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Introduction

Are you satisfied with your life?

If your answer is yes, this book isn't for you. Keep doing what you're doing.

If your answer is no, does the following resonate?

From the outside, you seem like you have it figured out. You have spent your whole life doing all the “right” things to get you to this point. You're on the track that other people dream of, with the job you worked so hard to get, at a company that excited you when you joined it. This feels like it should be your happily ever after, and yet you're not satisfied.

And you can't figure out what you're doing wrong. You're doing what has always worked for you, the actions that previously got you into college, that got you jobs, that got you promoted.

Despite all the external validation, you're unhappy, maybe even miserable or burning out. You feel exhausted and drained at the end of each day. Your life is an endless stream of tasks and emails and meetings, with no way to get it all done. It feels like Tetris - each time you go up a level, the game speeds up and sends more at you, and eventually you get drowned in pieces and lose.

But what else can you do? Losing isn't an option, because the work needs to get done, and you know how to do the work, and your boss and team are depending on you.

You dream of a change, something different, but what could it be? You come up with ideas, but they all sound impossibly unrealistic. You're tired of feeling this way, but you don't see how you can change your life without everything falling apart.

I used to be you. I spent my whole life exceeding expectations, getting top grades so I could get into a top university, building my skills at several jobs before getting the opportunity to work at Google, tasked with [responsibilities that felt so important that I could not fail](#). But a couple years in, I was working 8am to midnight each day, including most weekends, drowning in emails and meetings and tasks, and feeling miserable.

Now I work the hours I choose, spending time on work I find meaningful and inspiring. I spend quality time with my family, while still having time for my own pursuits like writing this book. I am designing my own life, day by day, to create impact in alignment with my values.

What changed?

I realized I had been letting other people run my life: my parents, my managers, my coworkers, my friends, even random people I just met once. I had set myself up with the impossible task to keep everybody around me happy by delivering above their expectations all the time.

And I realized I had a choice. I could keep going as I had been, letting my success be defined by the expectations of others. Or I could find a new path, where I define my own success.

As part of reshaping my own life to explore new possibilities, I changed careers to become an executive coach, helping leaders grow their impact by sharing the principles and mindsets that I used to change my own life. I wrote this book to help you start on your own journey of discovery and creation.

The advice in this book is simple to understand, but not easy to do. We all know we should follow the simple advice of “Eat healthy, and exercise”, but how many of us actually do it? I often tell my clients that nothing will change as a result of our sessions, unless they do something different with what they learn. The same applies to the advice in this book; nothing will happen because you read this book, unless you do something different with what you read.

Your life will change when you change your life. By sharing what worked for me and for my clients, I hope that you will take a fresh look at your current life, and feel empowered to try just one experiment to see how things could be different. That's the moment that can change everything.

Once you realize that you have the power to make a different choice, you will start to see ever more choices you can make to create new possibilities. And as you keep making new choices, you may find yourself creating a life that would have been unimaginable for your previous self.

This approach worked for me, it has worked for the many successful leaders I have coached, and it will work for you, if you are willing to embrace the process and put in the work.

Let's start with the key principles that will guide you in this journey.

The only thing you control is your next action

You can't change the past. It's already happened, and nothing you do will change that. If you don't like what happened, you can avoid responsibility by looking for somebody to blame, or other excuses. You can spend hours beating yourself up and wishing you had done things differently. But to get different results, you have to learn from what happened, and take different actions going forward.

You can't control the future. The world is too uncertain and complex for you to know that you will get the future you want, no matter how good your plan is. I had great plans for how 2020 would unfold for my coaching business, and the Covid pandemic destroyed them. And now that I'm a parent of young kids, I am learning to hold my plans even more lightly.

You can't control others. You can try to influence and persuade them, but they choose their actions, not you. In fact, what they do is more often a response to their own experiences, rather than having anything to do with you.

So if you can't change the past or the future, and you can't control others, then what's left is the present moment and yourself. What you can actually control is choosing your next action with purpose. In other words...

You have a choice

With control comes responsibility. If your next action is the only thing you can control, you can take responsibility by intentionally choosing your actions. This includes the stories you tell yourself about the events that happen around you, and how you choose to react to those stories.

