Chapter 3: Skills and Strategies
Section 1: Life Skills

Skills for Tackling Life
When attempting to new learn a new skill or behavior, especially something as complex as life skills, the goal is better, not perfection. It’s important to be realistic. If you are trying to replace an old behavior, be prepared that a new habit may never feel as natural as old behaviors. It will always take more of an effort. Similar to learning a new language, we don’t expect that it will be easy or a natural response. Think of life as a seashell, with endless number of spirals. It is a given that life issues will present themselves again and again, allowing us to perfect our approach the second or even fifth time around.

A. Incentive for Change
As we get older, we need to readjust our problem-solving strategies to compensate for advanced aging, change in health status, job loss, marital problems or a financial setback. If change is a given in life, then why do we resist it for so long?

The Brains Attachment to the Status Quo
From the perspective of the brain, change is inefficient, and will be resisted. Change takes learning new behaviors, a demanding, messy, annoying and discouraging process. It diverts necessary brain bandwidth away from beloved, familiar and routine activities. Who likes going back to being a novice, having to do tedious homework, appearing clumsy and slow when you were a pro at doing things the old way?

The Human Condition
It is only human to prefer pleasure over pain, happiness over sadness, winning over losing, health over sickness. Difficult experiences that do not go according to our scripted perceptions of “what should be” tend to be avoided, rationalized and ignored, sometimes for years. When we resist experiences that could be of great value because our preference is to shut out painful information, we end up focusing all our energies on changing the message or blaming the messenger, and miss the insights that are available in broadening our perception.
1. The “Ah, ha Moment”

Sometimes we can “just happen” along a life changing incident. Perhaps something that we read or observe can have a profound experience on us. We say that meeting the right person was *serendipity*, or meant to be. More often the case, and unlike Sir Isaac Newton and the proverbial discovery of gravity, when the apple lands on our head, we usually moan about bad luck. Self-awareness is a frontal lobe skill and is considered the highest of all brain functions.

2. Data: A Powerful Reality Check

In absence of fate or a rare aligning of the stars, a more reliable means to achieve self-insight is through taking careful note whether aspects of our behavior are consistent with where we want to be in life. Whether monitoring your behavior or money, you will repeat old habits if you don’t have the hard data to know where problem areas lie.

Data is impartial. It is fair, hard to refute and ignore. Data, well data, just is. You may not initially like the results but reviewing your cholesterol level, blood pressure or financial spreadsheet with an accountant can often inspire life-changing behaviors.

Indecision and inaction are often the result of limited information. Having access to objective and tangible data can often trigger an “ah, ha moment.”

3. Loss Aversion Theory

Our capacity for risk is directly proportional to how much we have to lose. The popular book, “Freakanomics,” offers an interesting twist on risk theory, looking at how far we as humans go to maintain the status quo, to restore a loss or avoid risk of losing a sure thing in our life.

We all know that losing feels bad. In fact, it feels so bad, behavioral economists say that people care more about losing a dollar than gaining a dollar. This ideal is known as loss aversion theory. The theory predicts that you will fight harder and longer to dig yourself out of hole or when you're confronted with a loss than to attain a potential windfall.

If we have something or somebody in our life that we value and are at risk of losing then the odds are we will work hard to regain or restore balance to our lives. When faced with an unpleasant reality, many will finally have the courage to relinquish old habits and behaviors. They are finally ready to do “whatever it takes” to restore the status quo or hopefully an even better outcome.

4. The Elephant in the Room

While loss aversion theory predicts we will take risks or work hard, very hard when confronted with the prospect of loss, we will also be open to taking risks when we having nothing else to lose. No other options on the table, then bet the bank.

Risk theory can explain why at some point folks finally jump down off the fence, ready to make some important change in their life. They have nothing else to lose. The behavior is too painful to continue or has too many negative consequences to the people in their lives.
5. Caution... Road Work Ahead... Be Prepared for Delays

Once starting a new goal we need to be prepared for things awry. Life happens. It’s important to be realistic. If you are trying to replace an old behavior, be prepared that a new habit may never feel as natural as old behaviors. It will always take more of an effort. Remember the goal is better, not perfection.

6. Getting Hooked

The sheer relief of feeling better is reward enough. Seeing progress is reinforcing and can build its own positive momentum. Attempting a new behavior and sticking with it long enough to see positive results can be a powerful incentive.

7. Practice, Practice, Practice

By practicing the new behavior, we can usually get better at it and then you’re on your way to developing a new habit. Unlike declarative learning, in which we may only have to hear or read something once, procedural memory depends on practice. Lots of it! It usually takes 30 consistent practice sessions to develop a new habit.

