



6 Saboteurs of Self-Control

WHY DO WE SELF-SABOTAGE AND HOW TO OVERCOME IT?



A Note From Eric Zimmer



This guide aims to help you better understand why you sometimes struggle with self-control by identifying the main barriers and, more importantly, providing tools to overcome them.

While many believe that willpower and discipline are key to achieving our goals, behavioral scientists agree that relying solely on self-control is not the most effective approach.

Instead, by structuring our environment and making clear plans, we can reduce our reliance on sheer willpower. However, even with the best preparation, there are crucial moments—choice points—where we must decide between following through or falling short.

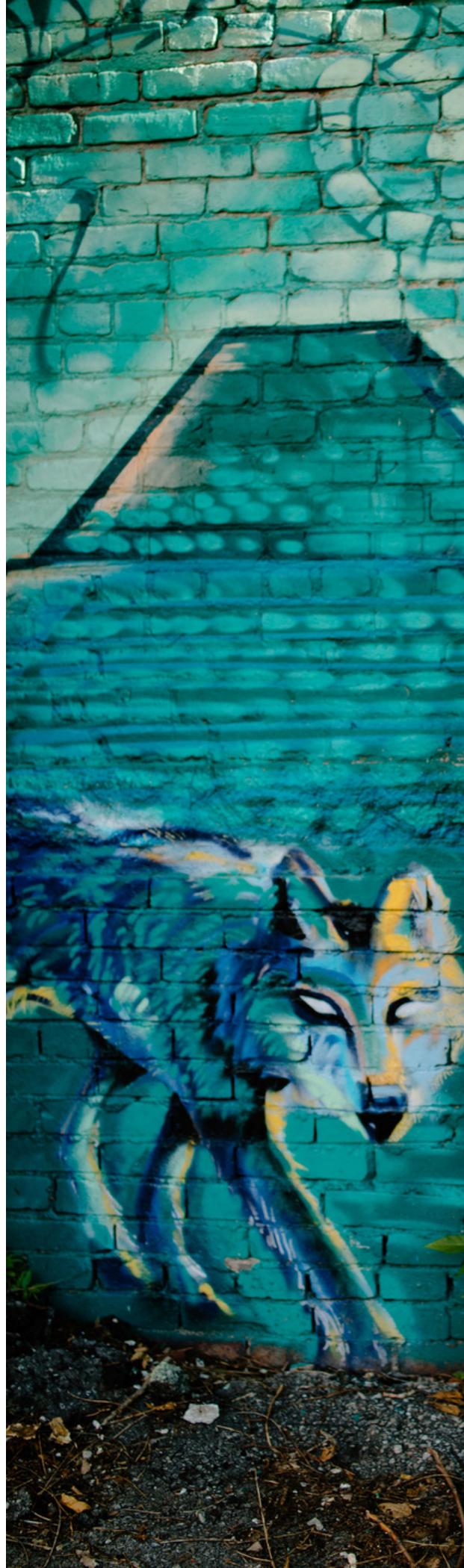
This guide explains the six saboteurs, or obstacles, that I've identified that often hinder us at these critical moments.

Understanding these barriers is crucial because they highlight the internal and external challenges we often face in maintaining discipline and finding greater meaning and satisfaction in our lives.

By exploring these obstacles and learning strategies to overcome them, you'll be better equipped to make and keep promises to yourself, ultimately leading to a more fulfilling life. In the following sections, we'll delve into each of these obstacles and discuss practical ways to address them.

Remember, the goal isn't to achieve perfect self-control, but rather to build a balanced approach that combines effective structural support with improved self-discipline skills. This combination will empower you to live the life you aspire to, one choice at a time.

Let's dive in!





6 Saboteurs of Self-Control

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A woman with long, wavy brown hair is looking down at her smartphone. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey. A large, light blue '01' is overlaid on the page, serving as a chapter or section marker.

The Autopilot Pitfall

CRUISE CONTROL // LACK OF CONTROL

I've spent considerable time deconstructing my own autopilot responses, like how my hand seems to confuse "time to open this work document" for "time to play solitaire again." I can trace a line between internal discomfort such as frustration, doubt, or boredom—and the directions my autopilot takes me. But the defining element of this pitfall is that it unfolds below the threshold of conscious awareness.

We don't actively choose to deviate from our intentions; we're off base before we even realize what's happening. Imagine having a few chips while watching tv—and looking down as your hand scrapes the bottom of the bag. Or finding your phone in your hand for the tenth time in ten minutes. We've all been there. We do these things not because we've decided they're the best use of our time and energy, but because the part of us that would have chosen otherwise is out to lunch.