Or you can give that choice to others. Instead of choosing what you do, you can let your manager choose, or your parents, or your friends, or your community. These others may not even have to

tell you what they want, as they can show up as nagging voices in your head that you have internalized based on what they previously told you.

But giving that choice to others means you have given away the one thing you control, which is why you feel helpless and stuck.

Victor Frankl, whose book *Man's Search for Meaning* describes his experiences living moment to moment in a WWII concentration camp where he could die at any moment, had a wonderful quote in this vein:

"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

That space is where you have a choice, to decide whether to respond as you have previously, or to choose a new option that might open up new possibilities. Your freedom comes from taking the responsibility to make that choice.

I'm not saying you have easy choices. There can be difficult consequences, and your past choices may constrain you in real and unfortunate ways. If you stretch financially to buy a house beyond your means, and the economy enters a downturn, that mortgage will constrain your actions - you might have to stay in a job you hate because it's well-paying and stable, or if you choose to leave, it might affect your ability to keep the house. There's no easy choice, but that doesn't mean you can't leave your job - you just can't leave your job AND keep paying the mortgage.

I once burned out so badly at Google that I had a 103 degree fever on Christmas day and was sick for a week. I had been working 100+ hour weeks for months because I felt I had to prove that I belonged at Google after getting fired from my previous job. I had to earn a promotion by exceeding expectations on all the work that my manager gave to me. But lying in bed that week, I finally asked myself whether that promotion was worth sacrificing my health, my happiness, and my time with my friends and family.

This was my epiphany moment where I first realized I even had a choice. I had spent my whole life taking the expectations of others (my parents, teachers, managers, and coworkers) and exceeding them to earn the "gold star". Once I was given a task, the only options I saw were

success or failure at completing the task. But keeping up with the requirements of that job was destroying me. And that meant I finally saw a new possibility for myself.

I could choose to keep going as I had been, trying to exceed expectations no matter what.

Or I could make a different choice. When given a new task, instead of saying “Yes” and destroying myself to deliver on that task, could I say “No”? I had never done that before.

I decided that I no longer wanted to continue working as I had been, and shared my decision with my manager when I came back to work in January.

Even though I didn’t get fired, that choice still had consequences. My manager told me that if I couldn’t handle the work, they would give it to somebody who could, and took away half my team. They also slashed my performance rating which meant I lost any chance at that promotion.

The reason I had never even considered the choice of saying “No” to new responsibilities was that these consequences had previously felt like they would mean the end of my world, that I had completely failed as a person and had no value.

But that’s not what happened. Instead of the soul-crushing defeat I had feared, I felt an uplifting freedom. Rather than spending my evenings and weekends on work I found meaningless, I worked 40 hours a week for the same salary, and invested the time I got back into my health, my friends, and other things I found meaningful. I had failed to meet expectations for that job, but I had chosen myself over Google, and that choice changed my life in ways that are still unfolding to this day.

You have a choice too. You choose how you spend your time in each moment and each day. You choose how you show up in your interactions. And I want you to have the same epiphany I had, that you have more possibilities and choices available to you than you even realize.

And once you see that, I am asking you to choose what matters most to you in life.

What tradeoffs do you choose? What will take precedence over the other things in your life?

We rarely make these choices consciously or intentionally. We discover what works well for us as a child or in school, and keep doing that, because...

Change means letting go

Once we learn a set of habits that bring us success, we keep doing them even when our situation changes. To navigate the next set of challenges requires letting go of what once worked and learning a new set of skills and actions. This makes sense! If certain mindsets and actions have brought you success for decades, you want to keep doing them. And yet they may be the exact set of behaviors that is now keeping you from moving forward.

