas: 5

Content Density: 5

Overall: 5

Summary and Review:

[SuperBetter](#) gives advice that is radically different from any other self-help book I've ever read. (Not necessarily

disagreeing with other advice. Just focusing on its own thing.) It presents a lot of compelling evidence for the contrarian view that games - especially video games - are beneficial for your mental and physical health. They reduce pain and trauma, increase resiliency, build a mindset directed toward overcoming challenges, strengthen motivation and perseverance, and when played with others, increase social connections and empathy.

McGonigal takes things a step further by suggesting we should treat our personal development *as if it were a video game*, a

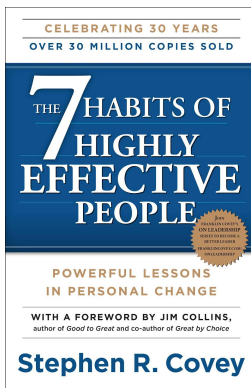
game she calls SuperBetter. We should give ourselves a Secret Identity. We should treat things that make us feel stronger, healthier, and happier as Power-Ups. (Such as petting a cat, our favorite song, or a bit of exercise.) We should consider things that hinder our growth “Bad Guys.” (Such as negative feelings, unhealthy snacks, or people who are mean to us.) We should seek out Allies - family, friends, and peer communities who will help us. Treat daily goals as Quests. And difficult (but attainable) goals as Epic Wins. And then treat your journey of growth as an Adventure, where you monitor your progress as if you’re keeping score in the game. This could be for a limited time, if you have a specific goal such as recovering from an injury or running a marathon. Or it could be lifelong, if you just want to live better.

The ideas in [SuperBetter](#) are extremely interesting. How useful they are will depend on how easily you’re able to shift your mindset to match the gameful outlook prescribed in the book. It’s very difficult for many people to choose to change the way they think about things. That was my own experience. I thought the techniques in the book *sounded* great, and they weren’t very burdensome. But I found myself unable to implement them.

But you may find it easier than I did. And even if you aren’t able to adopt the whole SuperBetter methodology, there are a lot of useful tidbits in here. For example, it explains how visual puzzle games like Candy Crush or Tetris can be used to prevent anxiety

attacks, which *is* something I have adopted. So I do highly recommend this book.

[The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 4

Interesting Ideas: 3

Content Density: 3

Overall: 4

Summary and Review

[Seven Habits](#) is one of the most famous self-help books, and still holds a lot of relevance and enduring popularity.

One issue with the book is that [Covey](#) defines a lot of words in non-standard ways, so that if you were to just read the chapter titles, you'd likely misunderstand what the book is about. To start, the first six habits aren't really habits. They aren't things you regularly *do*, but instead are about how you think and who you are as a person.

Habit One is “Be Proactive.” This is not the normal definition of proactive; rather, it’s meant as an antonym of ‘reactive.’ It is saying that you have control over your thoughts, emotions, and own mind. Regardless of what happens to you, how you react is your own choice.

Habit Two is to “Begin With the End in Mind,” which means to imagine what you’d like people to say about you at your funeral, use that exercise to determine what your principles should be, then use those principles to develop a personal mission statement, and then center your life around those principles and mission statement.

Habit Three is to “Put First Things First,” which means spend as much time as possible working on important but non-urgent tasks. This will prevent problems from turning into important **and** urgent tasks, or crises. And you want to minimize time spent on unimportant tasks, whether they’re urgent or not.

Habit Four is “Think Win-Win,” where you try to resolve disputes in a way that both parties end up better off. This is distinguished from Win-Lose (“I’ll make myself better off by screwing the other guy”), Lose-Win (“I’ll sacrifice myself to give the other guy everything he wants,” which you see in dysfunctional relationships and poorly run businesses), and Lose-Lose (“I’m willing to hurt myself if it hurts the other guy too,” which sometimes happens in divorces, lawsuits, and other cases where people are guided by hate and anger.) But Win-Win is also different from Compromise. A compromise is where both

sides sacrifice a little to meet in the middle. Win-Win is looking for a creative solution to make everyone better off.

