



building a foundation
for happiness

by Dennis Liegghio

This book is dedicated to everyone who stood by my side, inspired me, gave me a place to sleep, shared a meal with me, made music with me, gave me a shoulder to lean on, loved me when I felt unlovable, and propped me up through the darkest times in my life. I am eternally grateful for my amazing friends and family. I would not be here today without you. With love and appreciation, Dennis

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Intro

This book is about my personal experience with a very long, suicidal depression, what got me through it, and what I learned along the way. Each person's path and experience is unique. My greatest hope is that you will be able to relate to some of this information and use it as a springboard toward your path to a happier and more fulfilling life.

The foundation of my depression:

- Traumatic events and losses
- Poor relationships
- Sedentary lifestyle
- Stress and anxiety
- Solitude and isolation
- Unmet (unrealistic) expectations
- Narcissistic (self-centered) perspective
- Negative thoughts and self-talk

This book is about how I imploded that foundation, and all of the pain and negativity that it has sustained, and replacing it with a new foundation – simple, practical, universal principles for building a foundation of happiness, balance, and peace.

This is not a clinical book, and I am not a doctor, counselor, therapist, psychologist, or psychiatrist. I am a regular guy who struggled with depression for more than a decade and beat it (without medication) using the tools and strategies described in this book. It's a no-nonsense, practical guide describing what worked for me, in plain English. This book is not meant to serve as a diagnosis, or replace medical advice, treatment, or therapy. It's simply an account of what worked for me, in the hopes that it can help you gain a new perspective, take control, and live an empowered life without limits.

If you believe that a person or event beyond your control is the source of your unhappiness, I encourage you to read on. I believed this very same thing for a very long time. You possess the ability to take that power away from someone or something else and start living *your* life on purpose, on *your* terms.

I wrote this book because I thought it could help others. I lived with my depression for so long, stuck in that despair, not really knowing that I had the power to change my actions, beliefs, and behaviors, and prevail. I was told by the television that my depression was a medical illness, a chemical imbalance that required medication. I did not want to take medication. And so there I stayed, stuck in that dark place for so long, believing that fate had dealt me a losing hand, and that's just the way it was and the way it would always be. I wrote this to let you know that it doesn't have to be that way.

This book is the culmination of everything that I have learned through years of therapy and self-help and have put into practice.

The Foundation for Happiness

Call “happiness” whatever you want – peace, balance, success, mental health. They are all one in the same and part of the whole. A miserable, meaningless existence is a pretty difficult life to sustain. I know because I lived one for a very long time. However, as it turns out, living a meaningful life full of passion and purpose is pretty simple. On the following page, there is an outline of the concepts and strategies that we’ll explore in more detail in this book. It’s what I’ve learned over the years and put into practice with great success.

My grandpa told me over and over throughout my life that to have a good house you have to build a solid foundation. I think it’s such a simple and profound metaphor and lesson for all aspects of our existence – our relationships, our careers, and our lives. My grandpa moved to this country with nothing when he was 17 years old and could not speak a word of English. He built a career and a family here and was an inspiration to us all. His passing on Christmas Day 2006 was a devastating blow to our family, but I will never forget his lesson.

The Foundation for Happiness

Take responsibility for your actions, choices, and behaviors starting today.

- Life is sometimes difficult and can seem unfair.
- The world doesn't owe us anything.
- We are responsible for our own happiness and well-being.

Practice acceptance, mindfulness, and gratitude.

- Let go of expectations.
- You can only exist in this moment; be present.
- Reflect daily on who and what you are thankful for.

Slow down.

- Focus on one task at a time.
- Stay connected with nature.
- Mind your commitments, distractions, and media consumption.

Explore your passions and cultivate your natural talents.

- This is how you will find your purpose in this life.
- Do it without expectation, comparison, or judgment.
- Don't focus on end results, just start.

Cultivate positive, meaningful relationships.

- Take risks, be open, be vulnerable, and be honest. Be YOU.
- Define and defend your boundaries.
- Learn to listen.

Before I elaborate on these concepts, let me share with you a little bit of my background.

My Background

I hate you, and I never want to see you again.

I was 14 years old when my father died by suicide, and my last words to him were in anger. We were in his car, running errands, and we were fighting about my math grades. I was failing math (again) and my Dad was really upset. This was something that we fought about frequently because it was my worst subject, and he made his living as an accountant. This time seemed different somehow, though. He was literally screaming at me, and I didn't understand why because he'd never yelled at me that way before. I thought it was way over the top, and I got pretty freaked out.

When we got back to his place (my parents had already been divorced for about 6 years and this was Dad's weekend), I called my mom and I asked her to come and pick me up. I didn't want to spend the rest of the weekend with Dad. I waited in my room until she pulled up in the drive. I ran out the front door and screamed at my Dad, "I hate you and I never want to see you again!" It was the last thing I ever said to him.

Over the next few months, he tried to call. I wouldn't answer the phone, I wouldn't listen to the messages and I wouldn't call him back. He sent letters in the mail that I never opened. I just ripped them up and threw them out. I was 14 years old, angry, and determined to be right – to win this fight and not back down.

My mom got a call from my step-mom one night who told her that Dad was missing. She didn't know what was going on, she said, but he was acting really strange when he left. Not knowing what was going on or what was going through his mind, my mom took my brother and me over to our grandma's house. Now that my dad was missing, and nobody knew where he was or what he was doing, all I could think about was how sorry I was that I said those things to him. I went to sleep hoping and praying that someone would

find him and bring him back home safe so that I could apologize and tell him that I loved him. I dreamt of a reunion: He was smiling, we both apologized, and we hugged. Everything was all right. Then morning came. My grandma made breakfast for my brother and me and we ate in silence. I knew something was up. My mom and grandma took us into the spare room where we had slept, sat us down, and told us the news. The police had called very early that morning. They found our Dad, and he had taken his own life. I remember the tears, shock, and detachment from that morning. It was like I literally walked away from my physical body and was watching a horrible nightmare.

How could he do this to me? How could he leave me like this? How could God let this happen? Nothing made sense anymore. I would spend the next 10 years of my life blaming myself for my Dad's death. It didn't matter how many people told me that it wasn't my fault and that there was nothing I could have done. I believed that I killed him and I spent every day of those 10 years trying to kill the guilt, shame, anger, and pain that came with his suicide. I shut down. I gave up. I did my best to self-destruct. Life sucks anyway, I figured. It will always suck, and so I might as well try to have some fun and experience every wild thing I can before I go out with a bang. My goal was to be dead by the time I was 25. I would die of a drug overdose or alcohol poisoning or in some horrible, bloody accident. I dreamt about my funeral, who might show up, and what they might say.

Even with everyone around, I still feel alone.

