

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Choose to Choose

The first choice.

### Five-Minute Takeoff

#1 tip to beat procrastination.

### Focus on Strengths

To thrive.

### Happiness Boosters

What are yours?

### The Failure Hall of Fame

Let's join! :)

### Golden Rule +

Be nice to those you love the most.

### Creating Reality

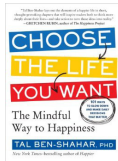
By how you see it.

### Meaningful Endurance

Is key to optimizing. How's yours?

*"We are used to thinking of making decisions as the hard part. But the truth is that often the more difficult thing is realizing that there is a decision to be made, that we have a choice. In fact, at every moment in our life we have a choice."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar



## Choose the Life You Want

101 Ways to Create Your Own Road to Happiness

BY TAL BEN-SHAHAR · THE EXPERIMENT © 2012 · 292 PAGES

“But the dramas of life’s ‘big decisions’ (which, almost by definition, are few and far between) should not hide the fact that in life we face choices all the time. *Every moment of our waking life* we face choices whose cumulative effect on us is just as great, if not greater, than the effect of the big decisions. I can choose whether to sit up straight or stooped; whether to say a warm word to my partner or give her a sour look; whether to appreciate my health, my friend, and my lunch, or to take them all for granted; whether to choose to choose or to remain oblivious to the choices that are there for the making. Individually, these choices may not seem important, but together they are the very bricks that make up the road we create for ourselves.”

~ Tal Ben-Shahar from *Choose the Life You Want*

[Tal Ben-Shahar](#) is one of my favorite authors and teachers.

One of the leaders of the positive psychology movement, his classes on “Positive Psychology” and “The Psychology of Leadership” were among the largest courses in Harvard’s history, attracting a total of 1,400 students—approximately 20 percent of all Harvard undergraduates.

Tal does a great job of integrating the rigor of the science of happiness with the fun of self-help and this is the third Note we’ve done on his great books. Check out Notes on [Happier](#) + [The Pursuit of Perfect](#) (now called *Being Happy*) for more.

Drawing on the latest psychological research, this book walks us through 101 choices we make throughout our lives and, as with his other books, is packed with wisdom.

I’m excited to share a few of my favorite Big Ideas so let’s jump straight in!

## CHOOSE TO CHOOSE

“When the injunction to just live our life becomes a license not to choose, we end up being pulled along by *others’* choices, simply behaving the way we always have in the past, passively reacting to life rather than actively creating the life that we really want to be living. To make the most of our life, we must first of all *choose to choose*—this is the fundamental choice underlying all choices. We must commit ourselves to the idea that there are far more possibilities than we normally see, and then to the effort that it takes to examine these possibilities and choose the one that is best for us.”

This is Chapter #1.

We need to “Choose to choose.”

It’s tempting to think that the quality of our lives comes down to getting the “big decisions” right. But that’s just not the case. It’s far more important to bring more awareness to the fact that we’re making a choice every.single.moment of every.single.day!

*"I have a choice and I choose to choose."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

Here's how [Matthew Kelly](#) puts it in his great book [The Rhythm of Life](#) (see Notes): "Everything is a choice. This is life's greatest truth and its hardest lesson. It is a great truth because it reminds us of our power. Not power over others, but the often untapped power to be ourselves and to live the life we have imagined."

*It is a hard lesson, because it causes us to realize we have chosen the life we are living right now. It is perhaps frightening for us to think that we have chosen to live our life exactly as it is today. Frightening because we may not like what we find when we look at our lives today. But it is also liberating, because we can now begin to choose what we will find when we look at our life in the tomorrows that lie un-lived before us. What will you see when you look at your life ten years from now? What will you choose?"*

In his great book [The Compound Effect](#) (see Notes), SUCCESS magazine publisher [Darren Hardy](#) tells us: "The Compound Effect is the principle of reaping huge rewards from a series of small, smart choices. What's most interesting about this process to me is that, even though the results are massive, the steps, in the moment, don't feel significant. Whether you're using this strategy for improving your health, relationships, finances, or anything else for that matter, the changes are so subtle, they're almost imperceptible. These small changes offer little or no immediate result, no big win, no obvious I-told-you-so payoff. So why bother?"