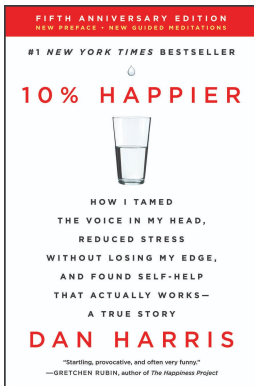
Habit Five is “Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood.” Don’t tell people what you think. Learn what they think, make sure you understand it, and make sure they know you understand it, before you push your point.

Habit Six is “Synergize.” Which means effective delegation, listening to other people’s ideas even when they conflict with yours, teaching, learning, and taking advantage of the amazing array of human experience, skills, and outlook to build something far better than could be done individually.

Habit Seven is “Sharpen the Saw,” which means to maintain your physical and mental health so that you are capable of following the other habits.

Seven Habits is well worth reading. Some of the advice falls into the super-achiever, “Just be perfect,” category and isn’t very helpful. But there is a lot of useful stuff mixed in. And it gives a good overview of ideals we should be aiming for.

[Ten Percent Happier by Dan Harris](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 2

Interesting Ideas: 2

Content Density: 1

Overall: 2

Summary and Review

[Ten Percent Happier](#) is part self-help book, part autobiography of newscaster turned meditation advocate [Dan Harris](#).

Telling the story of his career, it focuses on an incident where he had a cocaine-induced on-air panic attack while he was anchoring the news. This led him to both kick his drug addiction and go on a spiritual journey where he discovered meditation.

The rest of the book is just advocating meditation. He doesn't promise it will completely transform your life, but it will, as the title implies, make you ten percent happier.

While I agree with the premise of the book that meditation is an easy way to make yourself happier, I can't recommend taking the time to read this. You could get just as much value from reading a one-sentence summary as from the entire book. Instead, I would suggest reading Harris's much better follow-up [*Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics*](#), which is filled with actionable advice on meditating and specific meditations.

See Also: [*Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics by Dan Harris*](#)

[The Weight Loss Habit by Steven Ray Marks](#)

THE WEIGHT LOSS HABIT



The No BS, No Gimmick,
(Sort of) Easy Way to Lose Weight
and Keep It Off Forever

STEVEN RAY MARKS

Ratings:

Useful Advice: 5

Interesting Ideas: 5

Content Density: 5

Overall: 5

Summary and Review

[The Weight Loss Habit](#) tells the story of how after spending half his life obese, Marks figured out strategies to make weight loss easier, and has kept the weight off for 20 years. The key is to find methods that don't rely on willpower, and can be easily built into habits that can be maintained for the rest of your life.

Most people fail at losing weight because the strategies they attempt are too *hard* to follow long-term. Then they blame themselves, but really the problem was with the diet. Instead, weight loss should use methods that real people who struggle

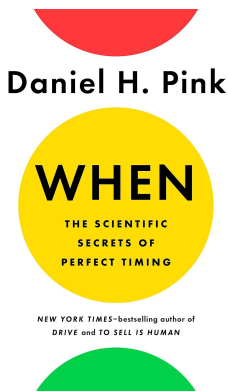
with their weight will realistically be able to maintain for the rest of their life. Which means they have to be easy.

The titular Weight Loss Habit is to “think before you eat, make a rational decision about what and how much to eat, and then celebrate and take pride in your good decision.” He explains how to change your attitude toward food to help you to eat less of it, and lose weight while still being able to enjoy your favorite dishes and desserts. He then lays out 39 specific strategies that will help make losing weight and keeping it off for life easier.

This is the greatest book that was ever written. You should buy ten copies of it. No, make that fifty. And then buy fifty more copies for every person you’ve ever met, whether or not they need to lose weight, and regardless of how many copies they already own. The book is **that** good.

Okay, I may be a teensy bit biased.

[When by Dan Pink](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 5
 Interesting Ideas: 5
 Content Density: 4
 Overall: 5

Summary and Review:

[When](#) examines people's circadian rhythms. By gaining a better understanding of when is the best times to do certain tasks, we will be more effective, get more done, and be happier. This doesn't take any willpower. It just means moving things around on our schedule to match our bodies' and brains' cycles. In fact, it will result in us doing less work rather than more, so it's an easy big win.