I'll share a few common mindsets that I see in myself and others:

- I must solve problems myself. If I ask for help, it will appear as if I'm incompetent or don't know what I'm doing, so I must figure it out. This mindset leads to great success in school and early in one's career when performance is evaluated on an individual basis. However, as we take on more and bigger challenges, it can also quickly lead to a state of overwhelm, because we can't let go of any of the problems and can't ask for help from other people to get things done.
- Working harder is the answer. Effort is rewarded as a child, where you get credit for showing your work, and activities like sports and music teach us that more work led to a proportional amount of success - if you practice more, you get better. So we continue to apply that mental model in life, because we believe that working hard will inevitably lead to proportional results. Unfortunately, the world is often nonlinear and non-intuitive ([a central teaching of systems thinking](#)), so working hard on the wrong things is ineffective and may even reinforce the current state of affairs. So rather than helping, working hard can lead to burnout, because the harder we work, the further we get behind.
- I can't say no. Saying yes to my manager brought me great success so I have to keep doing it. Saying no to others may make people feel like I'm not collaborative, and may lead to hard conversations. So I say yes to everything, loading myself down with more and more commitments until I can no longer reliably deliver.

Each of those behaviors is very effective in the right situation, and delivers great performance!

That's why letting go in this way is particularly difficult; your short-term performance will likely get worse as a result. Your current behaviors have been optimized for your current job, and changing them will mean you do worse at that job. That feels icky!

But continuing to practice the skills for your current job is not helping to prepare you for the next level. Taking a step back may mean a short-term decline in performance, while also being necessary to start experimenting with new behaviors that will set you up for a giant step forward.

Again, you have a choice. It may not seem like a choice, because you've spent your whole life on a linear path where your performance is always improving, and any decline feels like a failure. But learning new skills means pushing through the discomfort of being an unskilled beginner. If you knew that discomfort could unlock leaps in your performance, would you make that choice?

These choices illustrate that while we may want to blame others for our situation (our parents, our managers, the expectations of others), we still have a choice as to what actions we take. If we do not see those choices, and/or choose not to make different choices, then we are responsible for the consequences of those choices. Our refusal to let go of our current patterns is how we are keeping change from happening.

I want you to start asking yourself the question:

How are you the problem?

When you feel stuck, this book will help you understand the ways in which you might be contributing to that stuckness through your unwillingness to let go of your expectations of yourself or others, or of commitments you've previously made, or of an identity that no longer serves you.

Once you see how you are part of the problem, you have a choice.

- 1) You can keep doing what you're doing and stay stuck¹.
- 2) You start experimenting with different actions that might change the situation and get you unstuck.

To be clear, I am not saying you are the only problem. I write this as a white-passing man in America, who was brought up with financial security and the guidance to get into a great college. I recognize that [my privilege has sheltered me from having to face external obstacles](#), so I am more focused on the internal obstacles. I do believe these principles apply regardless of your relative privilege, as similar concepts are cited by Shellye Archambeau's book *Unapologetically Ambitious* and Arlan Hamilton's book, [It's About Damn Time](#). But I am not the right person to write about how to face structural racism or economic inequality, so this book is designed for people like me and my clients, who are often the major contributors to keeping ourselves stuck, and have the capacity to do something about it.

As an example, most leaders know what they should do - they've read all the advice, and have learned the best practices. But they're not doing them, because there is something in their own head getting in the way². A startup CEO told me that "I know I should delegate more, and I know I need to give this difficult feedback, but I just don't do it."

He had built his career on solving problems himself by diving into the details and providing the answer. And that worked great when the company was 10 people, even 20. But as the company grew to 30 or 40 people, he became the bottleneck. Rather than give people feedback or coach them how to handle things, he just did it himself. As a result, every problem had to wait on him, because he had never learned to trust others to solve problems without him.

For the company to keep growing, he had let go of the feeling of being a superhero, swooping in to save the day. Instead, he had to build a team that could handle problems without him, which felt scary! He had thrived on feeling indispensable, where the whole company rested on his shoulders. If people could do the work without him, what was his role? How would he add

¹ Jerry Colonna, the "CEO Whisperer" superstar coach, often asks: "How are you complicit in creating the circumstances you say you don't want?" It's not meant as a blaming question, but to reflect on how your actions contribute to the situation staying as it is.

² Kegan and Lahey call this [Immunity to Change](#), the unconscious commitments to how we do things today that prevent us from meeting the conscious commitments that we say we want.

value? Those are difficult questions, so of course he was unconsciously resisting that unpleasant path and sticking to what he knew how to do. But the pain of his situation grew until he realized that he was the problem, and chose the path of growth, to take on the discomfort of letting go, and starting anew.³

How to read this book

The rest of this book will use the principles of *How Are You The Problem?* and *You Have A Choice* to guide you out of your current situation to create a life that feels more aligned and true to yourself. I will offer a variety of questions and exercises to help you find a way forward, and share stories of me and my clients struggling through these challenges.