*Most people get tripped up by the simplicity of the Compound Effect. ... What they don't realize is that these small, seemingly insignificant steps completed consistently over time will create a radical difference."*

In short, Hardy tells us: "Your life is the product of your moment-to-moment choices."

*"Self-concept is destiny."*

~ Nathaniel Branden

Back to you.

How can you shed a little more light on your moment-to-moment choices?

Here's to the most important choice: Choosing to choose!!!

## THE FIVE-MINUTE TAKEOFF

"Fortunately, the research into procrastination has also identified practical ways that can help overcome the tendency to procrastinate. The single most important technique is called 'the five-minute takeoff.' It consists, simply, of *starting* to do the thing you have been putting off, no matter how little you feel like doing it. Procrastinators often believe that to do something one has to truly *want* to do it—to be in the right mood, to feel inspired. This is not the case. Usually, to get the job done, it is enough merely to begin doing it—the initial action kick-starts the process and often brings about more action."

The five-minute takeoff.

Tal tells us this is the #1 way to deal with procrastination. It's awesome.

The next time you're feeling stuck and you're tempted to procrastinate, first realize that you're at a choice point.

The choice (as per the title of this chapter) is:

Procrastinate

—or—

Just do it!

Then, quite simply, just start.

Turn off the part of your brain that thinks you need to \*feel\* like it to do it.

And, just do it.

*"The truth is that there are no shortcuts, no getting around the real work—the daily effort and struggle—that is required for living a full and fulfilling life."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

\*Cue Captain's voice\* → "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking. Although motivation was low, we've decided to embrace the five-minute takeoff and look forward to a great, productive session. Please buckle your seatbelts and prepare for awesome."

Here's to the five-minute takeoff!

## FOCUS ON STRENGTHS

*"Assuming the posture of how we would be if we were more assertive and energized in fact boosts our confidence and invigorates us. Our behavior changes our attitude."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

"Individuals who invest in their strengths are happier and more successful. This does not mean that we should ignore our weaknesses, but, rather, that our primary focus ought to be that which we are naturally good at. In the words of leadership expert Peter Drucker, 'Only when you operate from strengths can you achieve true excellence.'

The kind of questions that I have to ask myself to discover my strengths are: What are my strengths? What I am naturally good at? Where do my talents reside? What are my unique abilities? These questions are significant for choosing general life goals (being a writer, becoming a teacher, pursuing a career in law, and so on) as well as for choosing to apply my strengths in the immediate future (prepare a speech for my employees, hone my math skills, plan a family vacation, and so on)."

Tal shares another Drucker gem to kick off this chapter: "It's abilities, not disabilities, that count."

And Tal tells us: "We need to invest in our weaknesses so that we can survive in the world; we need to invest in our strengths so that we can thrive."

Happy people focus on their strengths.

What are *your* strengths?

If you're feelin' it, take some time and reflect on Tal's great questions above to discover your strengths and identify more ways to integrate them into your life more consistently!

Here's another good thing to know:

## HAPPINESS BOOSTERS

*"The real enemy of high performance is not stress . . . the problem is the absence of disciplined, intermittent recovery."*

~ Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz

"In the past, I often reached a point where I felt depleted, when I had little enthusiasm for work (and sometimes even for life in general). The best cure, I found, was to inject a few happiness boosters into my daily routine. Today, rather than waiting for my energy levels to drop dangerously low before I take a break, I incorporate instant gratification into my life on a regular basis. These infusions of moments of joy do not merely make me feel better in the moment, they often create a current of enthusiasm and energy that helps me become more productive, more creative, happier."

The challenge, as it often is, is to find the right balance between delaying gratification, and grabbing it. I leave that to you..."

In [Happier](#), Tal walks us through four primary happiness archetypes.

In short, we have the Rat Racer (who is always delaying gratification and seeks happiness in the future), the Hedonist (who is all about pleasure right *now!*), the Nihilist (who has given up hope for pleasure now or in the future) and the Happy person (who experiences happiness now while pursuing future goals as well).

