

THE BIG IDEAS

The As If Principle

Want a quality? Act like you have it.

Fun Factory

Research from.

Time Traveling

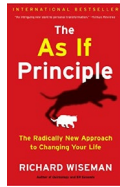
To a younger you.

Paradox of Rewards

We're punished by them.

Creating a New You

"Hi, new you! Nice to meet you."



The As If Principle

The Radically New Approach to Changing Your Life

BY RICHARD WISEMAN · SIMON & SCHUSTER © 2014 · 304 PAGES

"It's time for positive action."

Self-help gurus and business coaches preach the same simple mantra: if you want to improve your life, you need to change how you think. Force yourself to have positive thoughts, and you will become happier. Visualize your dream self, and you will enjoy increased success. Think like a millionaire, and you will magically grow rich. In principle, the idea sounds perfectly reasonable. However, in practice, the approach often proves surprisingly ineffective. ...

Over a century ago, the brilliant Victorian philosopher William James proposed a radically different approach to change. Since then, researchers from across the world have carried out hundreds of experiments into James's theory and discovered that it applies to almost every aspect of people's lives. ...

This book is all about the impact that your actions have on your mind, and the exercises encourage you to actually experience these phenomena rather than just read about them.

You are about to encounter a new approach to change. An approach that is grounded in science, overturns conventional thinking, and provides a basis for the easiest, quickest and most effective ways of changing your life.

So sit up straight and take a deep breath. Forget all about positive thinking. It's time for positive action."

~ Richard Wiseman from *The As If Principle*

"If you want a quality, act as if you already have it."

~ William James

Richard Wiseman is Britain's official professor in "the Public Understanding of Psychology." That has to be one of the coolest job titles out there. And, his last name has to be the best possible name for a guy who does what he does. "Wiseman"? Hah!

Professor Wiseman grounds his wisdom in the best of modern science. He's also a funny guy.

This book takes a fascinating look at the power of BEHAVIORS driving FEELINGS rather than the other way around. We've talked about the idea a fair amount throughout these Notes but it's great to see a book exclusively focused on the *science* of what happens when you "act as if." (Get a copy of the book [here](#).)

It's packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

THE AS IF PRINCIPLE

"The notion of behavior causing emotion suggests that people should be able to create any feeling they desire simply by acting as if they are experiencing that emotion. Or as James famously put it, 'If you want a quality, act as if you already have it.' I refer to this simple but powerful proposition as the As If principle.

"The sovereign voluntary path to cheerfulness . . . is to sit up cheerfully, to look round cheerfully, and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there. . . . To wrestle with a bad feeling only pins our attention on it, and keeps it still fastened in the mind."

~ William James

This aspect of James's theory energized him more than any other. In one public talk, he described the potential power of the idea as 'bottled lightning' and enthusiastically noted, "The sovereign voluntary path to cheerfulness . . . is to sit up cheerfully, to look round cheerfully, and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there. . . . To wrestle with a bad feeling only pins our attention on it, and keeps it still fastened in the mind."

William James was born in 1842.

He's considered the father of modern psychology and his two-volume magnum opus (written in 1890), *Principles of Psychology*, is still considered required reading for students of behavioral science.

He was a contemporary of Freud. While Freud was developing (and very effectively marketing) his psychoanalytic approach encouraging people to go back into the pain of their past, James believed a more effective approach would be to change your behaviors right now.

Wiseman has fun keeping track of who research says won that debate in the century since it started.

Short story: William James is our clear winner. (Hah.)

You're MUCH better off working on optimizing your unhelpful thoughts and behaviors *right now* than going on an archeological dig into the mysterious origins of your current neuroses.

So, William James tells us: *"If you want a quality, act as if you already have it."*

Now, I've gotta say that I've always had a slight bit of an allergy to the way some self-help authors have run with the basic idea of "acting as if" into a "fake it until you make it" approach, so I found it particularly refreshing to read Wiseman's take on the hundreds of studies that prove the efficacy of the As If approach without all the silly stuff that triggers an allergic reaction.

As Wiseman tells us:

*"Common sense suggests that the chain of causation is:
You feel happy — You smile. ...*

*The As If theory suggests that the opposite is also true:
You smile — You feel happy."*

And, that's what the book is about. It's a systematic review of the scientific literature as it relates to what Wiseman calls "The As If Principle."

We have chapters on everything from how to be happy, love, mental health (and how to conquer your depression), willpower (and how to beat procrastination), persuasion, and how to create a new you. Let's explore some of my favorite ideas.

But first: What specific quality would you like to have more of?

How can you act as if you already have it a little more today? :)

RESEARCH FROM THE FUN FACTORY

"The message from the As If principle and the fun factory is clear: rather than trying to cheer yourself up by thinking happy thoughts, it is far quicker and more effective to simply behave as if you are having a good time. Smile, put a spring in your step, hold your head up high, use happy talk, dance, laugh, sing, or do whatever else you enjoy.