Those words, written on the back of a poster in my bedroom, is how my journey began, back up through the darkness that had surrounded me for so long. I had hit what felt like rock bottom. I had no self-esteem or sense of self-worth, I was angry and filled with anxiety all the time. I sat alone in my room every night drinking myself into oblivion. I felt completely isolated from everyone in my life. And I was more than \$100,000 in debt.

I was completely self-centered, lacked the ability to empathize with or relate to others (even my closest friends), and my motivation in every relationship was "What can this

person do for me?" I was unable to maintain a romantic relationship. I was lonely, isolated, empty, and sad all the time. I would constantly find myself in a fit of cynical rage because I believed that people kept letting me down (or rather, not living up to *my* expectations).

I was miserable. A constant thought in the back of my mind was "There has to be more to life than this." Something was wrong, something was missing, and all my friends were moving on happily with their lives: graduating from college, starting careers, and starting families. They were living and enjoying life. I was watching it all from the sidelines. I couldn't feel anything so I started acting recklessly in an attempt to get a thrill, to feel *something*... an adrenaline rush, fear, *anything*.

"You will be alone forever, nobody will ever really love you."

"You are born to lose and you have failed at anything you've ever tried."

"You are not good enough or talented enough or strong enough."

"You are better off dead, and nobody cares anyway."

These were the things the voice inside my head was saying, any time I was alone, for years. This voice was constant and deafening, and I did whatever I could to try and drown it out. These beliefs and insecurities are what I was hiding behind my smile, and my obnoxious, reckless behavior.

I didn't have the guts to make an actual suicide attempt, so I got really high and I got really drunk. I got behind the wheel when I could barely see and drove as fast as I could. I slept around. All the while secretly praying for death by some horrible accident or overdose. I craved and chased instant gratification with reckless abandon hoping to self-destruct. After a life that seemed to be full of mistakes, heartbreak, and loss, I just didn't see a point in doing anything else.

I was 24 years old, going nowhere, filled with cynicism and despair. At the end of every reckless, drunken night, the sadness and despair would creep back in as I passed out,

praying for death to come in the night so that this nightmare would finally be over. This was my depression, my darkness, my existential crisis – and it was with me all the time.

“How did I get here?”

“How did things get so bad?”

“What have I done to deserve this miserable joke of a life?”

These are the questions I wanted to answer, the questions I *needed* to answer. I hated feeling this way. I hated being angry and sad all the time, and I hated the feeling that my life was going nowhere. It became my mission to answer these questions and do whatever I had to do to find some peace and balance and happiness in my life.

After asking myself these questions over and over again (for years), I gradually came to realize that it was *my* actions, and the choices I was making that were feeding this darkness. All of my self-destructive thoughts and behaviors had only contributed to feeling increasingly hopeless and worthless. Things just kept getting worse, until I recognized and accepted that I had to make some serious and significant changes in my life and how I looked at things.

I wanted to be happy again. I wanted to love and be loved. I wanted to go home.

Finding an outlet

Writing had been a passion of mine ever since I was young. I had piles of notebooks filled with journal entries, short stories, poems, and song lyrics. It had been a few years since I had actively written anything and I had to get back into the habit of doing that when I was in my darkest places. This would help in a couple different ways. First, it would allow me to take all of the dark, self-loathing thoughts out of my head (where they would linger, multiply, and consume me) and put them somewhere else. Getting all of the toxic stuff out of my head and on to paper was a great relief in itself. Second, it would

allow me to look at what was going on in my head from an outside perspective. It was like stepping out of my own head for a while.

I spent a few years traveling with some friends who were in a band. I helped sell T-shirts and CDs at the shows, load and unload gear, etc. These guys were an amazing band and amazing friends. It was their music, their friendship, and the incredible people that I met along the way (some of whom would become lifelong friends) that helped me through some of the darkest times of my life. Admittedly, the times and adventures were pretty wild and reckless back then, but that experience (along with another experience which I'll tell you about later) helped me find some self-confidence and inspired me to pick up my guitar again and start writing songs. The first song I wrote was called "*No Resolve*", which was about how my father's suicide had affected me. Shortly after writing *No Resolve*, along with a few others, I met a girl named Anna who played piano and also wrote songs. Anna and I got together one afternoon and it was pure magic. In about 5 minutes, she whipped out the piano riff that would become *No Resolve's* signature. And with that, Student Driver Band was born, and we were off and running.

After spending some time writing more songs, the guys in the band helped Anna and I record our first full-length album. After releasing it on our own, they graciously allowed us to open up for them at some of their shows. Getting out there and performing these songs really helped me find an outlet for all of the toxic emotions that had been building up inside me for years.

Music has always been a huge part of my life. Whenever I felt like nobody else in the world could understand me, or what I was going through, music was my salvation. Just turning that stereo up in my room or in my car and getting lost in the music validated every emotion and helped to release some of the pressure, anger, and sadness. Now I was making my own music, and to be out there, chasing that dream, and following my passion with support from my friends was incredibly empowering.

I had found a way to express my darkest fears and deepest secrets, and my thoughts of suicide began to fade and were replaced with the will to survive and do whatever it took to get through this. I thought, “The longer I do this, the more I write, the more I sing these songs, the more the pain will subside.” This was a crucial first step – expressing myself – but it was only the beginning.

Taking Responsibility.

For so many years, I believed that my life was a cruel joke and was the direct result of everything that had ever happened to me. I believed that I was “born to lose” and I blamed my life events and the circumstances that I was born into. Coming to terms with three simple truths about life allowed me to start looking at my life from a different perspective, and helped to set me free from the chains of the past.

1. **Life is sometimes difficult, and can seem unfair.** Bad things happen to good people every day. That’s life. We can’t control much of what happens to us but we can control how we react to it. There are ups and downs, tragedies and triumphs, love and loss. It’s all a part of the human experience and accepting that we can’t control much of what we experience allows us to focus on the experience itself, trusting that “*this too shall pass,*” and take with us the lesson that we are meant to learn. Struggle, pain, and adversity exist so that we may learn resilience, humility, and compassion. These things do not happen to us because we are cursed or doomed or born to suffer. These things happen to us so that we can grow.

“Life is difficult. This is the great truth, one of the greatest truths—it is a great truth because once we see this truth, we transcend it.”

– M. Scott Peck

2. **The world doesn’t owe us anything.** I believed for so long that because my life had been full of tragedy and heartbreak and loss that I was *entitled* to peace, love, success, and happiness. I believed that I shouldn’t have to put forth any effort or work toward those things. I believed life *owed* me this. *God* owed me this. Everyone who I ever came into contact with owed me this. That is what I expected and that is how I behaved.