It's easy to fall into the Rat Racer-mode where we're constantly delaying gratification and, unfortunately, rarely experiencing it. (You may have noticed. Hah!)

One key practice to keep our enthusiasm and joy high?

*"If I had to limit my advice on healthier living to just one tip, it would be simply to learn how to breathe correctly."*

~ Andrew Weil

Engage in what Tal calls "happiness boosters"—bite-size activities that elevate your mood. These mini-breaks give us the fuel we need to continue to rock it with energy and zest.

Tal's happiness boosters include listening to inspiring music, taking a meditation break, reading poetry or fiction and stuff like that.

Mine include enjoying a few deep breaths, lying down and enjoying a "napitation," watching a movie, going on a hike and even just looking at the mountains outside my office window.

You?

Here's to seizing the joy in this moment fueling our journey!

## THE FAILURE HALL OF FAME

"When we hear about extremely successful people, we mostly hear about their great accomplishments—not about the many mistakes they made and the failures they experienced along the way. In fact, most successful people throughout history are also those who have had the most failures. That is no coincidence. People who achieve great feats, no matter what field, understand that failure is not a stumbling block but a stepping-stone on the road to success. There is no success without risk and failure. We often fail to see this truth because the outcome is more visible than the process—we see the final success and not the many failures that led to it.

When I acknowledge that fulfilling my potential must involve some failure, I no longer run away from risks and challenges. The choice is a simple one: Learn to fail, or fail to learn."

That's from a chapter on the choice:

Avoid Making Mistakes by Not Trying

—or—

Learn from failure

As Tal advises, *"The choice is a simple one: Learn to fail, or fail to learn."*

Although a *simple* choice, that still doesn't make it an *easy* choice, eh?! :)

That lizard-brain of ours screams at us to avoid the pain of failure at all costs and, as a result, puts a very tight lid on our potential.

Remembering that EVERYONE (!!) we admire has experienced a ton of failure en route to their success is incredibly empowering.

Tal shares some stories from members of the "failure hall of fame."

He tells us that Thomas Edison had 1,093 patents to his name—more than anyone in history. And... He failed tens of thousands (!!!) of times. It's easy to overlook, but how else do you figure out \*that\* much stuff?!

Per Tal: "Edison himself, however, did not see these experiments as failures. When he was working on one of his inventions, a storage battery, someone pointed out to him that he had failed ten thousand times. 'I have not failed,' responded Edison, 'I've just found ten thousand ways that won't work.' Recognizing the real path to his accomplishments, Edison remarked, 'I failed my way to success.'"

Other members of Tal's failure hall of fame include such giants as Babe Ruth (home run king AND strike out king), and Abraham Lincoln (failed in business several times + nervous breakdown at 27 + lost 8 elections).

Spotlight back on you: Are there parts of your life where fear is holding you back? How can you take a step out of your comfort zone and in the direction of your potential?

*"Psychologists use the term cognitive restructuring to describe our ability to look at a situation from different perspectives."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

*"To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily. Not to dare, is to lose oneself."*

~ Soren Kierkegaard

P.S. All this reminds me of Walter Russell who, among many other things, sculpted an extraordinary bust of Edison. In [The Man Who Tapped the Secrets of the Universe](#) (see Notes), he tells us: "I have had my share of what one calls defeat, in plenty. I have made and lost fortunes and seen great plans of mine topple through my own errors of judgment or through other causes... But I do not recognize these as defeats. They are but interesting experiences of life. They are valuable stepping stones to success. Defeat is a condition which one must accept in order to give it reality. I refuse to give it reality by accepting it. In my philosophy I have written these words: Defeat I shall not know. It shall not touch me. I will meet it with true thinking. Resisting it will be my strengthening. But if, perchance, the day will give to me the bitter cup, it will sweeten in the drinking."

Amen.