There’s no other way around it...it takes old fashioned effort and practice. As the old adage by Edison goes, “Genius: one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration.”

B. Fair and Authentic Communication

No one will ever understand you or be more invested in having you achieve your desires and goals more than you. It is your responsibility to enable others to communicate in a style that works well for you. No one is a mind reader.

Communication is a Two Way Street

Information that is presented in a well-organized and concise manner will be better received, encoded and remembered by others. This works both ways, as a sender and as a receiver.

1. The Receiving End First

Communication patterns are initially learned through observation in our families. In some families, getting your needs met, is rather straight forward, you just ask. These families operate like a bank, you meet the requirements and you get the loan. Other families don’t post the rules, so you never know where you stand. By the time you get to school, you are exposed to a new set of rules, which may or may not be like the set up in your home. The same is true with your first job, friends and their family systems as well as significant others.

By the time you get to be an adult, you have been exposed to a number of communication patterns and experienced varying degrees of success in getting your needs met based on these different styles. By and large, institutions that “play fair” by posting and playing by the rules make interactions more predictable and outcomes more assured.
Just look back on your own history. If you can think of instances when having clear, accurate and timely information made all the difference in a successful outcome, then you can appreciate that different communication styles really matter.

One of the biggest mistakes people make is generalizing from a prior experience of having needs ignored that effective communication skills won’t make a difference in getting what they want out of life in the future. The static may be coming from the sender.

Better communicators facilitate more productive exchanges. You may not get the loan but you will know why and what do to improve to improve your credit score.

2. Sending a Clear Signal

Tune In With Self First
Before you can effectively communicate with others you need to pay attention to the messages you are sending yourself. Episodic memory, including short and long term memories, are not the most reliable form of information available to us. In contrast, semantic memory relies on what we have been taught by a reliable source or read, it is objective, fair and impartial.

Try to critically evaluate what you tell yourself and check it out against other data points to ensure that you are not repeating out of date or inaccurate information. Check the facts on which your personal assumptions are based.

Model Clear, Well Organized and Succinct Communication
Carefully reflect on your objective and then select the appropriate words to accomplish your goal. Present your thoughts in a clear, well organized and authentic manner. It takes effort, but you are modeling how you would like others to communicate with you. Try to avoid patterns of filtering, screening or being less than direct in communication with others.

The goal is to hone one authentic commutation style, not reach into our bag and pull out the one that fits the sender’s needs. If you can’t be upfront, then critically examine your role in the relationship and your continued need to be in it.

Organize Thoughts in Advance
It takes practice to be able to communicate ideas in “real time”, or face to face, especially in emotionally charged situations. The more high stakes the situation, the more important it is to outline your talking points in advance. Public speaking takes knowing yourself and the subject matter well. So avoid spontaneous verbal exchanges, at least in the beginning.

Hone your communication skills on paper first. You can send an email or snail mail. With outline in hand it will make it easier to place or return phone calls and ensure your message is clear and authentic.

Redo’s Are Just Fine
With practice it will become easier to communicate authentically and clearly with others. However,
expect setbacks, or that sinking feeling of knowing your words missed the mark or you failed to clarify some point in the conversation. No worries. You can catch your mistake or clarify your words better next time.

However, in certain situations or with some individuals you have to expect your message will not be heard. Think of the problem as occurring on the receiving end and move on.

3. The Power of Word

Be Impeccable With Your Word

By learning to communicate authentically and clearly with yourself and then with others, you can avoid much in the way of misunderstandings, sadness and drama.

Never Make Assumptions

When we misunderstand the intent of another we take it personally. We react and create unnecessary upset for ourselves for nothing. The biggest assumption humans make is that everyone sees life the way we do, assume others think the way we think, feel the way we feel and judge or blame ourselves the way we do. No wonder we feel hurt if we think, “How could you do that? You should know...” The truth is that others don’t know and are unaware of your truth.

Clarify, Clarify, Clarify

It is always better to ask questions than to make assumptions. Have the courage to ask questions until you are clear you understand the answer to your question.

Ask For What You Want

In order to get your needs met, you must find the courage to ask for what you really want in life. Don’t make the assumption that others know what you think, or that you don’t have to spell out exactly what you want, even if a person knows you well. It’s a trap to believe it will mean less if you have to tell someone what you need from them.