But nobody owes me anything of course and when I accepted that and took responsibility for it, my perceptions began to change. Instead of focusing on what I didn't have (and what I believed I should have), I began focusing on all of the amazing gifts and people in my life, and being grateful for them. Acknowledging that gratitude each day, in my heart and out loud, helped me to redirect my thoughts and to accept that I wasn't *entitled* to anything. Everything was a gift! If I wanted peace and love and success and happiness (whatever those things meant to me), I had to work toward them, just like everyone else.

3. **We are responsible for our own happiness and well-being.** For so many years, I would go to sleep each night hoping that someday, some girl would swoop into my life and rescue me, take me away from all the pain and sadness and make everything OK. This, of course, is a fairy tale. We are not capable of being good for someone else, or truly loving someone else, until we are good for ourselves, until we love ourselves. It's unfair to place this expectation on another human being. We are all trying to do the best we can with what we've got on our journey, and it's not fair to dump our shortcomings, insecurities, negative attitudes, and unhealthy behaviors on someone else. I needed to do some pretty serious self-examination and work on developing positive thoughts, actions, and behaviors before I could start cultivating positive and meaningful relationships in my life. It's not right to place our expectation of happiness on someone else's shoulders, and we'll never find happiness if we continue living life this way.

My big breakthrough moment (that's coming up a bit later) was very similar to the scene in *Good Will Hunting*, though it took many years to get there: I accepted that my father's suicide was not my fault, and there was nothing that I could have done. The past was over, and it was time to move on. Nobody can change their past, and I'm not trying to minimize what I experienced as a child or anything that you've experienced in your past, but this is *now*, and we have the choice, the power, and the responsibility to start moving forward. **Our past does not define our future.** Tomorrow is built on the choices we make today.

You'll have an amazing sense of empowerment once you decide to stop blaming others or circumstances that you had no control over, and start taking responsibility for the choices you make starting right now. You are free to make choices every day. You are free to choose to stay in unhealthy relationships and you are free to walk away. You are free to choose with whom you will spend your time and what you will spend your time doing.

You are free to choose to express yourself or ask for help when you feel overwhelmed *and* you are free to choose to isolate yourself and self-medicate. You are free to choose to go for a walk or a jog or a bike ride *and* you are free to choose to lie on the couch and watch TV. You are free to flip off the guy who just cut you off and lose your temper *and* you are free to take deep breath and let it go because you have no control over his actions. You are free to make choices that will help you learn and grow *and* you are free to make choices that will keep you where you're at in life. It starts by recognizing that you *do* have a choice in each moment: reflect on what the possible choices are and make a choice based on what you think will have the most positive and healthy outcome. I was free to keep getting wasted every day and running from my problems and I was free to make the choice to seek help and look for answers. I chose to seek help and look for answers.

Getting professional help

Despite the stigma that is somehow still attached to it, seeking help from a therapist doesn't mean that you're crazy. The goal of therapy is to provide a safe environment for an intimate relationship to develop. In this environment, you'll learn the skills needed to open yourself up and be vulnerable to someone else and discuss your fears and insecurities. Through this relationship, where the therapist is a professionally trained listener with the ability to empathize, you can feel free to discuss these things, and arrive at a place where you feel confident and secure enough to move forward in a healthy

manner. The client / therapist relationship builds trust and helps you to develop communication and coping skills. In short, you are taught how to own and process your feelings. Therapy can be a very helpful thing for those of us who have experienced traumas that we have not yet processed. Building intimate relationships with others (not just romantic ones) can also be useful for these purposes, but therapy provides an unbiased, professional environment. If you are having trouble sustaining meaningful, intimate relationships with others, I strongly suggest looking into therapy. My life, attitude, and relationships have all improved dramatically since.

When you are feeling depressed

Taking responsibility for my depression, and the hole I often found myself (or put myself) in took a while. For years, the pattern remained the same. The darkness would descend and I allowed myself to be consumed by it. I would isolate myself and self-medicate which, of course, prolonged my depression, and often made it much worse.

Eventually, I realized that remembering to do the following three things whenever I could sense the depression coming back helped tremendously in releasing some of the pressure and break the cycle.

1. **Find your outlets:** Don't keep what you are thinking and feeling inside, express yourself somehow. A simple and effective way to get a new perspective is to write it out. Grab a notebook or journal and just start writing. Don't over-think it, just let the words flow.
2. **Participate in life:** Isolation fuels depression. Get out and do something. Be around people. You don't have to talk about what's going on, just get out there and interact. This is a great way to get out of your own head for a little while.

3. **Move your body:** The simple act of getting active can alter your thoughts and perspective. Go for a walk or a run or a bike ride or any other physical activity that you like. The important thing is to just get active and get your blood pumping.

As time went on, doing these things became automatic for me, but in the beginning I had to keep reminding myself about them and force myself to do them even though they were the last things in the world I wanted to do. That, perhaps, is the most important thing to keep in mind, when doing these things seems impossible (or stupid or worthless or pointless), do them anyway.

Take responsibility for your actions, choices, and behaviors starting today.

- Life is sometimes difficult and can seem unfair.
 - The world doesn't owe us anything.
 - We are responsible for our own happiness and well-being.
-

Practice Acceptance, Mindfulness and Gratitude

Acceptance

A great deal of my anger, disappointment, frustration, and despair came from unmet expectations, expectations that I was holding onto of myself, of others, and of life. I spent many years wasting my energy wishing that people, and life in general, were different. Unrealistic and unmet expectations are counterproductive to finding peace and balance and happiness. I was constantly miserable, ungrateful, and dissatisfied.

Change is necessary, constant, and unavoidable. Nothing stays the same. What is “fair” or “just” or “right” does not exist – only what “is.” We have no control over other people’s beliefs, actions or behaviors – people aren’t who we think or wish they “should” be – they simply “are.”

Acceptance is achieved by letting go of our expectations and planting ourselves firmly in what “is” – for that is reality, the only thing that matters. Focusing on anything else is a waste of time, energy, and health. It really is as simple as that. The next time you find yourself getting angry or frustrated about something you simply can’t do anything about, calmly remind yourself to focus on what you can control (your reaction) and let go what you cannot (everything else).

“Happiness equals reality minus expectations.”

– Tom Magliozzi

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is about being in the moment – not dwelling on the past, not worrying about the future, simply being where you are right now and experiencing only that. Practicing and cultivating mindfulness relieved a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety in my life. I lived in a constant state of worry, frustration, and panic, and I didn't even know it.

When I first started learning about mindfulness, my first step was to simply notice when I started getting into these obsessive thought cycles (about work, about whomever I was dating, about what had to get done, or what I should have said, or what this person thought of me: Are they mad at me? Did I piss them off somehow? Oh my God, I have so much work to do tomorrow, I'm never going to get everything done. On and on and on and on!)