Here's what you will find in the chapters ahead:

1. **Aim:** To start on the journey requires picking a direction. How do you want things to be different?
2. **Accept Yourself:** Reflect on why you might be blocking yourself from the change you want. You will move forward more effectively when you start with who you actually are, rather than starting from an unrealistic version of yourself.
3. **Accept Others:** Similarly, accepting other people as they actually are will help you plan more effectively how to work with and influence them.
4. **Experiment and Iterate:** Once you have accepted the reality of where you and others are, you start trying experiments to see what moves things in the direction you want. Each experiment is designed to learn what works and doesn't work for you, and if you consistently do more of what works for you, you will move towards your aim.
5. **Address the Blockers:** There are several common patterns that block progress, and I identify them and offer ways to address them.
6. **Attention and Accountability:** Staying on the path requires paying attention, because your previous behaviors are wired into your brain after bringing you past success. This

³ Jerry Weinberg has a wonderful illustration of this in his book *Becoming a Technical Leader*, where he writes that we think growth looks a steady linear up-and-to-the-right increase. But what growth actually looks like is a set of plateaus, where we learn a new set of skills, plateau in performance, then fall backwards in performance by letting go of those skills and learning a new set of skills to reach the next plateau. It never feels "right" to perform worse, but that unwillingness to let go of their current performance level is what keeps people stuck.

chapter offers ideas on how to hold yourself accountable to continuing to do the uncomfortable work of letting go to change and grow.

7. Aspiration: Once you have learned these skills to grow and change, you can think bigger. What will be your aspiration to change the world?

This book is filled with ideas and practices designed to help you on your journey. Don't expect to absorb it all on the first read. These practices are easy to understand, but difficult to do consistently, because they require letting go of what previously worked for us.

My clients often leave the first session inspired by having a new understanding of how they are the problem, and a couple experiments they could try to get unstuck. They arrive at the second session dispirited because they thought that knowing the idea would be enough, and instead found they struggled to make a different choice despite the best of intentions to run the experiment. Here's how that conversation goes:

Me: "Did you try the experiment even once?"

Them: "Yes."

Me: "That's great!!"

Them: "But I only did it once! I thought I would do it consistently now that I know what to do!"

Me: "But you did it once. One is greater than zero, which is how many times you would have done it otherwise. And what results did you get?"

Them: "It went better than I expected."

Me: "Great! Maybe you'll try the experiment twice now that you've gotten some positive results!"

This will not be an easy path. But I have applied these principles to transform my own life over the last decade, starting from that moment where I had the epiphany that I had a choice between continuing to burn myself out for my job to meet the expectations of others, or exploring a different possibility for my life.

Now I control how I spend my time each day, inspired by the work I do to help others make the kinds of transformational changes I made to my life and career, while committing the time and energy to be the father and partner I want to be.

This book is about the principles that drove those changes for me and my clients, by helping people break through the assumptions and expectations that have kept them stuck, exhausted, burnt-out and miserable. It starts with one core concept that smashes through everything:

You have a choice.

If you take that idea seriously, and change your behavior as a result, you will find a new path forward. Rather than feeling stuck in a life that doesn't fit you, you will intentionally create a meaningful life for yourself.

Let's begin.

N.b. I moved these sections to later chapters (Accept Myself and ACcept Others) where they fit more thematically.

Each of those behaviors was the “right” answer for the situation in which I learned them, and they drove my success. And what I’ve learned since is...

There is no single right answer

We are trained by school to believe there is a “right” answer that we can find if we only work hard enough or are smart enough. But classes and problem sets are constrained to focus on a limited domain where there can be a single right answer.

