

Sasha Chapin, journalist, writer and chess-obsessive, shares 30 life lessons he's learnt...

1. I know what makes people grow more reliably than anything else. It is: taking on a difficult project with some amount of public accountability. This can be large or small: a lecture series, a business, a blog, a house, a child, etc.
2. It's strange, but I know that it's common to resist positive emotions, as well as negative ones. Ask yourself, next time you're doing something enjoyable: are you really surrendering to the full enjoyment available here? The answer will often be no. Perhaps this has something to do with how displays of rapturous delight are often discouraged in adolescence.
3. I've worked with hundreds of unhappy creative people, and I can boil down most of my transferable insight into one sentence. I know that it feels horrible to create from a place of defence. For example: you will find it exceedingly difficult to write if your motive is trying to convince people that you are *not dumb*, or *not boring*, or if you're hoping that you will not offend anybody.
4. I know that most people overrate the difficulty of hard conversations, and underrate how good it is to have them. Conflict avoidance slowly rots your whole life, and many people are about eight awkward discussions from a much-improved existence. In other words, go squash all of your beefs.
5. I know that the people who will make you feel warm and fuzzy when you're sad, and the people who will give you brutally honest feedback, are usually different people. Ideally you want to have relationships with both kinds, and reward them for their strengths, rather than getting mad at them for failing to do what they're bad at.
6. I know that people really and truly cannot read your mind. It's easy to think that people are ignoring your wants or emotions because they don't care about you. But it's likely that they have no idea what those are. If you've told them, they've likely forgotten, and may need a reminder — they have their own whole crowded bubble of consciousness going on!
7. I know that travel is valuable because most knowledge can't be written down. The most crucial info about a society is how it feels to be there—the rhythms of street life, where and when people eat meals, how gender works. You can read a million things about Japan without knowing the bodily experience of walking around in a truly high-trust society, for example.
8. I know that talent doesn't feel like you're amazing. It feels like the difficulties that trouble others are mysteriously absent in your case. Don't ask yourself where your true gifts lie. Ask what other people seem weirdly bad at.

9. I know that environmental influence is the most effective form of behavioural control. Accordingly, if you want radical change, radically change your environment. Being in the wrong city will cancel out years of self-improvement.
10. I know how to spot real confidence. Look for people who are fluid with status—who allow themselves to be the butt of a joke, or accept criticism, but also avoid false modesty, and inhabit the spotlight when it falls on them. One might call this a balance between dignity and humility. Pro tip: people who always cling to high status aren't confident in the normal sense, they are cult leader types, which is a different animal.
11. I know that sometimes people unfairly collapse reality via cliché. Your money management issue might be described as a “first world problem,” or your changing desires a “midlife crisis,” by yourself or others. This is a way of dismissing your complexity.
12. I know that unless you are exceptionally good with ripostes, the best way to win a fight with an angry person on the internet is to not respond. They will look ridiculous fuming impotently on their own.
13. I know that if you tell someone “we should keep in touch,” you will not keep in touch. Instead say, “I'm going to schedule a phone call with you in two months to catch up, I'll send you the invite — if we need to adjust when we get closer to the date, that's fine.”
14. I am not the funniest person, but I am funny enough, and I know how to become funnier if you're not naturally gifted at comedy. Simply say the stupidest things that enter your head, in a normal tone of voice.
15. I know that it's easy to observe when people are feeling insecure. Notice how much they are mentioning their positive attributes, material possessions, or important friends, when there's no conversational reason for this to be occurring other than a status claim. It is harder to spot yourself doing this, but it is worth the effort — you are likely doing it occasionally. I certainly do.
16. Listening is a neglected social skill.
17. I know that there are two modes of experience: appreciative, and evaluative. Concrete example: let's say you're listening to a piece of music. Are you sinking into it, awash in emotions? You're in the appreciative mode. Are you the mixing engineer, listening to the snare hits to make sure they're consistent? You're in the evaluative mode. Much of sanity, and happiness, consists of finding the right mode for the right moment. The appreciative mode is terrible for debugging your business plan. But the evaluative mode is terrible for having a first date. A lot of capable, intelligent people suffer

because they do not have the ability to switch out of the evaluative mode, or even notice that they're in it.

18. I know that you cannot skip to the punchline of the cosmic joke. If you're ambitious, it will be hard to believe that achievement won't make you completely happy until you accumulate some achievements, and notice the gaps in your happiness. Legend has it that the Buddha woke up at 35, and this seems about right — by your mid-thirties, you have probably been productively disillusioned by at least one serious personal disappointment.
19. I know that you are almost always not the only one experiencing a person's challenging attributes. Is your boss being privately abusive to you? They are likely doing it to someone else, or have before. Can't believe that person is always monopolizing the meeting? Someone else is also annoyed. Now, solving these collective action problems is tricky — but realizing that you're not alone is the first step.
20. I know that if your significant other asks you to do an irritating-for-them task that is not especially difficult, you should be thankful. They have given you an unambiguous way to earn points in the relationship, which is how you get a nice life going. Usually, achieving personal flourishing is more complex than taking out the garbage.
21. I know that in a really great relationship or friendship, you should be able to state your needs without explanation. "I need attention." "Some cheese would make me happy." "I want to express a feeling that I don't endorse." "I am looking for a compliment." "Can you tell me that I'm cute and good right now?"
22. I know that if you have a serious dispute with someone, it will go nowhere unless you clearly name the underlying emotion that you're struggling with. If you're afraid that your partner will abandon you, cataloguing their flaws will not communicate this effectively.
23. I know that if you are not unusually hard-working or competitive or smart, you can still distinguish yourself. Be unusual in some other noticeable, likable way—unusually honest, brave, generous, curious, or pleasant. All of these attributes are composed of discrete behaviours that can be learned through practice.
24. I know that freedom is earned by confronting things that embarrass and trigger you, over and over again, until you are cringe-proof in your desired environment.
25. I know that it is powerful to state your weaknesses and limitations. Try this on for size: "I'm abandoning this debate because you are more qualified to have

an opinion.” “I’d like to finish this project quickly because I don’t like to work hard.” “I realize that I don’t believe what’s coming out of my mouth.” “I’m worried that I’m taking this decision too seriously and I’m not adding value by fretting over it.”

26. I know how to handle a day when you feel extremely lazy. Decide that, given that you’re a lazy person, you will work diligently for only 30 entirely focused minutes on the most important thing, and then take the rest of the day off. You will do your best work on these days.
27. I know that among my regrets, one of the sharpest is refusing to accept a sincere apology. Offering an olive branch takes courage. Try to reward this, even from people who you don’t believe deserve forgiveness.
28. I know that simplistic stories about happiness leave out crucial details. For example: Yes, relationships are more important than career, ultimately. But some career success might give you a greater ability to locate people you’re compatible with later on, as friends or partners.
29. I know that, if you can pull it off, you should continuously have mentors, and be offering mentorship. This can be as formal or informal as you want.
30. I know that almost nobody hears too many sincere compliments. Compliment them to their face. Then, compliment them behind their back. Practice naming pleasant feelings you have about people, as soon as they bubble up, in the moment: “It’s always fun to see you.” Lower the resistance around this to zero.