So I learned to take notice of this and interrupt myself. I would touch something nearby (a wall, a piece of furniture, etc.) and take three very deep breaths. Breathe in, hold for a few seconds, and breathe out. It was a 30-second break to remind myself that wherever I was, whatever I was doing, it was the only thing that I could be doing, the only thing that mattered. I practiced and repeated this simple exercise whenever and wherever I could: taking a shower, shaving, brushing my teeth, driving, writing, playing my guitar, walking, spending time with someone. After a month or two (of daily practice), it became habit.

Soon enough, it seemed almost anything that I was doing could be seen as an opportunity to practice being present: walking, washing dishes, cleaning the house, writing a song, driving. I found all these opportunities to practice mindfulness in my daily routines and it helped me to become more patient, kind, and focused. You can only exist in this moment. Practice being fully present in whatever it is that you are doing.

Gratitude

In my darkest times, I was focused solely on everything that I wanted or needed or didn't have. I focused on how successful or happy others were (in my eyes) and wasted all my time wishing my life or house or family was more like theirs. It was an endless cycle of negativity and wanting – nothing was ever good enough. It's easy to get stuck in a thought pattern of what we wish we had, or to focus on what other's have that we don't – but it's pointless and insignificant to live by comparison when the reality is that we have so much to be grateful for everyday.

What we *need to survive* is a very short list: air, food, water, shelter, and human connection. Everything else is a want, a luxury, a gift – and these gifts should be reflected on and appreciated. As I learned to practice gratitude on a daily basis for everything and everyone that I had in my life, what was missing became insignificant.

Take some time each morning when you rise and each night before you go to sleep to reflect on the gifts in your life. Even in my darkest hours, there were people, experiences, and gifts each day that I could be grateful for. Keep a gratitude journal, take lots of pictures, create photo albums, reminders of who and what you are thankful for and surround yourself with these things.

Yes, there are hard times: financial hardships, job losses, breakups, accidents, injuries, sicknesses, challenges, obstacles, uncertainties and minor everyday irritations. We all face this stuff throughout our lives, and nobody's life is perfect or without struggle (no matter how perfect you think it is). There are ups and downs, sometimes we have less, sometimes we have more – but there are things to be grateful for in our lives every day and *that* is what we need to shift our focus to. Once you learn how to adopt an “attitude of gratitude,” you'll find that the grass is green on your side, too.

Practice acceptance, mindfulness, and gratitude.

- Let go of expectations.
 - You can only exist in this moment; be present.
 - Reflect daily on who and what you are thankful for.
-

Slow Down

We often generate unnecessary worry, stress, and anxiety for ourselves. We can reduce our level of stress, worry, and anxiety by learning how to slow down. You don't *need* to be constantly "connected" (cell phones, email, texting, Facebook, Twitter, etc.). The age of information has become the age of distraction and we are stressing ourselves out. We are constantly bombarded by the information and distractions that we have available at our fingertips (along with a ridiculous amount of advertising for things that we don't need) and it has trashed our attention spans. Life offers so many moments of joy and wonder, but if you are moving too fast, you'll never notice them.

Give yourself some time away from these distractions: shut off your phone an hour or two before going to bed, wait until you've gotten ready before turning it back on in the morning. Check your email, Facebook, Twitter, etc., at certain times throughout the day and then log off. Leave your cell phone behind (or at least on silent) when you are eating or visiting with someone. When you are driving in a vehicle that can take your life, or the lives of others at a moment's notice, you do not need to be talking on your cell phone or texting someone or updating your Facebook status. Believe me, whatever it is, it can wait until you are where you need to be, safe and sound.

You are only capable of doing one thing at a time, so set your priorities and focus on doing *one* thing at a time. Multi-tasking and rushing around only leads to stress and mistakes. You may think you're being more efficient, but you end up creating more headaches for yourself.

You can practice slowing down in almost any moment. When you are showering, brushing your teeth, washing dishes, etc., try to focus solely on that experience. This takes time and practice, and you will be shocked at how often your brain automatically

leads you into other thoughts about the past and the future, but realize when that is happening, and gently bring yourself back to concentrating only on the task at hand.

Suggestions for slowing down

Get outside

We spend too much sedentary time inside these days. We wake up, go to work or school, sit at a desk, drive home, eat, plop ourselves in front of the television, go to bed, and do it all over again. Day after day after day after day. A sedentary lifestyle has an incredibly negative affect on our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. It drains our energy, attention spans, creativity, and health.

“Adopt the pace of nature, her secret is patience.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Spending time in nature is one of the simplest and most accessible ways to reduce stress and fatigue, and boost our immune systems. Research proves that spending time outdoors, surrounded by nature, helps boost our Vitamin D levels which helps protect us from cancers, osteoporosis, heart disease, diabetes, and yes, depression, too.

Spending just a few hours every week outdoors helps to restore our minds, bodies, and souls. Here are just a few of the benefits you will notice:

- Improved mood
- Increased activity (better fitness)
- Increased attention span and ability to focus
- Reduced stress and anxiety
- Enhanced creativity

When was the last time you took a walk in the early morning and watched the sun rise, or took a walk in the evening and watched the sun set? Can you remember the last time you felt the cool evening or morning breeze on your face? Walked barefoot through the grass in the morning dew? Ran through a sprinkler or a rain shower on a hot summer afternoon? Stood barefoot in a lake with a loved one and watched the sun rise as the waves rolled over your feet? Went fishing or kayaking or canoeing? Built a snowman? Do you take time each day – even if it’s just for 10 minutes – to listen to the birds or watch the clouds move or smell the flowers?

I can tell you that after an afternoon of hiking through the woods or canoeing or a weekend of camping, I feel refreshed, rejuvenated, calm, appreciative, focused, and happy. It’s one of the most restorative, therapeutic experiences I can think of.

I was not always like this. I *hated* it outside! I hated the bugs, the heat, the cold, the snow, the rain, etc. I was also a very miserable, negative, cynical, angry, and overweight person during those times.

A few years ago, I made a commitment to spending some time outside every day, and getting out into nature (and away from the suburbs) as often as I possibly could. This commitment has played a *huge* role in reducing my levels of stress and anxiety, increased my ability to focus, increased my level of appreciation for life in general, and improved my patience and relationships.

Years ago, I was driving home from Chicago with my friend Audrey (who has since passed) and as we crossed back into Michigan, she told me to pull off at an exit. When I asked why, she said to just do it and she would show me. As I followed her directions, we arrived shortly at a secluded beach on the shore of Lake Michigan. She told me to take off my shoes and socks and stand with her in the water, and she took my hand. She told me not to speak. To just close my eyes and listen and feel. I don't know how long we stood there, but that was a life-changing moment. That was a moment when I realized that my life had been moving much too fast, and that I was not taking the time to

appreciate the nature and beauty that surrounds us. Everything else that was on my mind quickly faded as I became quiet (physically and mentally), calm and connected.