In the real world, we often struggle with multiple conflicting domains with multiple “right” answers. For instance, let’s take me as I write these words:

- The “right” answer for my coaching business is to work harder, and take on more clients, as I have been trained to believe that more is always better when it comes to work.
- The “right” answer for my family is to spend more time with my kids and my wife, rather than letting my attention be dominated by work.
- The “right” answer as an author is to spend more time writing, withdrawing from other activities (like my coaching or my family) so I can focus on this book.
- The “right” answer for my physical health is to spend more time exercising, sleeping, eating better, and resting so that my body can continue to support my other activities.
- The “right” answer for my mental health is to spend more time meditating and journaling, and giving myself more time to recharge rather than overschedule myself.
- The “right” answer as a social being is to spend more time with friends who help me feel like I belong, so that [I feel less lonely and stressed](#).
- The “right” answer as a citizen is to spend more time getting out the vote, working on social causes, and contributing to my community.

And there’s still more! I “should” also be keeping up with the news, and reading more books, and cooking more meals at home, and learning new skills. It’s a little daunting because...

You can't do it all

There is far too much to do, and no possible way to do all those things I “should” do. And yet I keep getting tripped up because I know the “right” thing to do in each area, and beat myself up for not doing it.

The constraint, of course, is time and attention. I can't do it all because there's only so many hours in the day. Each individual commitment feels attainable, but in aggregate, they far exceed my capacity.

I can already hear you, the reader, saying “But Eric, you don't understand, I really do have to do it all - I can't let any of these things go!”, even as you are exhausted from the constant stress of keeping up with all of your responsibilities.

You don't realize you have a choice, because your unconscious default is likely that you are choosing your job over everything else. Only after you get all of your work “done” will you spend time with your family, or exercise, or take a vacation. But that never happens, because most managers will constantly ask for more from their employees until they collapse.⁴

And yet you can make a different choice, one where you stop and do something else before all of the work is done. But to do that would mean that you would have to...

Accept people as they are

We often cling to the way things “should” be rather than accept reality as it is.

- I “should” be able to do it all.
- My coworker “should” want to work with me and not stomp on my turf.
- My manager “should” look out for me and support me in difficult situations.
- My company “should” make sure I'm appropriately compensated and promote me without me asking. I “shouldn't” have to play politics to get what I deserve.
- My spouse “should” take care of me, and never hurt my feelings.

⁴ I'll refrain from the political rant that exploiting people until they are completely exhausted is a “feature” of Western capitalism going back to the days of slavery and colonialism.

Whenever I hear one of these “should” statements from my clients, I ask them “What evidence do you have that things are actually that way?” Most of the time, they will sheepishly admit they have no evidence. They can describe in great detail what will actually happen even though it does not match what they think “should” happen e.g. “My manager is going to get involved and micromanage the details, when I wish they would just stay out of the way and let me handle it”.

My next question is then “So why are you surprised or disappointed by this behavior?” If it happens every time, there shouldn’t be any surprise; you’re not surprised when you let go of an object, and it falls to the ground. But we want people to be who we want them to be, rather than accept them as they are.

There’s a Buddhist idea that suffering is the gap between our expectations and reality, so the suffering comes because we get attached to how we want things to be, rather than accept reality as it is.

When we update our expectations to be more accurate, we are less surprised and more calm, because then we are not constantly disappointed by what actually happens, and can take actions in that reality to get the results we want. That leads me to ask...

How are you the problem?

Jerry Colonna has a wonderful coaching question: “How are you complicit in creating the circumstances you say you don’t want?” He’s not blaming you, but he’s asking you to reflect on how your actions contribute to the situation. Until you take responsibility for your own actions, and recognize you can make a different choice, you will continue to be stuck.

I am not saying you are the only problem, of course. I write this as a white-passing man in America, who was brought up with financial security and the guidance to get into a great college. I recognize that [my privilege has sheltered me from having to face external obstacles](#), so of course I am more focused on the internal obstacles. I do believe these principles apply regardless of your relative privilege, as similar concepts are cited by Shellye Archambeau in her book *Unapologetically Ambitious* and in [It's About Damn Time, by Arlan Hamilton](#). But I am not the right person to write about how to face structural racism or economic inequality, so this

book is designed for people like me and my clients, who are the major contributors to keeping ourselves stuck, and want to do something about it.

As an example, most leaders know what they should do - they've read all the advice, and have learned the best practices. But they're not doing them, because there is something in their own head getting in the way⁵. A startup CEO told me that "I know I should delegate more, and I know I need to give this difficult feedback, but I just don't do it."

