



# How to achieve less

The antidote to self-help books



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# Contents

Introduction	2
What are we trying to improve?	4
Why are we trying so hard?	20
What is it doing to us?	30
Ten steps for non-achievers	34

# Introduction

We seem to spend most of our lives striving. Striving to earn more money, gain more self confidence, be better parents, travel more, be more attractive, have better relationships – the list is endless. But why should we spend our lives striving?

This booklet shows that we live in a world obsessed with striving, self-betterment, maximising, having more and making the most of every opportunity in life. It argues that this can have a range of negative effects on our lives, including making us unhappy with ourselves and what we have, as we're constantly chasing a carrot of the next experience we can have or improvement we can make.

The booklet also explores where this obsession with striving came from. It focuses on the sense of yearning instilled in us by various aspects of the modern world – from adverts telling us we need more stuff to be happy, to friends boasting that you haven't lived until you've visited every country on the planet through to self-help books telling us that some of our natural character traits (such as shyness) are undesirable.

It considers where the roots of this striving and yearning lie – from natural human tendencies such as the desire to be accepted, through to external factors such as the development of technology and the impact of consumerism.

Finally, it asks whether our lives would be better if we just stopped striving, and led the lives we really wanted – however 'imperfect' they may be. It provides some practical ideas to help people truly live their own lives, free from the expectations and influence of others.

Part 1

# What are we trying to improve?





# What are we trying to improve?

In part one we'll explore a selection of the areas of life in which we're striving to achieve, acquire or maximise. As we'll see, our striving is not just confined to the more obvious things like having more material goods – it covers a wide range of areas of our lives.

## Our characters

Everyone is after self-betterment. There's a massive self help industry telling us we could improve a range of things about ourselves – from our confidence through to our sexual prowess.

And many of us are obsessed by this idea of trying to improve ourselves – I know I am. Most of us seem to cling to the idea that if we tried harder or took certain steps, we might become better or more successful (at specific things or more generally) and as a result would be better people, like ourselves more and/or achieve more.

Take one simple example – public speaking. Many people fear it and many people work hard to make themselves better at it. But what if some people simply don't like to do it and aren't the types to do so? Isn't it perfectly OK to say 'No, this is not a priority for me – I don't want to try to get better at this. Not being able

to do this is my natural state and I'm happy with my natural state?'

The reality seems to be that our individual identities are formed by a mixture of nature (genetically inherited characteristics) and nurture (environmental factors that we can change). We therefore each have natural tendencies to behave in certain ways or prefer certain things – for example, some people are naturally introverted and some people more extroverted. We can certainly choose to override these natural compulsions (and in some cases it might be useful to) but in many cases it may feel more natural, enjoyable and fulfilling to accept who we are and live an authentic life that embraces and makes the most of our natural tendencies rather than trying to battle against them and feel unhappy with who we are. Susan Cain explores this issue in relation to people with introverted personalities in her great book 'Quiet':

“ The trick is not to amass all the different kinds of available power, but to use well the kind you've been granted.<sup>1</sup>”

## Our efforts

It seems to be a common idea, particularly in the world of business, that if we're not succeeding at something then we are simply not trying hard enough. How many times have you been told that you need to 'graft away' more in order to achieve something?

Clearly, hard work and application is an important part of achieving in any field, unless you are unusually talented. But even then, effort is important. In his book 'Outliers' Malcolm Gladwell suggests that the key to success in any field is, to a large extent, a matter of practicing a specific task for a total of at least 10,000 hours. For example, The Beatles honed their playing skills by performing live in Hamburg, Germany, around 1,200 times from 1960 to 1964.

The point is though that it is not just effort that gets us places – we need to have talent too. So, telling people to just work harder if they want to achieve success in a particular area is not enough if they don't have the talent to accompany this effort. We would do well to remember this when getting frustrated with ourselves (and indeed other people) when results aren't going our way.

The adage that 'you can be anything you want' is a staple of self-help books but is also complete bollocks. You can't. Ultimately we are all dealt certain cards at birth which have a big impact on our futures – these include not only our abilities but also our preferences – and the point is that we shouldn't feel hemmed in and limited by these cards, but understand them, accept them and play them as best we can – without listening to the people who tell us we should have some other cards.

