

The Game-Changing Book You Must Read (and Probably Already Own)

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by Liz Funk

One night in spring 2014, I sat on the floor, scanning the spines of books housed on a petite bookshelf in a spare, but very well-appointed one-bedroom apartment in Manhattan. The apartment belonged to the business developer I'd recently begun seeing, who I admired for his high-functioning lifestyle. He rose at 5:30 every day to run before work, he ate super-healthfully—not out of neuroticism, but out of a desire to feel good—and he had excellent knowledge of low-lit cocktail bars. I also admired his taste in interior architecture: the walls of his living room were exposed brick, and the bedroom was closed off by a pair of curtained French doors.

“You have *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*?” I asked from my seat near the bookshelf, not facing him, but probably still not doing the best job of covering up an incredulous, mildly disdainful tone.

“Have you read it?” he asked.

“No,” I shook my head.

“It’s really good,” he said. “I’ve read it a few times.”

I opened the book to a page where his first-class plane ticket to Cancun from 2013 was filling in as a bookmark.

Perhaps the *7 Habits* weren’t so middlebrow after all.

A few weeks later, I spent Easter at my parents’ house in upstate New York. I nosed around their bookshelf, too, and predictably located the yellowed copy of the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* that I could picture sitting on that spot on the shelf as long as I could remember. To me, the *7 Habits* was like *Chicken Soup for the Soul* or *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*; books that were part of American vernacular, but no one actually read.

I plucked the 25-year-old book from the shelf and brought it back to Manhattan with me. Within a week, its yellowed pages were stained with the ink of my fervid notes in the margins and I'd dog-eared the page corners to the extent that my book looked like an accordion. My life was forever changed. I loved this book.

I became a *7 Habits* evangelist. I met a girlfriend and fellow writer the following week for drinks, and I produced my weathered book from my Montana-sized handbag. She raised an eyebrow at me. I told her, "This book would most accurately be titled, *How to Stop Being a Screw-Up, How to Forgive Your Parents for Everything, and How to Immediately Become a Better Person*. You just have to get through all the parts where the guy talks about his kids and gets a little preachy."

Thus, the *7 Habits* isn't perfect. Far from it. The book is heavily anecdotal, narrated mostly by the observations and personal and professional experiences of its author, the late Dr. Stephen Covey. He earned his Ph.D. from Brigham Young University, where he taught organizational behavior and business management. His perspective as a father of nine arguably influences the book; some sections read like tough-love advice from a strict parent, and the book could be substantially edited down (especially all the stories about all the kids).

While it may not be effortlessly relatable, the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is an important read. So to bridge the gap, I want to share my takeaways from the *7 Habits*. These are interpretations and renditions of what I found most meaningful in the book. They come from my perspective as a 20-something entrepreneurship-junkie who wakes up early to study for the GMAT before work (not at 5:30 am), but who also relates to *Inside Amy Schumer* more often than would be ideal.

1. Have mastery experiences. Every day, do something that makes you say to yourself, "Awesome. This was a good, important thing to do, and I accomplished it." Suggested mastery experiences: completing a project at work, teaching yourself something, carving out time to write a blog post, going to a networking event, or reading something intellectually nutritious. Or, a totally valid mastery experience could be finally doing your laundry (especially if you dislike doing laundry to an unusual extent). Every day, do at least one thing that makes you feel skillful and effective. Dr. Covey calls these kinds of actions "private victories, the essence of character growth." They help you have more influence over how you make choices, behave, and react.

2. You can choose your response to any situation. Perhaps you dislike your job. Perhaps you can't stand the way your boss talks to you. Perhaps you think you pay way too much to share an apartment with someone who doesn't see eye-to-eye with you on what "clean" looks like (or feels like under your bare feet). Great news: you have the power to decide how to react to the situation. Once you've validated your feelings and articulated what the problem is, you can come up with ways to make the situation better and act accordingly. For example: it's liberating to say, "Starting now, when my boss flies off the handle, I am going to react like a stoned

person. I am going to smile and nod and say, 'Sure, uh-huh.' And then I'm going to do x, y, and z things when I'm at work, to make my day better and get more out of being at this job."

3. Feel your feelings. There is a ton of wisdom in "You can choose to be happy, and you have way more influence than you think over situations that are not ideal." But first, you need to acknowledge how you truly feel. Skipping this step creates the risk of invalidating your feelings. That's why "Look on the bright side" or "You can choose to not let your boss get to you" can be really grating. In that way, positive affirmations can be like wrapping up a wound without cleaning it first. But, once you've fully acknowledged what hurts and where, you can take positive action, and you can be proactive in many areas where you want things to be different.

4. Write new scripts. What are the stories that you tell yourself about yourself? If you seek profound, personal change, rewrite the script in your mind to reflect how you want to see yourself and how you want to behave. It's an empowering possibility!

5. Be in an "upward spiral." Sure, we can laugh off being a little bit self-destructive during challenging times of our lives, and the fact that it's somewhat *de rigueur* to occasionally be a "hot mess" gets us all off the hook. But I personally find that I feel best when I'm in a place where I'm taking really good care of myself and doing little things to improve myself. Things like getting up right when the alarm goes off, trying new activities, taking lessons, doing interesting things after work, using Whitestrips, etc. My recommendation? Try to always be in an "upward spiral"—even if it's not drastic leaps and bounds of self-improvement—by doing the next right thing and doing things to grow as a person.

6. Acknowledge your mistakes and forgive yourself as soon as possible. Dr. Covey describes how one of his sons was a football quarterback who would wear an elastic on his wrist during games. Every time the son made a mistake or a play went wrong, he'd snap his elastic. It wasn't a self-flagellation; by contrast, he was acknowledging the mistake and giving himself full permission to put it in the past so that mistake didn't affect his next play. He could start over fresh and undistracted.

If this one sounds trite or reductive, let me share an example of one of my less significant (but really dumb) mistakes where I used this "habit" to feel better. I had been sick last spring and was clinically dehydrated. One afternoon, despite (or perhaps because of) my brain-fogging dehydration, I decided to pop in my earbuds and go running; I thought some runner's high would do me good. And then I ran in front of a car. I wasn't hurt—just my ego and shoulder were extremely bruised—but now, whenever I hear the song "Pompeii," I experience the sensation of being a fly on someone's windshield. But I could forgive myself for a really dumb mistake: that day, I fully soaked in the mistake and felt like an idiot, and then I was able to move on. The bruise, unfortunately, lingered about two weeks, turning angry shades of purple, green, and finally yellow.

7. Make burnout prevention part of your lifestyle. Dr. Covey calls this "sharpening your saw." [When I speak to young women at colleges about healthy ambition](#) and achieving in a

sustainable way, I encourage them to consider how a little self-care can make them more productive and energetic all week. I encourage them to say to themselves, “I have x number of minutes to do something for myself today. So, what’s the most restorative thing I can do for myself in this window?” Do something every day that charges your batteries: exercising, spending some time on a hobby, eating a healthy meal, eating an unhealthy dessert, meditating, subscribing to magazines that you enjoy page-by-page nightly as part of your wind-down ritual, or reading your favorite blog on your tablet in bed.

After all, new habits that make us more effective don’t have to be so hard.

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