Practice Self-Advocacy

No one will ever understand you or be more invested in having you achieve your desires and goals more than you. Don’t take this personally. But, don’t make the mistake of assuming that others won’t help you to succeed if asked. Others have the right to tell you no, but you always have the right to ask. If someone turns down a request of yours, it’s better to know sooner than later. That way you can already be formulating your Plan B.

Keep it Objective

If it makes it easier, formulate all interpersonal communications in your mind with the same level of detachment as you would when speaking with a banker for a loan. By stating to yourself, “It’s not personal, it’s business,” you can free yourself to bring your higher order reasoning and objectivity into your communication with others.
Don’t Take It Personally
Everybody has the right to ask you for what they want and you have the right to say yes or no.

When The Student is Ready, The Teacher Will Come
Being turned down in a fair and dignified manner can be kind of freeing. If you have ever struggled with saying “no” in the past, you have just witnessed a true teaching moment. It’s not personal. Your request was denied because it was unfeasible in this situation.

Honor Yourself
Take the risk to express your dream and honor the person that you are.

Preparation is Not Manipulation
If you are invested in achieving a certain outcome (and who isn’t?), then tip the scale in your favor. If you want to ensure someone’s availability, then give them plenty of lead time and flexibility in scheduling to increase the likelihood of a positive response. On the other hand, if you prefer a certain date or time, then by all means ask for it.

Take the notion that “Why would someone not want to help you out?” Advocating on one’s own behalf can work both ways, so, be prepared to be turned down and never take it personally.

Check Your Rear View Mirror
No one can predict the future. However, spending time reviewing prior glitches in communication should tip you off to the loopholes in your communication you may want to close up in the future. Instead of writing off a bad experience, try and figure out how the situation could have been avoided with improved communication. Then, use this information to revamp your approach the next time.

The Quid Pro Quo
Pinpoint the “quid pro quo” or the “what for what.” Clearly state what you expect to receive in exchange for your time or money. Be objective, be fair and be explicit.

Get it in Writing
By all means, get it signed in writing. It’s your record of the event.

Take Action and Then Enjoy Your Life
You were born with the right to enjoy your life. You can have many great ideas in your head, but without action upon an idea there will be no manifestation and no reward.

C. Keeping Track of Your Resources
How do you normally spend the hours in your day? Time flies, but where does it go? Time and energy are like money. They are finite and have limits, although we frequently don’t treat
them this way. Without carefully managing these precious resources we may feel tired, overworked and discouraged at the end of the day. We may have not accomplished anything that was really important to us.

In the same way you should get into the habit of checking your bank balance before making a purchase, you should frequently check in with yourself to monitor your energy level or available time. Money, time and energy are valuable commodities. How do you want to use these limited resources to meet your long range goals?

1. Time

Every time you take out your wallet or credit card, you should be thinking “Can I afford this purchase?” You likely weigh the benefits of the purchase against what you will have to forfeit buying in the future. Why is it that we frequently treat our time and energy like tap water?

Aging, emotional duress or physical limitations clearly, and sometimes painfully, point out to us that “there’s not always more of where that came from.” When we begin to see that minutes are like pennies and they all add up, then we are on a path of leading a more balanced and healthy life.

2. Energy

Just like some purchases cost more than others, some activities will expend more cognitive energy than others. While some daily tasks like housework can be physically tiring, habits do not require as much active frontal lobe energy as bill paying or interacting with groups of people. Think of your daily activities as a debit card, with each task withdrawing a different amount of energy from your mental bank.

High Demand Activities

Brain load may be more or less taxing based on factors related to the task itself or the setting in which we perform the activity. Factors that can make a task more demanding include learning something new or challenging or lengthy. Tasks that require planning, organization and attention to detail can also be more draining. Finally, an environment that is noisy or involves pressure to perform quickly, in unpredictable situations or under tight deadlines will take more of a toll on us.

Any of these factors can result in increased risk for inattentive errors. It is important to identify the demand of the task as well as the context in which it is being performed in order to accurately assess risk for careless errors. The old adage, “To thy own self be true” is worth considering.

Low Demand Activities

In contrast, habits and daily routines, like housework or gardening, are frequently performed with little active attention. They can leave us physically tired, but not mentally drained. However, one must also be vigilant for of absentminded errors, or we will be putting the leftovers in the dishwasher. Given the routine nature of many of these tasks it is common to multitask or pay little attention whatsoever to performing the task.
Again the rule of thumb to determine whether one should multitask is to evaluate the personal or financial cost of a mistake. Even if we have done the task numerous times, if we find that we are making inattentive errors while performing routine check writing, then we need to evaluate the context in which perform the task, including the time of day or risk for intrusions.