## Our time management

A feature many people will recognise in their lives is that, in the modern world we're constantly busy. We never stop and are always on the go. In fact, we see the level of busyness in our lives as a representation of how important we are.

We seek to maximise the number of things we can squeeze into one 24 hour period, and get frustrated and annoyed with ourselves and others (road rage, anyone?) when something holds us back from achieving these unrealistic and arbitrary expectations.

This is clearly a source of stress for us, and may add to the sense that we're not 'good enough people' – as surely, if we were better at managing our time, we'd be able to fit an unlimited range of things into each day?

I've had the experience several times of getting very stressed during the day when I've had so much to do (whether work, family or leisure related), and experiencing almost as a revelation the idea that I'm actually in control of how much I do, and that I can choose not to do some of the things I'd set myself that day. It is usually with real embarrassment that I realise how easy it was to drop these tasks and how much better I feel having done so.

## Our appearances

The desire to improve our looks is perhaps one of the best-known examples of striving that we present in this book.

It doesn't seem unreasonable to take pride in one's appearance and how one looks – after all, it is part of how we present ourselves to the world and one way of feeling comfortable with our identities.

But there has become an obsession with appearance in recent decades, with a clear bias towards a particular view of beauty – one that is youthful, thin and fashionable.

In fashion, we strive to wear the 'right' brands and adopt the 'right' looks in order to present ourselves as the people we want to be, or fit into the right groups. We are prepared to spend considerable amounts of extra money for the same basic product in order to ensure we are 'on brand'. But does it really matter? And it is really worth the extra trouble and stress it causes us?

The steps we are taking to improve our appearances are also becoming increasingly desperate as the technology and cost makes it possible for people to have a range of invasive treatments – from liposuction to cosmetic surgery.

This vision of beauty is hammered into adults and children from a very early age, and it can have a massive effect on how happy (or otherwise) we are with our bodies and ourselves. An example of this can be found in a recent study to discover the impact of

cultural ideals relating to weight on the very young.<sup>2</sup>

“ More than 100 girls aged between 5 and 7 looked at books while being read a story about shopping and dressing for a birthday party. Some of the books showed images of Barbie dolls, while others showed pictures lacking depictions of people. It was found that girls who were exposed to the Barbie pictures reported less body esteem and a greater desire to be thin. Researchers concluded that early exposure to unrealistic pictures of too thin body shapes may damage a girl’s body image. This, in turn, leads to the increased risk of eating disorders with cycles of weight gain and loss. ”

So, just looking at images of Barbie led to reports of less body esteem and a greater desire to be thin in children. And this is just one experiment. Imagine the cumulative effect that the mountains of advertising, peer group and other pressures have on the way that both young people and adults see themselves.

The researchers expand further on the unrealistic nature of many body images:

“ Were an average woman to mirror the proportions of a Barbie doll, she would need to grow 17 inches in height and have a body shape found in less than one in 100,000 women. At the same time, there is a documented trend of using thinner models in advertisements, with the average model about 20% underweight. ”

We therefore seem to be striving to achieve impossible ideals of beauty – ideals that are completely arbitrary. For example, in ancient Rome, fuller figures were seen as desirable for women – yet, this has now changed to thinner figures being desirable. This should give us a reality check when we strive for a particular type of appearance – and we should recognise that these visions of beauty we strive for are simply made up – so why not just take the pressure off ourselves and accept the way we are? If we aim for anything in physical terms, perhaps it should be to simply be healthy – regardless of how we look.

Youth is another thing we strive for in our appearance, as we seek to rally against the inevitable changes that occur in our bodies when we get older – from hair loss to wrinkles. Many people find this hard to deal with and entire industries have developed to service people's fear of ageing. But again, what if we just accepted the ageing process with good grace and didn't get stressed trying to reverse something that is irreversible?

We should also remember it is a personal choice as to whether we care at all about how we look. If this is not something that matters to you or influences how you feel about yourself, then ignore it.

Some people will however feel that looking their best is an important part of feeling good about themselves. But we should remember it's about looking our best – not someone else's best! It's about looking good with the features we have – not the impossible, idealised

features of other people. Again, it comes back to being happy with ourselves and not listening to the manifold external influences on us.

## Our experiences

These days, we're not just concerned about the quality of our experiences – the quantity seems to be equally, if not more, important. There seems to be an obsession with 'maximising' and doing everything – where life simply becomes a process of ticking things off on a list – whether it's in relation to travel, food or just experiences themselves.