## GOLDEN RULE +

"Often we save our best behavior for strangers. We tend to take greater liberties with those who are closest to us—those who care about us most and about whom we care—than we do with total strangers. We may say painful or hurtful things to family members; we may act hostile to our partner or best friend. Although such lashing out may come from a feeling of intimacy and a long shared history (and no worthwhile relationship is going to be free of friction, and at times, pain), there is no justification for insults, hostility, or contempt. I therefore propose a slightly modified version of the Golden Rule: Do not do unto those close to you what you would not have done unto others (who are not so close to you). We can get angry and upset, we can be disappointed and hurt, but if we want our relationships to flourish over time, we must treat those we love with at least as much respect as we do those we have just met."

Isn't that odd?

We're often *way* nicer to those we just met than we are to those we most love.

I love Tal's modification to the Golden Rule: "Do not do unto those close to you what you would not have done unto others (who are not so close to you)."

In [The Pursuit of Perfect](#), Tal shares another brilliant tweak on the Golden Rule. He calls that one the Platinum Rule and it goes like this: "Why the double standard, the generosity toward our neighbor and the miserliness where we ourselves are concerned? And so I propose that we add a new rule, which we can call the Platinum Rule, to our moral code: 'Do not do unto yourself what you would not do unto others.'"

Here's to integrating these radiant Gold and Platinum Rules into our lives as we give ourselves and those closest to us a ton of love! :)

## CREATING REALITY

*"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."*

~ Winston Churchill

"My words do not merely describe reality, they create reality. If I assess a situation as threatening, I am likely to experience stress. If I assess the same situation as challenging, my emotional reaction is more likely to be that of excitement. The same external event can be experienced very differently, based on the words I use to describe it. Is the upcoming speech a threatening event or a welcome challenge? What do I tell myself about the rough patch my partner and I are going through right now in our relationship? My reality is a product of both the subjective (my mind) and the objective (what is out there). I am a cocreator of my experiences, of my life."

This is big.

Research is unequivocal: Our words do not "merely describe reality, they create reality."

What words are you using to describe your reality? Remember: You're co-creating your reality with every word you use to describe it. Let's choose wisely!!

"Choice unleashes the potential within each moment. As you become mindful of the potential within this moment, your life gains momentum, becomes momentous. When a moment matters, life matters."

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

## MEANINGFUL ENDURANCE

"In Hebrew, the words *sevel* (suffering), *sibolet* (endurance), and *savlanut* (patience) stem from the same root. To develop and grow we must learn to be patient, to endure, and that sometimes entails suffering. The expectation that personal change is effortless and fast is a sure way to disappointment and frustration.

In his work on intimacy, David Schnarch points to the importance of "meaningful endurance" as a way to frame difficulties that are part and parcel of every thriving long-term relationship. The couple has to endure hardship, and that often entails suffering; however, the process is meaningful in that it potentially leads to a deeper and better connection. The same patience, the same meaningful endurance, is necessary for any change process—to enjoy positive change individually, interpersonally, and organizationally."

Meaningful endurance.

It's a key component to optimizing.

In fact, one of the greatest risks to our actualization is the naïve idea that it should be fast and easy. As Tal advises, that's a sure way to experience disappointment and frustration.

We want to embrace a *functional optimism* à la Jim Collins's Stockdale Paradox where we have absolute confidence in our ability to grow and learn and succeed AND we embrace our current reality and the inevitable challenges we will face in our process of mastery.

Here's to such meaningful endurance as we practice our modified golden rules, have fun stepping into the failure hall of fame, embrace our happiness boosters and choose to choose!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Chief Philosopher*

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you'll probably like...

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[The Pursuit of Perfect](#)

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## About the Author of "Choose the Life You Want"

TAL BEN-SHAHAR, PH.D.



Tal Ben-Shahar, Ph.D., is an author and lecturer. His classes on "Positive Psychology" and "The Psychology of Leadership" were among the largest courses in Harvard's history, attracting a total of 1,400 students—approximately 20 percent of all Harvard undergraduates. Author of *Happier: Learn the Secrets of Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment*, Ben-Shahar consults and lectures around the world on happiness, self-esteem, resilience, goal setting, mindfulness, and leadership. He holds a Ph.D. in organizational behavior and a BA in philosophy and psychology from Harvard. For more information visit [TalBenShahar.com](http://TalBenShahar.com).

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](http://brianjohnson.me).