E. Daily Routines

Setting Anchors in Your Day
You don’t have to be a Yeti master to achieve a more calm and balanced life. Sometimes all it takes is a little more preparation. By checking your day planner the night before and several times throughout the day, you can make sure you stay on course, and know what your options are when life sends you in a different direction.

1. Morning Review

Emotional Temperature
You are encouraged to begin your day by taking your “emotional temperature”. Check in with yourself and assess your physical and mental state. Did you wake up feeling fatigued, out of sorts or in pain? Perhaps you need to juggle an unforeseen crisis, not on your radar before you went to bed.

Learning to Go with the Flow
Just because you have an appointment on your schedule doesn’t mean it is in your best interest to keep it. If the stumbling block is fear of making a last minute change, then take the time to weigh out your options. If the consequences of staying on course are outweighed by the risks of not addressing a pending crisis then the prudent choice is to quickly figure a Plan B. By learning to recognize and accept your limitations you can achieve YOUR optimal daily best. The first step in being kind to you is learning to adjust to changes in life circumstances.

Time for Triage
When needing to make an unprepared change, take stock of your resources. Can you postpone, reschedule or ask a friend or family member for help? By taking a proactive approach when you first sense that a train wreck is approaching, you can usually salvage the day. Sometimes just calling to explain your situation resolves the dilemma right on the spot.

2. Power Hours
Most people are aware that certain times of day make us feel more alert and energetic. However, we can also experience similar rhythms in moods. Learn to recognize when you feel most alert, creative and optimistic. Then, schedule tasks that require higher order problem-solving into these time slots.
Use Them Wisely
Recognize that these hours are precious and fleeting; you will need to save them for tasks that are of the highest importance to you.

Priming the Pump
For any number of reasons, whether it is emotional overload, advanced aging, a life transition or a neurological disease, working harder is not the answer, in fact it can make us less efficient. If we have gotten out of touch with who is “doing the doing”, then research indicates we are likely impeding our own creativity, imagination and thoughtfulness. Breakthroughs in life take self-reflection. Self-awareness is a frontal lobe function and is the highest of all brain functions.

In all our rush to get “the doing done”, we frequently run out the door each morning without having taken time to take time to tune our instrument. Professional musicians would never think of starting a practice session, let alone a concert before tuning their instrument. Our most valuable resource is our mind, and tuning into self in the morning can make a big difference in the course of the day’s events. We may not be able to avert life’s obstacles, but we are always in control of our reaction to them.

Meditation….It’s Not What You Think
Although mediation is usually associated with relaxation, regular practice allows one to increase voluntary control over attention and self-awareness to develop improved clarity of thought, self knowledge, focus and wellbeing. This combined state of focused calm, or mindfulness is an ideal exercise before performing strategic thinking tasks.

Even whiz kids in a creative environment like Google could take some pointers on how to stay in the zone. For a down to earth, thoughtful and amusing explanation on mediation take to time to look at a short YouTube video by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Mindfulness with Jon Kabat-Zinn on YouTube), an internationally known meditation teacher, author, researcher, and clinician in the fields of mind/body medicine, integrative medicine, lifestyle change, and self-healing.

After spending 10 years as a Buddhist monk and returning to England, Andy Puddicombe was determined to demystify mindfulness and make meditation more accessible to the masses. His website Headspace (headspace.com) offers a free, easy guided 10 minute “Take10” introduction to meditation as well as short podcasts on all things mindful… walking, commuting, eating and creativity.

Binaural Beats
Some people report an improved quality of meditation by pairing the practice with specialized audiotapes that induce or train a desired brainwave, for heightened alertness and concentration.

Binaural beats play a stereo recoding of tones through a pair of headphones. The track is set so that one pitch is played into one side of the headphones and a very slightly higher pitch is played on the other side. The result is that your brain perceives a third subsonic tone, created by the difference between the two you are hearing.
This tone is perceived by the brain, although not heard by the ear (subsonic). When done properly, this third tone will entrain the brain to the desired brain wave frequency. Several popular apps for your phone include Binaural Beats Therapy and Brain Wave.

Walking to Clear Your Mind

You may want also want to consider pairing a mindfulness exercise with a short walk. Select a section of road or a trail head that facilitates mental perspective. Determine the amount of time you can budget for the walk. Designate a turnaround point in advance based upon when allotted time is half way up. On the first part of the walk, outline the problem or task you are about to begin. After you reach the turnaround place in the walk, allow the answers to formulate.