### Travel

With the advent of cheaper travel, it's become a badge of honour to say you've travelled to a list of exotic and exciting locations. If you've not 'seen the world' then you've not expanded your mind or reached your full potential. But this idea of travel as a key part of a person's development is a myth. Many of the places that people visit on their travels have been turned into homogenised variants of the western culture they're used to, and many people who travel come back simply with a list of places they've visited to compare with others, but have not necessarily grown as people during that time.

So, if you would genuinely like to travel – do it. But if you don't, don't feel pressure to be well-travelled if this is not what you enjoy.



## Experiences themselves

As a broader point, many people seem to have a yearning to have every possible experience that the world has available. We regularly see articles such as ‘100 things you must do before you die’, where we are told we must have seen and done certain things (and as many of them as possible) to have lived worthwhile lives.

But isn’t it up to us to decide for ourselves what constitutes a worthwhile life?

And if life does just become a process of ticking things off a list, does it have as much value? Even if we set ourselves a list of things we genuinely want to do, our completion of this list shouldn’t be the thing we take pleasure from – it should be the experiences themselves. So, one lesson here is to become better at appreciating experiences, and appreciating life in general. Rather than planning or thinking about the next experience, immerse yourself in what you’re currently doing and savour the experience – even the seemingly mundane aspects of life. As this is what gives life real content.

## Careers

Career success and standing has for many years been a key criterion upon which people have judged each other. A great number of people put up with incredibly long hours and stressful work, as well as sacrificing their personal relationships and friendships, in an attempt to climb the career ladder.

For some people, this pursuit of career success is undertaken because it feels like the natural way of things – from young children onwards, we’ve been taught to strive for it all our lives. It’s an engrained expectation. Other people seek career success as a response to fear – fear of being ‘left behind’ or becoming redundant in the future.

When advised about our futures from a young age, we are told to seek careers that will earn us a good, steady living and have the potential for promotion. One thing that has got left behind in this consideration of jobs and careers is the question of which job we would actually like to do. The main priority in our search for any work should be for work that we enjoy and that gives us fulfilment.

Vast numbers of people seek jobs in order to achieve ‘success’ rather than to find something they genuinely want to do. It’s time this changed – as this one thing could make a massive difference to millions of lives.

We should also be careful not to let the pursuit of career success take us away from other priorities in our lives. The idea of seeking balance between the various area of our lives (including work, home life and other things) has become more mainstream in recent years, but it is something that many people still don’t have. If you are spending too much time and energy on striving for career success, it might be worth reviewing its importance in comparison with other priorities in your life.

## Material success

One of the most obvious areas in which people strive and yearn for more is material success. People want the latest gadgets, clothes, decorations and things – and they want to be able to provide these for their children too. People want to dress in the right clothes and wear the right brands.

There is precious little joy in this type of success, as many people find when they achieve it, and the pursuit of it – essentially the pursuit of objects and status for the value that they are held in by other people – seems to be one of the most depressing ways to waste time and human life that there is.

## Abilities

Another area of striving in modern life is to raise our abilities and characters to become good at an impossibly wide, and often arbitrary, range of things.

For example, we are expected to be funny, highly intelligent, good at sport and great cooks. These qualities make up a particular era's vision of an 'ideal' person that we so often see on TV and in advertising. We may well each possess some of these qualities, but this overall picture of the 'idealised' person is simply made up – and we should remember this before striving to become it.

## Relationships

The nature of friendships has changed enormously in the last 100 years. In the early 20th century a typical person might have had a small number of close friendships with people who lived locally to them.

In the digital age, and with the advent of social media like Facebook, the focus on friendships seems to be more about quantity than quality. The aim is to have as many friends as possible, and the friendships with these people are conducted in a completely different way to those before.

This may not necessarily be a negative development in our relationships, and it would be churlish to criticise things just because they are new. But we should make sure that we remember the benefits of close personal relationships in which we can spend real time communicating with people in the real world – rather than trying to spread ourselves too thinly across large numbers of acquaintances.

Romantic relationships are also the object of much striving. Some people still strive to find a relationship in order to stop being branded as single, but if we are happy being on our own we should just enjoy it and not feel compelled to dive into a relationship simply because that's what's expected of us.