Here's why - it is scary! Doing things differently means letting go of the mindsets and reactions that brought him success. He has gotten great results by diving in and solving problems himself for his whole life, and that approach is what got him the chance to become CEO. But those behaviors, those choices, are now the problem holding him back from greater success aka "what got you here won't get you there".

He needs to let go of those behaviors, and learn new behaviors that he doesn't yet know how to do. He has to go back to being a beginner that will make mistakes, rather than continue operating as the expert who already has the right answer and knows how to solve the problems. Of course his unconscious mind is resisting that unpleasant path! But growth requires doing something new and uncomfortable.⁶

Realizing how you are part of the problem means that you have a choice.

You can keep doing what you are doing, and stay stuck.

Or you can accept your reality as it is, and choose a different next action, one where you let go of trying to do it all and instead choose what you will prioritize.

⁵ Kegan and Lahey call this [Immunity to Change](#), the unconscious commitments to how we do things today that prevent us from meeting the conscious commitments that we say we want.

⁶ Jerry Weinberg has a wonderful illustration of this in his book *Becoming a Technical Leader*, where he writes that we think growth looks a steady linear up-and-to-the-right increase. But what growth actually looks like is a set of plateaus, where we learn a new set of skills, plateau in performance, then fall backwards in performance by letting go of those skills and learning a new set of skills to reach the next plateau. It never feels "right" to perform worse, but that unwillingness to let go of their current performance level is what keeps people stuck.

How to read this book

The rest of this book will use these principles of How Are You The Problem and You Have A Choice to guide you out of your stuckness, and create a life that is more aligned with your true self. Taking inspiration from design thinking, the rough outline is to:

1. Aim: How do you want your life to be different?
2. Accept: Observe what is keeping you stuck, first by understanding how you are the problem, enforcing the rules that constrain your actions. Then develop a better understanding of how you and other people actually work, rather than expect or hope they will magically change to suit you. Once you accept yourself and others as they actually are, you can plot a path forward to a different life.
3. Assess and Experiment: I trained as a scientist, and believe in the scientific method as a method of learning. You will come up with a hypothesis of how you want your life to be different, and try a small, safe experiment to close the gap between your current reality and that possible future. Assess the results, learn from the experiment, and come up with a new hypothesis.⁷ As you experiment, you'll gain more clarity on what actually matters to you, and what works for you. Keep doing more of the things that energize you, and less of the things that drain you, and try another set of experiments.
4. Address the Blockers as you become more aware of what keeps you from your desired intentions and experiments.
5. Pay Attention to when you are getting off track, and learn to bring yourself back to your desired focus⁸.
6. Aspiration: Once you've built the skills of experimenting, learning and focus, you can start to dream bigger, and decide how you want to change the world. What impact do you want to have? How do you want to be remembered? Start experimenting and focusing your way towards that intentional life.

⁷ Alternatively, if you're a Lean Startup fan, this is another way of describing the Build, Measure, Learn loop.

⁸ Steve Jobs once said: "People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on. But that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas that there are."

James Clear, author of Atomic Habits, said [something similar](#): "When you say no, you are only saying no to one option. When you say yes, you are saying no to every other option."

This will not be an easy path. But I have applied these principles to transform my own life over the last decade, starting from that moment where I chose to no longer burn myself out for my job, to my present state where I choose how I spend my time each day.

A decade ago I was hopelessly single, driven by work in a prestigious dream job I'd fought my entire career to earn. I had success by anyone's definition of the term. I was also directionless, miserable, and constantly burnt out. I felt alone and stagnant. But I was doing everything I was supposed to do, and expected to do.

Today, I've found love and family, and built a successful and fulfilling coaching career helping people make the kinds of transformational changes I made to my life and career.

This book is about the principles that drive those changes, and have proven themselves time and again to help people also break through the assumptions and expectations that have kept them stuck, exhausted, burnt-out and miserable. It starts with one core concept that smashes through everything:

You have a choice.

If you take that idea seriously, and change your behavior as a result, you will also find your own path forward, one where you no longer feel stuck in a life that doesn't fit you, and instead intentionally create the life that you choose.

Let's begin.

Next chapter: [Aim and Get Started](#)