Nature surrounds you and is there any time you need it. Go on a hike. Go camping. Go fishing. Go stand in the water with your shoes and socks off and close your eyes. Go for a walk or a jog or a bike ride through a park. Plant a garden or tend to yours if you have one. Watch and feel your life change as you become more connected to the earth and all of the wonders it has to offer.

Learn How to Say "No"

We've all been there. We say "yes" to everything all the time. This can be a good thing: We get to meet new people, experience new things, and visit new places. We can also overwhelm ourselves by overloading our calendars, neglecting to take time off or away. Very often I felt obligated to say "yes" when someone asked me to do something or be somewhere or help with this or that or the other. I would say yes because I cared about the person and I like to help out where I can and I like to do fun things.

Sometimes, it's just not possible to say "yes". Prior commitments, a personal day, or evening to yourself, whatever the case may be. It is OK to say "no" sometimes. A simple, polite "No, I can't make it" or "No, that's just not going to work for me" will do. You don't have to describe in detail, apologize for, or defend your response any further. A reasonable person will accept a "no" without getting upset and holding it against you. We all have lives and jobs and schedules, and most people understand that. Someone who is not reasonable however, might become angry or upset and keep asking why, or continue trying to pressure or manipulate us with guilt and so we end up saying yes because we don't want to cause conflict. We become silently resentful and the relationship suffers. In cases like this, it can be helpful to start setting boundaries. I'll discuss that a little later on.

Your needs are important too, and saying “no” sometimes allows us to say “yes” to the people, passions, and activities that will enrich and fulfill our lives and will prevent people from taking us for granted or walking all over us. Remember, it’s always easier to say “yes” later to something that you originally said “no” to than saying “yes” to avoid dealing with a confrontation and having to worry about getting out of it later.

Turn off the TV

Want a calmer mind? More time? Better sleep? Better overall health? Turn off the television. Go out for a walk, pick up a book, meditate, create something, do something fun with someone you love ... your possibilities are endless!

I have to admit, I was a TV junkie. There was always something to watch and it was an easy way to escape for a few hours. I thought it was relaxing. It certainly felt and seemed that way. I would watch TV after work. I would fall asleep watching it, and I would watch it in the morning while I was getting ready. I often felt stressed out and anxious. I had trouble falling to sleep (and staying asleep) and my debt was mounting because I would buy stuff I didn’t need on credit, which lead to more stress and anxiety. The television became the source of a great deal of this excess stress, anxiety, lack of sleep, and desire to spend recklessly on stuff I didn’t need. Programming exists for one simple reason: to sell you things. Lots of things. Things you don’t *need*.

The constant barrage of imagery is mind-numbing and detrimental to our attention spans, ability to focus, and our overall well-being. TV keeps us sedentary, unnecessarily in fear, and always wanting more. Something better or new and improved! Something we absolutely *cannot* live without! Something that will make us healthier, stronger, leaner, safer, more desirable, something that will improve our status, display our success, a bright shiny thing to show everyone else that we are somebody, too. It will never end, and it will never be enough.

I'm not saying that you need to cancel the cable service or throw your television out the window (though it's not a terrible idea). As with most things in life, what I'm suggesting is moderation and the basic understanding that what you are watching is not real and is designed to do only one thing: sell you something. Take some small steps toward reducing your time in front of the TV and see what happens.

Suggestions for reducing your TV consumption:

- If you have a show or two that you really like, set your DVR and watch without the distraction of commercials, on your schedule, not the network's.
- Track how much time you spend watching TV each week and try reducing it by 30 or 60 minutes each week.
- Try a "no TV" day once or twice a week (or a TV-free week once a month).
- Turn off the television while you are eating, or getting ready for the day, or doing something else.

Who knows? Maybe once you start discovering all the benefits of reducing the amount of television that you consume, you might just end up trashing the thing anyway!

Meditate

Getting into the practice of daily, focused meditation helped me to become more mindful, and reduce the amount of worry, stress, and anxiety in my mind. It also helped me to start getting the best sleep I'd had in years. Meditating, or conscious relaxation, is a simple, inexpensive way to clear out the information overload in our heads that leads to being stressed out, and anyone can do it!

Benefits of meditation include:

- Better perspective on stressful or irritating situations

- Overall stress reduction
- Increased self-awareness
- Mindfulness (focusing on the present moment)
- Reducing negative emotions

My friend Paula helped me get started with meditation. She gave me a guided meditation CD and I let it sit on my desk for months before putting it on my iPod and giving it a chance. I thought to myself at first, “Well, this is just strange. This is probably going to be full of cheesy, weird things and all it’s going to do is make me laugh.” Then I finally gave it a shot. Instead of falling asleep with my TV on (which I had been doing for years), I put my earbuds in and started it up. I was maybe 10 or 15 minutes into it when I fell asleep and had the best night of sleep that I’d had in years. The next day I awoke feeling refreshed, relaxed, and motivated. I bought a couple more guided meditation CDs and have since made meditation a daily practice in my life: before sleep and when I wake. My patience, focus, and overall mood have all improved.

Meditation is about consciously focusing on your mind and body to cultivate greater focus, clarity, calmness, and insight. Meditation has helped me to start noticing the little things and appreciating that each passing moment is a moment I will never have again.

A simple exercise for getting started:

1. Find a quiet space where you can be alone (no televisions, cell phones, computers or other distractions!) and sit in a position that is comfortable for you.
2. Close your eyes and focus your attention on your breath. You don’t need to make any adjustments or consciously change your breathing pattern, simply observe your breath and the sensation of breathing. Devote 5 minutes or so to this. If you notice that your thoughts are drifting or wandering, gently remind yourself to return the focus to your breath.

3. Spend the next few minutes focusing and reflecting on the people and experiences that you are grateful for.
4. Spend a few more minutes observing your breath and then open your eyes.

You can devote as much or as little time as you feel comfortable to this as you get started. I generally spend 10 to 15 minutes meditating each morning as soon as I wake up, and at night, I use the guided meditation CDs that I have and fall asleep listening to them. Approach meditation sincerely, with an open mind, and it will be a peaceful and enjoyable experience. With practice and patience, you will naturally develop your own process and experience greater peace, calmness, and insight.

Getting Proper Rest

We need sleep to function properly. Real sleep. Proper rest is essential to good physical and mental health. Chronic sleep deprivation weakens your immune system, impairs your physical and mental performance, and contributes to heart disease, stomach ulcers, depression, and other mood disorders. In short, not getting enough sleep can make you miserable. If you're getting less than 8 hours of sleep each night, chances are you're not getting enough sleep.

Signs of sleep deprivation include:

- Having a hard time getting up and moving in the morning
- Feeling drowsy and sluggish in the afternoon, after meals, or when driving
- Falling asleep while watching TV or relaxing during the evening

Studies show that 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night is recommended for most adults.