When we're in a relationship we are told that we should have a few relationships before we settle down – but what if the first or second person we meet is the

right one? Again, we shouldn't be swayed by society's conventions, and must live our lives for ourselves.

We also strive for better relationships ourselves, which in some ways can be healthy as it helps us to work at improving them, but it can also be a problem if we have unrealistic expectations of our relationship. No relationship is perfect, and if we always think that a good relationship should just 'click into place' without any effort or compromise, then we are going to go through a lot of relationships unsatisfied.

## The length of our lives

We want to maximise the length of our lives as much as possible, and society appears to be intent on prolonging our lives, no matter what the financial cost or the actual quality of life individuals have in this additional life time.

## The content of our lives

We're trying to have the most complete lives possible. We look at other people and say 'I want that' like a greedy child in a sweet shop but we fail to realise that they have different lives from us. We also fail to realise that this is like trying to acquire more stuff or simply collecting stuff – and that this in itself is not fulfilling. We start wanting things – including status, belongings etc – not for the benefits they bring but just for the sake of ticking things off a list of desirable items.

But it's not just about aspiration to do or have particular things. There now seems to be among people in the western world a fear of NOT doing things. For example, you could be relaxing in a cafe (something that many people would see as a desirable activity) but feeling a desperate urge not to be there – but to be doing other things like travelling to exotic places. Or you're working in a great job but seeing someone go on holiday – so you want that too. This seems to stem from a desire to want to have everything – at once. An unrealistic, almost childlike, desire.

## Fame

Among younger people there seems to be a desire for fame in itself – not to be famous for a particular reason or skill, but just to be famous. This seems to suggest an attitude in which a person's value is simply based on how many people they can get the attention of – a rather childish, egotistical position that is ultimately unlikely to bring much fulfilment for the individual.

Although many adults don't share this preoccupation, it is worth mentioning as it is so prevalent among younger people. We should all realise that the attention of other people is a fleeting, transient thing and that we shouldn't base our sense of self worth on this.

## Our values

Aside from the various types of striving outlined above, there is pressure on people to be highly ethical individuals. Not in terms of doing mundane but important things like doing the recycling, but being heroes.

Look at films. When they want to portray someone as an ethical individual they often portray them as a glamorous hero – going to Africa to work for a development agency or working for an environmental organisation.

There is a sense that nothing but the most heroic, glamorous, big acts will do when seeking change. But our striving shouldn't necessarily be about these big, heroic acts. And by striving to do these, many of us forget to do the important everyday things that would make a real difference to the world if we all did them.

The key point from this section is to be sure you're living consistently with your own values, but don't buy into the confused mainstream thinking that only heroic acts and grand gestures are enough.

Values are also an area that can complicate our striving in other areas of our lives. For example, how can you strive to be an environmental campaigner when you're also striving to consume more material things? This opens up an interesting part of our yearning and striving – often the dreams we are striving for are contradictory and incompatible – which we shall discuss in the next section.





Part 2

Why are we  
trying so hard?



# Why are we trying so hard?

So, it's clear that we're spending a lot of our time and a lot of our 'head space' striving for improvement or more of something – whilst inevitably at the same time being dissatisfied with how things are in the present.

Overall the examples of striving we discussed in part 1 are all forms of yearning – a desire to have or be something that we don't think we currently have or are. They are also all related to outside influences in some way – take self improvement as an example – we're either looking at an idealised, external (and completely arbitrary) version of ourselves and yearning for it, or seeing a range of failings in ourselves that have been identified by external factors, for example other people or adverts. In either case we are failing to look at and listen to and nurture the internal, real version of ourselves.

## Is it feasible?

Before we explore why we are trying so hard, let's have a reality check. It is quite simply impossible to live a life in which we achieve or do all the things we discussed in part 1.

If we just take a cursory glance at the list of things that we could be striving for (and these are just examples

– there are many more) we can see that they not only paint an unrealistic picture of what our lives could be like, but it's also an impossible lifestyle to achieve. We simply don't have time to do all these things, from travelling to every country on earth, to having a high flying job, having a beautiful family, being an eco-warrior changing the world, having several large houses (and a cute cottage in the country).

Also, some of the things are actually in direct conflict with each other – for example, you can't be the owner of a private jet or multiple properties whilst truly being an eco warrior.