Or, to put it another way, if you want to be happy and you know it, clap your hands."

Want to be happy?

Smile. Sing. Dance. Laugh. Hold your head up high. Walk with a spring in your step.

"The As If principle is not just about forcing your face into a smile. It applies to almost every aspect of your everyday behavior, including the way that you walk and the words that you say."

~ Richard Wiseman

In short: ACT like a happy person and, the research shows, you'll be able to watch your emotions follow.

Wiseman walks us through research on all of that. Scientists have found creative ways to run rigorous studies to prove that doing things like having you say "ee" (like the sound in "cheese") rather than "ew" (like the sound in, uh, well, "pooh" (hah)) will make you happier. Why? One elicits a subtle smile while the other elicits a subtle grimace.

Seriously? Yah. Just acting as if you're smiling makes you feel a little happier.

Behaviors → Feelings

Same thing with singing. Listening to music isn't as powerful as actually singing.

Behaviors → Feelings

Happy people tend to dance. And... If you dance, you tend to be happier. (Dancing was actually one of the things he came back to most. Its effects are super powerful. After reading the book I immediately told Alexandra about it. She's the dancing queen of the Johnson house so we'll need her DJing some micro-dance parties. :)

Behaviors → Feelings

Hold your head up high. Walk the way you do when you're happy. And... You guessed it, you'll feel happier.

What do YOU do when you feel happy?

Hint: Do it.

Watch the feelings follow the behaviors.

TIME TRAVELING

"Whatever we learn to do we learn by actually doing it; men come to be builders, for instance, by building, and harp players by playing the harp. In the same way, by doing just acts we come to be just; by doing self-controlled acts, we come to be self-controlled; and by doing brave acts, we become brave."

~ Aristotle

"Within days, Langer could see the dramatic effect of behaving As If. The time-traveling participants were now walking faster and were more confident. Moreover, within a week, several of these participants had decided that they could now manage without their canes. Langer took various psychological and physiological measurements throughout the experiment and discovered that the time-traveling group showed improvements in dexterity, speed of movement, memory, blood pressure, eyesight, and hearing. Interestingly, more than 60 percent of those in the time-traveling group showed an improvement on intelligence tests compared with just 40 percent of those in the other group. Acting as if they were young men had knocked years off their bodies and minds."

In one of the more astonishing studies that proves the power of the As If principle, Wiseman walks us through the research conducted by Ellen Langer.

Langer wrote a whole book about her fascinating research. [Check out our Notes on Counterclockwise](#) for more.

The short story: In 1979, Langer recruited men in their 70s and 80s. She split them into two groups. One of them was to reminisce about life twenty years before in 1959. The other group was to actually RELIVE the past AS IF they were twenty years younger.

The group that was pretending to be twenty years younger listened to music from 1959, watched movies from 1959 and all their conversations had to be in the present tense AS IF they were actually living in 1959.

What happened?

Well, here's how she puts it: *"On many of the measures, the participants got 'younger.' The experimental group showed greater improvement on joint flexibility, finger length (their*

"According to the As If principle, behavior causes emotion."

~ Richard Wiseman

arthritis diminished and they were able to strengthen their fingers more), and manual dexterity. On intelligence tests, 63 percent of the experimental group improved their scores, compared to only 44 percent of the control group. There were also improvements in height, weight, gait and posture. Finally, we asked people unaware of the study's purpose to compare photos taken of the participants at the end of the week to those submitted at the beginning of the study. These objective observers judged that all of the experimental participants looked noticeably younger at the end of the study."

Think about that for a moment.

That sounds nuts, eh? Yet it's true.

Langer focuses on what she calls the "psychology of possibility." She tells us that *"Small changes can make large differences, so we should open ourselves to the impossible and embrace the psychology of possibility."*

The psychology of possibility first requires that we begin with the assumption that we do not know what we can do or become. Rather than starting from the status quo, it argues for a starting point of what we would like to be. From that beginning, we can ask how we might reach that goal and make progress toward it. It's a subtle change in thinking, although not difficult to make once we realize how stuck we are in culture, language, and modes of thought that limit our potential."

Let's open ourselves up to what's possible. And act as if we had that power now. :)

THE PARADOX OF REWARDS

"She [Teresa Amabile] recruited a group of budding writers and asked them to write a haiku-style poem using the word *snow* as the first and last line. The participants were then split into two groups. One group was asked to think about all the riches that would flow from being a great writer, while the other group was asked to dwell on the intrinsic pleasure that they derived from their work. Finally, everyone was asked to produce a second poem around the concept of laughter.

Amabile then assembled a panel of twelve poets, gave them the haiku poems about snow and laughter, and asked them to rate how creative the poems were. Both groups displayed the same amount of creativity when writing about snow. However, the group that was made to think about the rewards and riches that might flow from their writing displayed significantly less creativity when writing about laughter. Even thinking about rewards had a detrimental effect."

That's from a chapter on Willpower in a section on how we have become "punished by rewards."