01

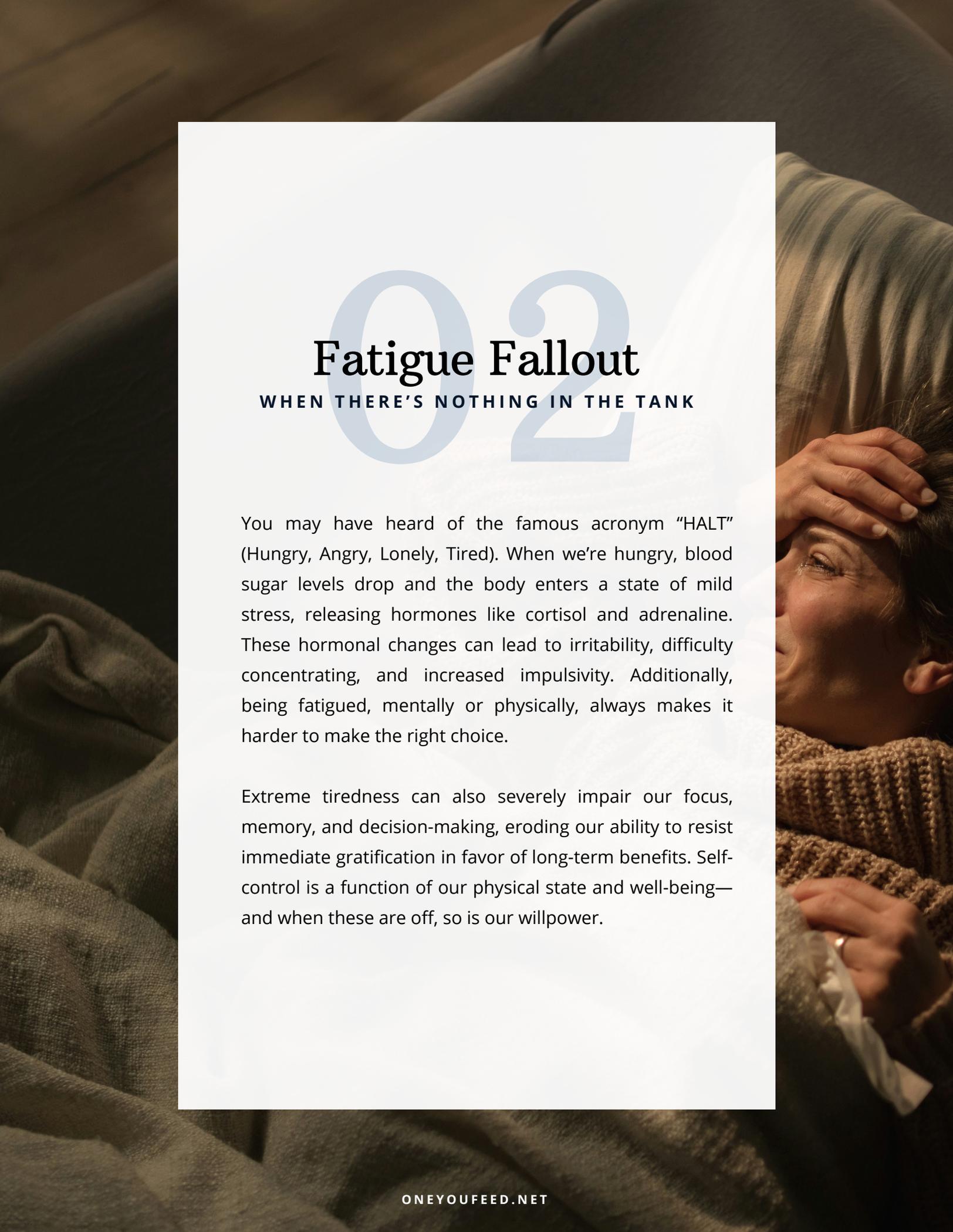
TOOLS TO OVERCOME

The Autopilot Pitfall

Attention is going to be our primary tool here. Often all it takes is enough awareness to see that we're making a choice—at which point we have the option to decide whether or not it's a choice we want to make. To cultivate this awareness, check in with yourself throughout the day by asking yourself what you are doing and why you are doing it.

I have a program on my phone that activates whenever I click on my email app, prompting me to take a breath in and out and then select how long I want to use the app for. It does not block me from using the app, but it does make me aware of what's happening and forces me to consciously affirm that I do, in fact, want to check my email—which then usually leads me to reflect that I don't want to, I just feel like it. This simple prompt has reduced my sometimes-compulsive email checking by about 500%!

You might think that setting up an app like this is really a job for the planning stage, not the action stage of behavior—and you'd be right. Consider this your broken-record reminder that the best way to succeed at self-control is to plan ahead so that you need as little thought as possible.

A woman is lying in bed, looking distressed with her hand on her forehead. The background is a close-up of her face and hands, showing signs of fatigue or stress. The lighting is soft and warm, highlighting the textures of the bedding and her skin.

02 Fatigue Fallout

WHEN THERE'S NOTHING IN THE TANK

You may have heard of the famous acronym “HALT” (Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired). When we’re hungry, blood sugar levels drop and the body enters a state of mild stress, releasing hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. These hormonal changes can lead to irritability, difficulty concentrating, and increased impulsivity. Additionally, being fatigued, mentally or physically, always makes it harder to make the right choice.

Extreme tiredness can also severely impair our focus, memory, and decision-making, eroding our ability to resist immediate gratification in favor of long-term benefits. Self-control is a function of our physical state and well-being—and when these are off, so is our willpower.