It's like basing our current and future happiness on wanting life to be like a fairy story we know to be untrue. It just doesn't make sense to do this.

## Is it really desirable?

Aside from the minor issue of whether the fantasy life we are striving for is actually possible, we should also ask whether it is really desirable.

First, simply consuming more and better material goods might fulfil some of our basic needs, but it is very unlikely to make us truly happy. We need other, non-material things in our life to be fulfilled – from friendships to a sense of our own identity – so, simply having more and better stuff is a goal that won't satisfy us even if we achieve it.

Second, everyone faces trade-offs in their lives. No matter how rich or poor we are we all have the same number of hours available to us in each day, and face the same challenge that there are only a limited number of things we can fit into this time, so we have to prioritise. And that will lead to us sacrificing some things in favour of others.

We should also realise that it is often the most extreme lives that carry the highest prices – and we often don't think about that. For example, the glamorous 'super-mum' who has a job in the city, exotic holidays and stays beautiful, fashionable and fit throughout it all – do you think she really gets very much time with her kids? Of course not! And what really matters to you more – seeing your family or being someone who lives a seemingly glamorous life? These are the sort of questions we have to ask ourselves when we start yearning for things.

I used the word 'seemingly' in the previous paragraph because there are plenty of examples of people who have achieved some of the things we've discussed above (and no doubt made many sacrifices to do so) but have found it to be not what they expected. See the Life Squared publication titled 'The Millionaire's Story' for one example. The truth? You take yourself with you. Just like when you go on holiday. So imagine what it would really be like for you.

## External influences

We can detect a range of influences on our tendency to strive and yearn – some of which are internal to us and others that are external. Let us explore some of the external influences first.

### Consumerism

We live in a global culture in which we are surrounded by thousands of messages every day telling us to consume more, to want particular material goods, to question our looks, and setting many other goals that make us strive. There is no doubt that the culture of consumerism is one of the strongest influences on our tendency for yearning and striving. See the Life Squared booklet ‘The Problem with Consumerism’ for more details on the influence of consumerism on our lives and the problems it can cause us.

### The economic system

This is the overarching driver of the culture of consumerism mentioned above, and is also the driver of many of our assumptions about the need to work harder and achieve greater material and career success. These (often faulty) assumptions all flow from the overarching idea that a society needs to be achieving ever-greater productivity and economic growth if human beings are to be happy. All of our institutions (schools, workplaces etc.) reflect these values, so it is very difficult for individuals to realise that they are simply arbitrary ideas of what we should be valuing or

doing in our lives, and that we can choose other values than these to base our lives on.

## **Individualism**

There is a sense in the modern world that the individual is king or queen of their world – that we should all be looking after ourselves rather than the groups that we are bonded to such as family, friends and communities. This sense of individualism again promotes the idea of individual striving, as the measure of value of someone's life is what they can achieve as an individual rather than their role and contribution to the group around them. This can make us obsessed with our own individual strivings.

## **The western idea of freedom**

We place a unique importance on the freedom of the individual in western society. It is utterly sacrosanct. This almost fundamentalist belief in the importance of freedom is not shared by every country and culture in the world. But it certainly shapes our beliefs in the west about what is important in our lives and what we can do with them.

We all like to think that we are completely free to live the lives we want – indeed that we have a right to live such lives. But the idea of freedom that we have – which has been promoted and supported by advertisers, employers and anyone else that wants to manipulate us – has gone too far. It's turned into the (completely false) idea of 'hyper freedom' – that we can do anything

or have anything we like in our lives. It also leads us to the associated conclusion that we're somehow wasting our lives or living less valuable lives if we don't try to do everything. This is all harmful stuff for us psychologically.

How would you feel if someone told you that there might be a limit to your capabilities and options in life? For many of us, given the values of the society we live in, it would be a very depressing and somewhat insulting thought.

These unrealistic expectations lead to us striving for impossible goals – many of which are worthless and many of which we were never meant to achieve in the first place – they've just been created by people who are pursuing their own ends and don't have our welfare or happiness at heart.

We're clearly not as free as we think we are in the west, even if we see through the exaggerated idea of 'hyper freedom'. It is very unfashionable to say it but we are all bound by our own capabilities, characters and circumstances, just as much as we are bound by the systems and assumptions that we live within, such as the limited perspective of the consumerist world-view that many of us live within. Perhaps it would do us a lot of good to acknowledge this and learn how to make peace with this fact.