During this time, there are series of sleep stages that we pass through that are essential to restoring our bodies and minds. Sleep is not a luxury in our lives, it is necessary for optimal health and happiness, and we need to give proper rest the same priority that we give in any other area of caring for ourselves.

Suggestions for getting a proper night's sleep:

- Sleep in complete darkness. Keep alarm clocks out of sight, turn off cell phones, cover the windows, shut the door, leave the television off (it shouldn't even be in the bedroom), and if it's still not dark enough, consider using an eye mask.
- Keep your bedroom cool. Research suggests that the ideal temperature for sleep is between 60 and 68 degrees. This is because as we sleep, our body's internal temperature drops to its lowest level. A cooler environment mimics our body's natural temperature.
- Avoid watching TV, messing around on the laptop or cell phone, or working (especially working!) in bed. Replace these bad habits which disrupt your ability to sleep properly with something that prepares your mind and body for rest such as reading, meditation, deep breathing, or listening to a guided relaxation CD. Find a restful and relaxing routine that you can repeat every night to help relieve the stresses from your day.

- Stick to a schedule. Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day, even on the weekends. Getting into a rhythm makes it easier to fall asleep and get up.
- Avoid fluids and snacks within 2 to 3 hours of bedtime
- Take a hot shower or bath before going to bed
- If you often find your mind racing when you lay down to rest, try writing in a journal before going to bed. Just grab a pen and start writing. Don't worry about doing anything formal or even making sense. Just start writing as thoughts enter your mind. This is called stream-of-consciousness writing and it can help you clear your mind of clutter.
- Exercise regularly. Even 30 minutes of exercise each day can help improve your sleep. Don't exercise too close to bedtime, though, or it might keep you up. Research shows that exercising in the morning is best if you can do it.
- Avoid taking naps during the day, if possible; this disrupts the cycle and can take hours away from you at night.

Slow down.

- Focus on one task at a time.
 - Stay connected with nature.
 - Mind your commitments, distractions, and media consumption.
-

Explore Your Passions and Cultivate Your Natural Talents

Exploring our passions and cultivating our natural talents leads to a sense of purpose in our lives, and purpose motivates us and feeds our souls. My passions for writing and music led me to where I'm at and what I'm doing today. It has helped me express myself, make sense of things that didn't make sense, and find direction. I have a sense of pride and accomplishment and self-worth as a result of all of this. Has it made me a millionaire or a celebrity? Certainly not, but that's not the point. The point is to find a positive, healthy way to express yourself and live with purpose.

I'm passionate about words and music. I can get lost for hours at a time with writing and music. I enjoy writing (songs, journaling, stories, articles, etc.) and I enjoy playing my guitar and singing. I love writing my own songs, and I love learning how to play and sing songs by others that move and inspire me.

I know that not everyone is a writer or a musician, but everyone is capable of creating something and each of us possesses natural talents. What inspires you? What are you passionate about? What kind of creative process or activity can you get lost in for hours on end? Perhaps it is cooking, photography, painting, drawing, illustrating, making jewelry, ceramics, pottery, sculpture, crocheting or knitting, carpentry, restoring cars or rebuilding engines, gardening, crafting, graphic design, fashion ... The list can go on and on, but again, the point is we are all passionate about something and we each possess natural talents. Explore what excites you and chase it.

Getting "lost" in something that moves or inspires you is often also referred to as "flow." Distractions seem to fade away and all of your focus goes into your project. Finding creative activities that we are passionate about helps us express ourselves in a healthy

way, it helps relieve stress, and it creates a sense of accomplishment, because whatever we have done, whatever we have created, has never existed before. There is no wrong or right way. It doesn't matter how big or small it is. It doesn't matter what other people think about it. *You* created it, and that's an amazing thing.

Take some time to explore the things that you are passionate about, start creating, and don't compare yourself to the abilities of others. Create without expectations or judgment. Create simply for the sake of creating. At this point in my life, I'm not making a living as a musician, but that does not stop me from following my passion. I still play my guitar, I still write songs, I still record music, and I still perform. I still write (in some form another) every single day. I write when inspiration hits, I listen to what's in my heart and the sounds that the world makes, I listen to people and become inspired, and I create – without expectation or judgment. I do it because it feeds my soul, because it creates a sense of peace and accomplishment. I do it because it feels good.

For me, the most difficult part of creating something was learning how to just *start* doing it. I would think about an idea for a song or something that I wanted to write and I would think about it for hours or days or weeks and end up putting it off and procrastinating because I was afraid of how much work I would need to put into this thing to get it finished. I would focus on everything that I had to accomplish in order to finish the project instead of just getting started and that would send me into a spiral of procrastination.

Eventually I learned that all I had to do was *start* and the rest would follow, naturally. There is always time to tweak, and edit, and re-do, etc. Some projects get done in one sitting, some projects take a couple of days or weeks or months, some get re-visited after a few years with a new perspective and all the sudden it feels right, some projects simply don't get finished, and all of that is OK.

I hear people say to others sometimes “Oh, I wish I had your talent (or passion or ability).” This is a negative and self-defeating statement. *Everyone* possesses talent in

some form. Everyone is creative in some way. Look inside and ask yourself, “What am I passionate about?” and then follow that, wherever it takes you. Explore, practice, refine, take classes or lessons, join a club or group, and read up about what others are doing who are passionate about the same things. Do it without an agenda or expectations and surround yourself with people who share your passions and people whose passions you can share.

Explore your passions and cultivate your natural talents.

- This is how you will find your purpose in this life.
 - Do it without expectation, comparison, or judgment.
 - Don't focus on end results, just start.
-

Cultivate Positive, Meaningful Relationships

Social networking was built with the best of intentions (connecting people), but it seems that it is accidentally contributing to further isolation. We need real connection – positive, meaningful relationships with actual human beings. We don't need 600 "friends." It is impossible to be truly connected and intimate with that many people anyway. All we need is a handful of people with whom we can truly be ourselves – people who know all of us, and for whom we know all – the good, the bad, and everything in between. These are the relationships that will matter when times get tough. These relationships develop slowly, over time, as two people gradually get to know each other and let their guards down.

My overall happiness improved dramatically as I gradually learned how to express myself, and to communicate openly and honestly with the people closest to me. When we feel deeply connected to people, it fills our souls with self-worth, stability, and peace. For so long, I just laughed and partied and acted as obnoxious and outrageous as possible – holding back on saying anything too revealing (even to the people who were closest to me) for fear that I would be judged or rejected.