Short story from a high level: Rewards are often great at eliciting near-term boosts in behavior. And... They're often disastrous in producing the long-term engagement we want to see.

Why? Well, in essence, they take away our intrinsic motivation and replace it with a poor substitute: the extrinsic motivation of the reward.

In the context of the As If principle, Wiseman tells us that it's almost as if we're having a conversation in our heads. "Well, I thought I liked to read or draw or write but then you paid me for it so I must not really like it enough to do it on my own."

In the research study above, even just *thinking* about rewards negatively impacted creativity.

That reminds me of our last Note on [Harry Potter](#) where we talked about [Carol Dweck's](#) research. She tells us: *"It's ironic: The top is where the fixed-mindset people hunger to be, but it's where many growth-minded people arrive as a by-product of their enthusiasm for what they do."*

*"I prayed for twenty years
but received no answer until
I prayed with my legs."*

~ Frederick Douglas

Then we have quintessential best-selling creative writer, Stephen King. Was *he* focused on the money?

Well, let's see what he has to say in his classic, [On Writing](#): "One more matter needs to be discussed, a matter that bears directly on that life-changer and one that I've touched on already, but indirectly. Now I'd like to face it head-on. It's a question that people ask in different ways—sometimes it comes out polite and sometimes it comes out rough, but it always amounts to the same: Do you do it for the money, honey?"

The answer is no. Don't now and never did. Yes, I've made a great deal of dough from my fiction, but I never set a single word down on paper with the thought of being paid for it. I have done some work as favors for friends—logrolling is the slang term for it—but at the very worst, you'd have to call that a crude kind of barter. I have written because it fulfilled me. Maybe it paid off the mortgage on the house and got the kids through college, but those things were on the side—I did it for the buzz. I did it for the pure joy of the thing. And if you can do it for the joy, you can do it forever."

Why do YOU do what YOU do?

Focus on the joy. Let the rewards be a by-product.

(But only if you want to enjoy the process and actually get the rewards. :)

CREATING A NEW YOU

"His extensive therapeutic experience led him to believe that people's personalities were not fixed, and in the same way that actors play many different roles during their career, so people can change their identities throughout their lifetime. Moreover, Kelly was convinced that the way in which people saw themselves was often at the root of their problems and that effective therapy involved helping clients adopt a less problematic identity. Kelly christened this approach 'fixed-role therapy' and over time developed a series of effective techniques for getting people to adopt a new identity."

This is from the last chapter called "Creating a New You."

How'd you like to design a new identity for yourself? It doesn't matter who you are, we ALL know that we're capable of even more.

So, whether it's slightly optimizing to polish some rough edges on the current iteration of you or having fun nearly completely reinventing yourself, let's have fun exploring the science of designing that new identity, shall we? :)

*"Action is the antidote to
despair."*

~ Joan Baez

Wiseman walks us through the ideas of "fixed-role therapy" as developed by a 20th century psychologist named George Kelly.

The short story: Your personality is NOT fixed. It's malleable. Best way to shape it? Yep. You guessed it. Act as if you ARE the person you aspire to be.

Which, of course, begs the question: Who do you aspire to be? Who are you at your most epic best? Even more simply: Who are you at a slightly more optimized version of you?

BE THAT VERSION OF YOU. Now.

We've approached this from a few different angles so far. We have Eric Grietan's wisdom from [Resilience](#). He tells us that we need to START with our Identity and let that drive our Behaviors and let those behaviors drive our Feelings.

Identity → Behaviors → Feelings.

Unfortunately, most people get that equation precisely backwards. Constantly checking in on how they "feel" and letting *that* run the show. Not optimal.

"If you want a quality, act as if you already have it."

~ William James

In [With Winning in Mind](#), Gold-medal winner turned peak performance coach Lanny Bassham tells us that our Self-Image is REALLY (!) important. Reminding us that we won't be able to consistently outperform a poor self-image.

Solution? Dial up your Self-Image. How? Get clear on who you are at your best. Remind yourself of that daily/all the time and, most importantly, ACT LIKE THAT VERSION OF YOU. Now.

Then we have Amy Cuddy. In [Presence](#), she echoes a lot of the wisdom in this book and shares a story about the Olympic coach who used her ideas with his swimmers. On the day of the race, he'd have them act as if they won that day's race from the moment they woke up on race day. It worked.

But, for some odd reason, he only used it on his more anxious swimmers and only on race day. What would happen if they acted like that best version of themselves all the time?

So, back to you. Who are you at your best?

Wiseman tells us to spend two weeks role-playing your new identity. He tells us to *"Focus on changing your behavior rather than trying to change the way you think."*

He says, *"It might be helpful to think of your old personality as being on vacation for two weeks, so you have an opportunity to act like a different person. It is important, however, that you play out your new role twenty-four hours a day, even when you're alone. The As If principle will cause you to feel like a new person, and the new you will soon become part of your actual identity."*

High fives to the new you! :)

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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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 optimize.me.