### **Wider access to travel**

The reduced cost and greater availability of air travel in the last couple of decades has opened up a wide range of travel and lifestyle options to many people who could have previously never dreamed of these things. Travel now seems to be regarded less as a luxury and more as a necessity (and cheap travel as a right), and there are fewer and fewer locations that can truly be seen as ‘off the beaten track’ as travellers from richer countries around the world have jetted off to new places.

Although international travel is certainly not easily accessible to everyone (even in the west), for many people it has become another way of expressing their freedom (see previous point on this topic).

### **Improved communications**

The massive advances in communications over the last 50 years have given us access to more information than ever before, and have opened up our insight into other people’s lives in a way that didn’t previously exist. Even without the external influences like consumerism, this development would inevitably lead to us seeing a much wider range of options in every area of our lives, and would also lead to us comparing ourselves with other people more, or envying their lifestyles or aspiring to be like them.

## Internal influences

So, there are plenty of powerful external forces that influence us into striving and yearning. We are not simply moulded by outside powers though – we also have a range of inbuilt tendencies that could contribute to this behaviour too. We will explore a couple of them.

### Social programming

It's clear that human beings are strongly motivated by social factors such as the desire to fit in to a social group. These clearly contribute to our desire to 'keep up' with other people in various ways, even if we subconsciously know that the actual things we are striving for are nonsense in themselves. It's often more about the social 'fitting in' than the actual goal.

### The need to maximise

Perhaps the desire to 'maximise' (money, possessions, achievements etc) is also partly a natural trait – a 'rule of thumb' to help us simplify the world and do the things that will best aid our survival? One could imagine the maxim 'If in doubt, try to get as much as possible' being very useful in our hunter gatherer days where we needed to get as much food and other resources as we could in order to survive. But things have changed. In the modern western world of plenty we don't need to 'maximise' in order to survive, and in fact many of our modern ailments (heart disease, obesity etc.) are problems related to the tendency to maximise. Perhaps we need to grow out of this desire to maximise?



So, in conclusion, some of the striving that we exhibit is natural – like desiring to be more self confident if our lack of it is making us unhappy – and some of it is understandable. But we can also see that a vast amount of the striving and yearning that dominates our lives is based on fantasies, goals and values that have been made up by other people without our real happiness or interests in mind.



Part 3

What is it  
doing to us?

# What is it doing to us?

We've now seen some of the root causes of our striving and yearning, but what effect is all of this really having on us? This section will explore some of the main consequences of our striving and yearning in the modern world.

## It's making us stressed

The pressure of striving and yearning for everything can be incredibly stressful. We can put ourselves under pressure to achieve things or meet certain goals, and this pressure can place a physical and mental strain on us.

It is not only this 'not-quite-achieving our goals' that causes us stress – it is also the things that we do in the pursuit of these goals – for example, commuting long distances and working long hours in order to climb the career ladder or achieve greater material success.

## It's making us discontented

We're so busy looking outward (either at other people, other possibilities, goals we are pursuing or the future – things that we're not doing or not fulfilling) that we're failing to realise what we have. We don't look inward to see who we really are, or appreciate the present. So, we're not happy with who we are or what we have – because we're not really aware of these things – as we're

constantly looking outwards rather than inwards.

We're never at peace with ourselves – we're always wanting better or more – and this is just the way that some of the people trying to influence us want it.

This is probably the most acute problem caused by our striving – as although stress can have serious and debilitating effects, if we are failing to focus on the most basic elements of our lives (like our identities and what we want from life), we are unlikely to live happy or fulfilled lives – which is surely the point of living?

## It's making us unsure of what we want

Many readers will have heard the phrase 'The paradox of choice'. It is also the name of a very interesting book by Barry Schwartz that shows how having too much choice can actually have a negative effect on us.

We argued earlier that freedom is perhaps the most important value in western society – in and of itself and because it lets people live the lives they want. The thinking follows that the way to maximise freedom is to maximise choice. So, in our modern capitalist society, choice is seen as a consistently good thing.

But this is simply not the case. We now have so much choice (of consumer goods, ketchups, careers etc.) that it can be more difficult for us to make choices and the stress of making such choices can be bad for us too. We can also end up spending time making unimportant choices that would be better spent on more important things.