To cultivate and sustain meaningful relationships, we must allow ourselves to be vulnerable and that can be scary. It's natural to be afraid that people will judge us or look down on us or reject us if we reveal our true selves, which includes all of our flaws and fears. So often, we try to put our best foot forward and show people only the best parts of ourselves, hiding these fears and insecurities so that we can make a good impression and so that they will "like" us. We *all* have fears and insecurities, though – and what an amazing feeling when you are free to share yours and the people who are closest to you can share theirs. You bond, you relate, you lighten each other's loads.

It took me a *long* time to start doing this because I had spent so many years internalizing my fears and insecurities so that everyone would think I was strong, that I had it all together. It's exhausting carrying all that weight around by yourself, and I felt like I was living a lie. What a relief when I learned that I could open up to the people I love and that that would strengthen our bonds!

A difficult but liberating truth to accept is that not everyone is going to like you. I was so worried about this all the time, so focused on saying "the right thing" and trying to impress people. When I was finally able to accept that there are people who just won't like me, for whatever reason(s), I could stop thinking so much about what "the right thing" to say was and simply listen and respond honestly and naturally. We owe it to ourselves to be true to who we are. That is how we find like-minded people and weed out the ones with whom we just don't have that much in common.

We are all coming from different perspectives, circumstances, and environments, and we're all just trying to do the best we can with what we've got. If everyone had everything in common, the world would be a very dull and boring place.

Take risks. Be vulnerable. Be YOU. At the end of our lives, the only things that will have mattered are our experiences and relationships. Not everyone is going to like you. Why waste time pretending to be someone you're not? Be open and honest without worrying about what others may think. You will attract like-minded people and positive, meaningful relationships make for a fulfilling life.

A great way to find like-minded people is to explore places and groups that share your passions and interests. Your possibilities here are endless: join a club at school or at church, look online for hobby and interest groups or discussion boards, go to your local community center or library and ask about information on the different social groups and

activities in your community. You will be surprised at how many people out there are ready to meet you and share your passions and interests!

Define Your Boundaries

We protect our homes and our cars and our personal possessions, but all too often we don't put the same amount of care and effort into protecting our emotional health. Setting boundaries simply means caring enough about yourself to clearly communicate what you will tolerate and what you will not from other people and their behaviors. Setting boundaries is an important tool for empowering ourselves and improving our lives and relationships.

Our lives are filled with all kinds of relationships: friends, significant others, acquaintances, co-workers and colleagues, classmates, and family members. Too often, we assume a lot about each other and about our relationships. We expect someone to know what makes us happy or what irritates us, what is acceptable and what is not. We are setting ourselves up for disagreements – and sometimes disasters – by living this way. We must learn how to communicate our wants and needs, define what is acceptable behavior and what is not – *and* learn to be open to, and respectful of, other people's boundaries as well.

Without boundaries, we allow people into our lives and personal spaces who might be manipulative, dishonest, or physically, emotionally, or verbally abusive. These people constantly and consistently drain of us our time, energy, and self-esteem. There is a big difference between someone who occasionally frustrates or annoys you and someone who is seriously affecting your mental health and constantly bringing you down.

How often have you told a demanding, intimidating, manipulative person what they wanted to hear instead of speaking your mind out of fear of their reaction? I can tell you that I've done this more times than I care to count. I would then either keep it to myself

and beat myself up over it or vent my frustrations and whine and complain about it to other people who had absolutely nothing to do with it. Living this way only adds stress and frustration to our lives and enables dysfunctional relationships.

Setting, defining, and defending our boundaries helps us say what we mean and mean what we say. This may be difficult and uncomfortable at first, but over time, we develop more confidence, gain more respect from others, and our lives and relationships improve dramatically.

Examples of some of my personal boundaries are:

1. I will not tolerate dishonesty.
 2. I will not tolerate manipulation or passive aggressive behavior.
 3. I will not tolerate people who refuse to take responsibility for their own problems.
-

These are just a few examples of course, but setting these boundaries has helped me to eliminate toxic or co-dependant relationships that I was holding on to for no good reason, and replace them with caring, meaningful, positive ones.

“You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with.”

– Jim Rohn

In the past, I sustained my fair share of unhealthy and toxic relationships with people who complained relentlessly about everything, and used manipulation and passive-aggressive tactics to gain sympathy and attention. These relationships were emotionally exhausting and draining. Their behavior really irritated me and constantly brought me down, but I felt sorry for them and continued our relationship based on that sympathy and fear of conflict. I simply lacked the confidence to stand up for myself.

We learn as we grow up that being “selfish” is a bad thing, but the definition of “selfish” needs to be dissected a bit. When we don’t believe in ourselves or don’t care enough about ourselves, we become dependent on approval and recognition from other people, and afraid of rejection and conflict. In therapy, I was able to come to terms with and address the sources of my own insecurities and low self-esteem. As I realized and accepted that my needs were important – and that I deserved meaningful, fulfilling relationships – I was able to start setting boundaries in my relationships and communicating to others what I will and will not tolerate.

A healthy relationship is based on trust, respect, honesty, support, and equality. This applies to all relationships, not just romantic ones. If you find yourself always feeling resentful, walking on eggshells, compromising your own beliefs, constantly defending yourself or giving in to someone because you feel guilty or obligated – these are all signs that you may be in a toxic relationship.

It’s important to realize and accept that you cannot change people. Everyone is on their own personal journey and responsible for themselves. They have the right to learn and grow, and they have the right not to. It’s up to you to decide who you want in your life and who you don’t.

Life is too short to tolerate relationships with people who constantly bring us down. We owe it to ourselves to find and surround ourselves with people who support, motivate, and inspire us. The quality of your relationships is created by you, and supported by the boundaries that you define and defend. In the end, you will have better relationships, and gain more respect by defining who you are, what you will tolerate, what you will not, and enforcing those limits.

Learn to Listen

This is one of the things that took me some time to latch on to, and something I continue trying to improve today. One of the simplest keys to improving your relationships is learning how to really *listen* to someone. If you can do this, every interaction becomes an opportunity to learn something new, to know someone better, or to see something from a perspective you may have never seen. Think about the great interviewers and detectives, and what information they are able to get from people. That's the art of listening at work.

“Nature gave us one tongue and two ears so we could hear twice as much as we speak.”

– Epictetus, Greek philosopher.

Real communication occurs when both the speaker and the listener participate. So often, we hear what we want to hear, not what people are trying to tell us, and I have certainly been guilty of this myself many times. I spent many years as a “conversation hog” trying so hard to be heard, getting lost in my own head and thoughts without actually listening to what others were saying.

As I actively worked on developing my listening skills, I noticed right away how fascinating it could be on the other end of the conversation. The world doesn't revolve around me! Others are struggling or succeeding or feeling one way or the other about this or that. My obsessive thoughts began to fade and my relationships improved as I practiced being a good listener.

Communication is a two-way process and so many conflicts can be resolved if we learn how to really listen to someone without getting in our own way. As listeners, we think at a rate of about 400-500 words per minute while the normal speaking rate is about 125-150 words per minute, so it's no wonder that effective listening is a skill that we need to learn and practice.