People have a *chronotype*, or natural cycle. There are *Owls*, who prefer late nights, *Larks*, who prefer mornings, and *Third Birds*, who are in between. For Third Birds, who are most common, and for Larks, they are best at deep thinking and analytic tasks in the morning, fall into a lull in the early afternoon, and are

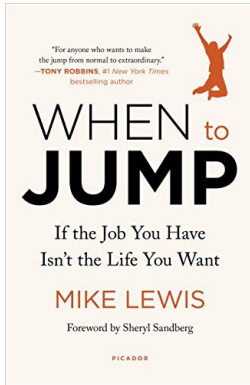
best at creative tasks in the late afternoon/evening. So you should schedule tasks to match up to these patterns, with boring/mindless drudge work filling in the early afternoon lull.

It also talks about the importance of breaks. Your mind does not work at its peak if you just try to power through non-stop. Taking a break every hour or so, and a longer break around lunchtime, will let your brain restore itself and work more effectively when you get back to work, ultimately resulting in you getting more done. Qualities that make a break more effective are stepping away from technology, moving around, going outside (especially in nature), and talking to someone about something non-work-related.

He also talks about the best time to have caffeine (about 90 minutes after you wake up, and in the early afternoon lull), and how 20 minute naps can be restorative. (But longer naps are counterproductive.)

There's a lot of very useful, easy, evidence-based ways to improve your life, and I highly recommend it.

[When to Jump by Mike Lewis](#)



Ratings:

Useful Advice: 2

Interesting Ideas: 2

Content Density: 2

Overall: 2

Summary and Review

[When to Jump](#) collects stories from people who left their stable but unfulfilling jobs in order to pursue their dreams. It suggests various things to consider, both in terms of reasons to leave your current jobs and how likely you are to achieve the dream you are leaving it for.

A lot of self-help advice is wildly impractical, overly optimistic nonsense that will [ruin your life](#) if you try to follow it. Stuff like “Follow your dreams,” “Never give up,” “Something’s only worth doing if it’s extraordinary,” “Don’t let anyone doubt you.” The problem with these cliches is that they have zero connection to how realistic your dream actually is. How good are you at it, including the less fun aspects of turning your

endeavor into a business? Is there a market for it? Will you be able to make enough money to support yourself and your family?

Lewis does give some thought to these pragmatic questions, but in my opinion, not nearly enough. There's an enormous amount of survivorship bias in this book. Nearly all of the case studies are from people who succeeded, even though the reality is that the overwhelming majority of people who "jump," or leave their secure job to follow a dream, will fail. The book could have greatly benefited from more examples of people whose jumps didn't work out, both to give a better understanding of the consequences and to give examples of what not to do.

Looking at the example of Lewis himself can be instructive in what the book is lacking. Lewis left his investment banking job to be a professional squash player. But when he did this, he was 24, had no responsibilities, had saved up a bunch of money, and was only planning for this to be a temporary thing. So he was able to spend a year and a half couch-surfing through Europe while earning a negative income playing squash, until he burned through his savings and went back to investment banking with cool stories of his adventures. Very few people have a similar lack of responsibilities or the ability to spend eighteen months with a negative income.

The book does have some useful advice, and is worth reading if you're considering leaving your career. But it only gives half the

picture, and you would need to give much more thought to the consequences of failure before you are truly ready to jump.

Final Thoughts

I hope you found these summaries and reviews helpful and enjoyable to read.

If you haven't already, make sure to sign up for [Five Boosts by Self Helping Yourself newsletter](#). Every week you'll receive links to five articles on easy ways to make your life better. You can also follow [@FiveBoosts](#) on Twitter.

Be sure to check [Self Helping Yourself](#) for my longform blog posts. Follow me on Twitter at [@YourselfHelping](#) and Instagram at [@SelfHelpingYourself](#).

If you have any thoughts, comments, concerns, or books you'd like to suggest or see added, you can tweet at me at [@YourselfHelping](#), or e-mail me at stevenraymarks@gmail.com.

New versions of this e-book with additional summaries/reviews will be released from time to time. These will be made available to current subscribers, so make sure to stay subscribed to the Five Boosts newsletter.

And if you're interested in weight loss, be sure to check out my book [The Weight Loss Habit: The No BS, No Gimmick, \(Sort Of\) Easy Way to Lose Weight and Keep It Off Forever](#), available for Kindle and paperback.