## It's leading to financial ruin

More than half the households in Britain had a financial debt in 2008/10 – not including mortgages<sup>3</sup>. The desire for more material goods, travel and the trappings of an aspirational lifestyle is not just held by people who can afford some of these things. Many people can't afford these things but are spending beyond their means to get them.

This problem has been exacerbated by the rise of the social scourge of payday lenders – organisations who loan 'easy money' to people at high interest rates, and who lead less well-off people into a spiral of debt that is hard to escape from. A recent report by the Unite union noted that “workers are borrowing £660 a month to make ends meet, three times as much as a year ago.”<sup>4</sup>

The rise of debt shows how we are being suckered by the idea that we can have it all, even when it is obvious that we can't. People of all levels of wealth can end up spending beyond their means in their pursuit of a fantasy consumption lifestyle – resulting in the grind and stress of debt through chasing a pointless dream.

It's also interesting to see how governments fail to take strong enough steps to regulate lenders so that vulnerable people don't get sucked up into these debt problems. Why do they fail to do this? Because it damages the country's potential for economic growth – and again, we see this idea trumping the idea of looking after people in society.





Part 4

# 10 steps for non-achievers

# 10 steps for non-achievers

So, we have seen the problems that can emerge from too much striving and how they are caused. It's clearly an important issue that's affecting our lives in profound ways, but what can we do about it?

This section contains 10 simple actions people can take to live lives of blissful non-achievement rather than of tortured, unfulfilled yearning and striving.

This doesn't mean that this is a manifesto for doing nothing. There's nothing wrong with putting effort into something; indeed, many of the most fulfilling moments in a person's life occur as a result of expending a lot of effort on a difficult or risky task. This booklet, and the following suggestions, are instead for people who don't want to value themselves or others based on the spurious trappings of achievement and other externally-focussed values.

## 1 Stop yearning

A massive variety of things in the modern world instil a sense of yearning in us, and this yearning can make our lives feel painful, stressed and unfulfilled.

Buddhists – quite sensibly – believe that it’s this sense of yearning that you need to get rid of in order to have a contented, happy life. Stop striving and you can be happy with what you have and who you are.

We can add more detail to this idea. We should stop looking externally for hooks to tie our sense of happiness, identity and well-being to (and resist those that try to hook us), and stop being dragged along by the ebb and flow of what other people are doing or saying.

It’s not as easy in practice as it sounds, but you can do it by checking yourself each time you feel yourself having this sense of yearning. It’s quite easy to identify – a bit like a feeling of stress, pressure, even a headache coming on. Remind yourself this is unhelpful and just deflate the yearning. And carry on with your life. Soon it will become a habit.

But remember, this stuff will be everywhere, in many areas of your life so you’ll need to be vigilant and aware of it creeping up on you regularly.



## 2 Live your own life

An essential accompaniment to the idea of resisting being ‘carried along by the external tide’ is for us to be the autonomous authors of our own lives. In some ways, this is the key to a fulfilled life, where you make the best of what you have.

Stand back from your life and look at yourself. Think about what really matters to you and what you genuinely like – not the things that you feel you should like or want – but the things you like and value on your own terms. Then resolve to be comfortable with this and live in a way that is true to yourself – not how you think others want you to live.

There’s really no choice but to work out what sort of life is genuinely best for you and then to live it. Being pulled around by external desires, standards and influences is a recipe for discontent and confusion. We need to be autonomous.

And remember you can only live your own life – not someone else’s.

## 3 Accept your limitations

If you want to change certain things about yourself, then do. But don’t set this as an obsessive goal for your life or see yourself in a negative light until you reach it (if you do) – accept everything about who you are at this moment and be happy with it.

#### 4 Make a decision

Some people can get paralysed by the number of choices and expectations in their lives, and end up doing very little. So, instead, let's realise that we can't do and achieve everything in our lives, so we must make some choices as to which things we genuinely want to do.

#### 5 Don't regret your choices

Once we've made these choices, we should focus on them, appreciate them and enjoy them. There is no point in regretting them – this will only add needless sadness and frustration to our lives.

#### 6 Don't focus on what you're missing

Don't think about what you're missing in your life, or the choices you have sacrificed or turned down to live the life you want. You can only live your own life and do one thing at a time. Instead, focus on what you are doing and enjoy that!