3. Wind Down

Remember, it is just as important to establish evening habits as it is to have early morning routines...sometimes more important. Begin the process by setting a regular time to go to bed every night. You should aim for 8 hours of sleep. If your chosen bedtime is 10:00 pm, you should be thinking of winding down activities by 8:00 pm.

4. Evening Review

Set the Stage for Successful Tomorrow

What you do the evening before can help you plan for a successful day. Begin the process by taking out your day planner and review the events of the day. Assess what you accomplished as well as what didn’t get done and why. If you fell short of your goals, you are encouraged to identify a specific roadblock, such as scheduling conflicts or emotional setbacks.

Time for Triage: Again

Based on today’s outcome, can you realistically accomplish what you have set out on your plate for tomorrow? If not, this is when you need to modify or rearrange your schedule. These notes can help guide you in preparing your daily memo to yourself, family members or coworkers for the next day.

5. Bedtime Routines

Bed time routines could include listening to relaxing music, reading or listening to books on tape, drinking tea or engaging in evening meditation exercise. Deep, slow breathing, also a form of brain entrainment can de-activate the “flight or fight” side of your nervous system, protecting the brain from the damaging memory effects of excessive stress.

Meditation Music Channel

Consider using Pandora. It is free app you can download to your computer or smart phone. It allows you to customize your own music channel from various music genres. Favorites include: Ambient Music, New Age or World Music. Turning on your music channel will signal to your brain that you are
switching gears for the day and preparing for sleep. The folks from headspace have a great mindfulness podcast on how to induce a more restful night sleep.

Evening Meditation Practice
Here is a great wind down meditation exercise. It is free and you don’t need to download an app for your phone. Get into the habit of “Practicing Gratitude”. Review the day and remind yourself of everything that you have to be thankful. Try to make sure your blessings exceed your worries. If you are being honest with yourself, this shouldn’t be hard.

Just as certain mediation exercises prepare one for the day; alternate practices can rewire the brain for sleep. Consider pairing meditation practice with a binaural beat CD to entrain Alpha Theta brainwaves, associated with relaxation and sleep.

6. Tips for Better Sleep
Getting enough sleep at night helps consolidate learning and the formation of new memories from the day’s experiences. People typically do best with 7-9 hours a night. A variety of techniques are available to help people literally relearn how to go to sleep.

Reset Your Sleep Clock
One of the most effective strategies is to actually restrict the amount of time people sleep, starting with very little time, say, five hours, and slowly adding 15-minute increments until the recommended eight hours is reached. It’s a slow process, but sleep experts say it can be very, very effective and lasts for years.

Bed is for Sleep
Bed is meant for sleep, that's it. That means, you can't pay bills in bed, you don't take your computer or your iPhone or iPad to bed, you don't watch TV in bed, and you don't read in bed.

Don't Just Lie There
If you can’t fall asleep in 20 minutes, then you should get out of bed and do something relaxing. Don’t watch a suspenseful movie or read a suspenseful book, instead watch or read something a little more boring, so that when you get sleepy, you’re willing to set it down and go to bed.

Don’t Watch the Clock
As for the clock, get rid of it. If you need the alarm, cover the clock, she says, or put it under the bed. You'll still hear it go off.

The first thing you do when you wake up at night, you look at the clock, and in order to look at the clock, you have to lift your head, open your eyes, but, more important, you have to take yourself from transitional sleep to full awakening to comprehend that its 1:10 in the morning and you want to be asleep. Full awakening, of course, makes it difficult to get back to sleep. If you need the alarm, cover the clock, or put it under the bed. You'll still hear it go off.
Circadian Rhythms

Sleep is controlled in part by our core body temperature, which drops at night when we get sleepy and rises in the morning, and that’s when we wake up. These patterns change throughout our lives. Teenagers' body temperature drops late in the evening, so they don't get tired till around midnight and don't naturally wake up till late morning.

For older adults, it's the opposite. Their body temperature drops really early in the evening, around 8 p.m., and rises really early in the morning, around 4 a.m. If your lifestyle allows it, it's just fine to go to bed early and get up at 4 a.m.

Light Therapy

Light is the strongest cue our body has to know when to go to sleep and when to get up. Lots of light exposure during the day helps us have a strong biological clock.

And the best source of light is the sun. A late afternoon or early evening walk, when the sun is still out, is best. That delays the circadian rhythm and helps people stay alert later in the evening and sleep longer in the morning.