Suggestions for developing your listening skills:

- Try asking more questions: Are you saying this? Is this what you meant? Ask open-ended questions, not simply questions that can be answered with a yes or no. Can you repeat to the speaker what you've just heard? If not, ask for some clarification.
- Pay attention to your body language: make eye contact with the speaker, show interest, and don't cross your arms or position yourself defensively.
- Listen without trying to come up with a response while someone is talking. Don't interrupt. Be patient and try to be in the moment (mindfulness). If you find your mind wandering (thoughts of what happened earlier today, stuff you need to get done later, what you are going to say in response, etc.), simply re-focus your attention on the speaker and what they are saying. Listen to the entire message, take a breath to reflect, and then respond.
- Listen with attention and affection when someone is sharing something difficult with you; try putting yourself in their shoes. Let go of the need to be "right" or your ideas of what the other person should say or do. Often by talking out our problems with a good listener, we are able to reach a solution for ourselves. Effective listening develops empathy – our ability to relate to and accept someone without judgment for who they are and what their thoughts, feelings and opinions are.
- Remove distractions. Cell phones seem to have become an extra limb for so many people today. Constantly checking a phone is distracting, disrespectful, and seriously inhibits our ability to truly listen to someone. Turn the phone off or on silent. If you are at home, turn the television off. Give someone the full attention they deserve when it's time to communicate.

What does it feel like when someone truly *listens* to you? I know I feel like I matter to the other person and that I am cared for. If we can spend less time trying to be heard and more time really hearing what people are saying, we can form deeper, more meaningful connections, learn countless new things, solve our problems more effectively, and generally feel happier and more fulfilled.

Cultivate positive, meaningful relationships.

- Take risks, be open, be vulnerable, and be honest. Be YOU.
 - Define and defend your boundaries.
 - Learn to listen.
-

Letting Go

We have explored the concepts of building a foundation for happiness. I hope that it has been helpful and has opened your mind to some new ways of thinking, but I have one more thing to share with you before bringing this all to an end.

Before we can truly move toward an empowered life filled with passion and purpose, we must learn to forgive those who have hurt us. The forgiveness is not for them. It's for us. As long as we hang on to hate, anger, or spite, we will never truly be free to live and to love. We have to understand and accept that everyone is a human being with flaws and faults and hurts. We all make mistakes and bad decisions and act out of anger or fear sometimes. We all come from different places and we all experience pain. I had to come to terms with the fact that my father was human and that he was hurting in a way that he couldn't see any other way out of. He made a choice that I was powerless to change and that I couldn't understand. I was angry and hurt and I had to let that go before I could move on.

My first step toward forgiveness – and my breakthrough moment – was a letter that I wrote to my father 10 years after his death. In that letter, I put into words, and on to paper, how angry I was at him for doing what he did and leaving my brother and I at a time in our lives when we needed him most. I told him how sad I was that he was never there for the important events in my life like getting my driver's license or graduating from high school. I told him that I was tired of living my life from the sidelines, watching all my friends grow up and graduate from college, and start families. I wanted to be happy. I wanted to love and be loved. I wanted to feel connected to the people in my life and to life in general. I told him that I couldn't do any of this until I was able to forgive him for what he did, and until I felt his forgiveness in my heart for the things I said and did.

I told him that I was sorry. I told him that I forgave him. I told him that I missed him, and that I loved him ... and I said “goodbye.”.

I took that letter to his grave that day. It was the first time I was able to bring myself to the cemetery. Going there, visiting his grave, seeing his headstone – I knew that would make everything real and I was terrified of that. For so long, I tried to make myself believe that I had always hated him or that he never even existed. But I went that day, and I faced my fears. I read the letter out loud to him, and I have never cried in my life the way I cried that day, in that moment. I lost it. I trembled. I shook. I wept uncontrollably. It was the hardest thing I had ever had to do in my life. After I finished reading the letter to him, I burned it and watched the ashes scatter over his grave and into the wind. I begged for some kind of sign that he had heard me, and the leaves on the tree nearest to his grave started rustling. In that moment, I knew he had heard me and forgiven me, and that he was out there somewhere, that God was out there somewhere, that redemption was possible.

That was the other experience (that I mentioned earlier) that inspired me to write *No Resolve*, to pick up my guitar again, and to start putting my life back together. Since that day, I have used writing and music as an outlet for the pain in my life. Since that day, I have had the courage and motivation to start facing my fears, to look for answers, to chase my passions, to search for the truth, to find out what helps us live with passion and purpose in a world and life that can sometimes be painful and difficult to navigate.

That pivotal moment was 11 years ago. Today, as I write this, I am 35 years old, 10 years older than I ever thought I would be. Although it has been a lengthy process coming back up to the surface, with plenty of setbacks along the way, that moment was when I decided that I wouldn't give up, no matter how hard things got, and that I would do whatever it took to find peace, balance, and happiness in my life. It's taken me a long time to get where I'm at today, but everything that I have learned along the way is in this book in the hopes that maybe *your* journey can be shorter. I don't have all the answers, but I am committed to a life of learning, and pursuing truth and passion and purpose. I'm human;

life still does (and will always) present new challenges and some painful experiences. I still have setbacks from time to time, but the difference today is that I have the tools and skills to help me cope and overcome.

The truths, concepts, and strategies in this book have existed (and gotten results) for a long time; I am not claiming to be a brilliant philosopher or to have broken any new ground. But the truth is, 10 years ago I didn't know about any of this stuff, and I hurt for a long time because of that. If it is our responsibility as human beings to pass on the knowledge that we gain along this journey called life, then I want to live up to that responsibility and I can only hope that in some way, it lights a path for someone.

I offer you my story – where I've come from, what I've been through, and the truths and skills that I have learned along the way – to let you know that you can begin again. Hope is possible. Happiness is possible. Peace and balance are possible. Like all good things in life, achieving these things takes a commitment to growth, followed by practice, patience, and persistence. It all starts with a choice, and that is up to you.

“Decide what to be, and go be it.”

– Head Full of Doubt / Road Full of Promise, The Avett Brothers.



Dennis Liegghio is a professional speaker on overcoming depression and thoughts of suicide and the founder of KnowResolve (www.knowresolve.org) - a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting mental health and reducing youth suicides. In his spare time, Dennis digs traveling, writing, cooking, meeting awesome people, reading, and making music with his friends in the Student Driver Band.

His goal is to live a life full of passion, freedom, and adventure. He hopes that this book has been helpful and inspiring and welcomes any feedback! Contact him by email at dennis@detourproject.org or visit his blog (www.detourproject.org) where he and his friends write about exploring roads less traveled, lessons learned and random observations.



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