#### 7 Don't set goals

In a video interview discussing the lessons he had learned from life so far<sup>5</sup>, Stephen Fry noted an interesting thought – he suggested “The worst thing you can do in life is set yourself goals.” You either fail to meet the goal and see yourself as a failure or you achieve the goal and then say ‘now what?’ – and realise the futility of the goal itself anyway.

So, try to avoid setting goals for ourselves in life – particularly materials ones, as these will keep you from becoming who you really are.

In fact, we can re-phrase this advice to simply ‘stop chasing’. For example, we should stop chasing happiness – because by doing so we will find it out of our grasp. It’s a sure-fire way not to be happy. All you can do is enjoy living and appreciate life – that is the way to a happy, decent life.

The ideal of perfect happiness is an illusion that the self-help industry has become rich on. We all have difficulties in our lives and need resilience to deal with them. Don’t base your current happiness on achieving the goal of perfect happiness in the future – enjoy what you have now, and you will be happier.

## 8 Life is not a list

In the modern world, many people seem to evaluate the value of their (and other people’s) lives by lists of things they have to maximise – the gadgets they own, books they’ve read, places they’ve been, experiences they’ve had. Don’t be one of these people – these lives must be generally shallow and unfulfilled. Do the things you want to do and enjoy them for their own sake. Don’t let your life become a list-ticking exercise.

## 9 Understand other lives

Try to see the reality of the lives of people that you might envy or are striving to emulate. Recognise the sacrifices and disadvantages of these lives – as there will be many. Your life and choices will seem much better after doing this!

## 10 Realise nobody's perfect

Recognise the reality of what goes on in other people's heads – especially the people you admire and might strive to emulate. Although their issues may be different, realise they have as many insecurities, issues and fears as you – possibly more. Perfect people and perfect happiness are illusions.

## Conclusion – live your life – not someone else's

So, the conclusion seems to be that we should stop this striving for change and improvement and simply learn to accept and love ourselves for what we are. Sure, we can try to work on some things if we want, and external forces (like capitalism and other things that have particular – and entirely unfounded – views of what people should be like) will always put pressure on us to tell us we should be seeking to improve ourselves. But we should start by putting our defences up and rejecting all this – and just be happy with what we are and be under no pressure to change.

Then, if we want to, we can each prioritise the things we want to get better at, based on what matters to us individually and not what other people tell us to value – otherwise we'll try to be better at everything and will feel dissatisfied with ourselves.

And of course we should reserve the right to not get better at anything if we want. Because not developing yourself is exercising your right to self determination.

Overall, accept the cards you've been dealt in life, and realise that other people aren't holding all the best cards – despite what adverts, other people and other external messages would have you believe. Take responsibility for enjoying and getting best use of the cards you have.

Don't try to live someone else's idea of a good life or their idea of what you should be. It has to be based on what you honestly want – otherwise you'll look back on your life (like lots of materially successful people have, as well as countless people who didn't succeed in their striving for their 'false' goals) and only realise at the end the things that really mattered to you. Wouldn't that be a shame?

## Footnotes

- 1 Quiet, Susan Cain, Penguin 2013, p.266
- 2 [www.epigee.org/the-barbie-effect.html](http://www.epigee.org/the-barbie-effect.html)
- 3 [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/was/wealth-in-great-britain-wave-2/the-burden-of-property-debt-in-great-britain/sty-household-debt--for-theme-page-.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/was/wealth-in-great-britain-wave-2/the-burden-of-property-debt-in-great-britain/sty-household-debt--for-theme-page-.html)
- 4 [www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/09/09/payday-loans-trebled-in-past-year-says-unite\\_n\\_3892967.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/09/09/payday-loans-trebled-in-past-year-says-unite_n_3892967.html)
- 5 [www.openculture.com/2012/08/what\\_i\\_wish\\_i\\_knew\\_when\\_i\\_was\\_18\\_stephen\\_fry.html](http://www.openculture.com/2012/08/what_i_wish_i_knew_when_i_was_18_stephen_fry.html)

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# How to achieve less

We seem to spend most of our lives striving. Striving to earn more money, gain more self confidence, be better parents, travel more, be more attractive, have better relationships – the list is endless.

But what is this doing to us? And why should we spend our lives striving?

This booklet explores our modern obsession with striving and provides some practical tips that could help you to stop striving and start living.