02

TOOLS TO OVERCOME

Fatigue Fallout

The first line of defense here is, again, preemptive: better self-care. But no one wants to be told that they should have gone to bed earlier last night or that they should have eaten something before we left!

One useful choice point strategy is to talk ourselves into just getting started, by narrowing our attention to whatever the smallest first step is. One of my favorite examples is my daily struggle with exercise. I might wake up and think biking sounds way too hard. But maybe I could just put on my shoes?

Putting on shoes is easy, so I focus my attention on only that: shoes. And more often than not, once the shoes are on, I start to forget how tired I am...and decide that the next step, getting on the bike, isn't so hard after all.

If the path of refocusing doesn't work, it may be time to deal with the HALT situation. If you skipped dinner to finish a presentation for work and now you're feeling scatterbrained, you might feel more productive with a burrito in hand. Or if you canceled plans with friends because tonight you're going to go to the gym, but you find yourself dawdling... maybe what you're feeling is not laziness, but loneliness. Would your friend be interested in exercising, too? And if not, could it be that you need a heart-to-heart conversation right now more than you need half an hour on the treadmill?

By recognizing the signs of depletion and employing these strategies, you're not just managing fatigue; you're enhancing your capacity for sustained self-control. This approach turns moments of low energy into opportunities for reinforcing your commitment to your goals.

03 Shortsighted Stumble

WHEN OUR ONLY PERSPECTIVE IS NOW

Researchers call this challenge “delay discounting,” which is a fancy way of saying we value immediate gratification over longer term effects. It’s the “what we want now versus what we want most” effect. I want to scroll instagram now, but I want to succeed at my job most.

There is a classic episode of the Simpsons where Marge is telling Homer that someday he is going to regret not spending more time with the kids. Homer replies, “That’s a problem for future Homer. Boy I don’t envy that guy”... before pouring vodka into a mayonnaise jar, shaking it up and slugging it down. The scene gets to the core of this pitfall: that we are not thinking of our future self, or the future at all.

We all deal with shortsightedness on a regular basis. I’m so invested in this show, despite that it’s 2am and I have work in the morning. I know I said I’d take the stairs, but the elevator just opened...

03

TOOLS TO OVERCOME

Shortsighted Stumble

In recovery we used a reframing technique called “playing the tape all the way through.” I might suddenly have a craving to get high, in the wake of which all I’d be thinking about is how good it would feel. Playing the tape through means think about what happens after I get high. I might feel good for a few hours, but then I would want to get high again, and with even more intensity. And I’d remember I didn’t have any money, which would mean that I would have to have to steal something to keep it going, and oh yeah I was already facing 50 years of prison time...

If we learn to mentally fast-forward to the outcomes of our choices, this can be a powerful way of making more informed decisions. If you’re tempted to hit snooze again instead of getting ready for work, take a moment to consider how you’ll feel rushing to the office, sneaking past your boss, and dealing with the shame and anxiety that follows. You’ll find yourself running out the door.

04 Emotional Escapism

WHEN WE CHECK OUT FROM FEELINGS

The lousier we feel, the more likely we are to seek fast fixes for our distress. This is rooted in our evolutionary history, where responding quickly to pain was often crucial for survival. (Is that a Sabertooth bite? Plague? Frostbite?) In modern contexts the fast fixes to our emotional wounds might take the form of comfort eating, impulse buying, substance use, or social media doomsscrolling. They provide temporary relief, a brief dopamine boost in a sea of complex feeling.

Emotional discomfort can also lead to cognitive distortions that justify self-control lapses. Thoughts like "I deserve this treat after such a hard day" or "Just this once won't hurt" become more persuasive when we're feeling vulnerable.

Listening to these voices isn't inherently wrong—it might be time to give ourselves a break. But it's also true that giving in can make the situation worse, as the original feelings remain unresolved, and we now have the added burden of not following through on our intentions. This can create a downward spiral where the negative consequences of the coping actions lead to more emotional discomfort, triggering further lapses in self-control.

04

TOOLS TO OVERCOME

Emotional Escapism

In the immortal words of Mr. Rogers: “Everyone has lots of ways of feeling. And all of those feelings are fine. It is what we do with our feelings that matters.”

Emotional escapism is not about thinking too little, like acting on autopilot or ignoring future Homer. It’s about thinking, or feeling, too much. In this state, we want to practice something I like to call emotional containment. Our goal right now is not to fix what’s truly wrong, or even to feel better. It is to contain our feelings skillfully enough, for the moment, that we can do what we set out to do.

To stop our feelings from spilling over, the first tool is attention. Can I move my attention away from distress and toward what I intended to do? One of my favorite lines from recovery circles applies here: “sometimes you can’t think your way into right action; you have to act your way into right thinking.”

Another tool has to do with lowering our emotional temperature. I like to think of this as self-directed calming. Take five deep breaths. Put on a trusty playlist. Try smiling even if you don’t feel like it: studies show that going through the motions of positive facial expressions can elicit the same hormones that come when we smile spontaneously. Again, the goal is not to address the underlying turmoil right now, it’s about trying to find calm in this present moment. And that will be one step in the right direction.



Self-Doubt Stalemate

A CAN'T-DO ATTITUDE

I'm currently working on a book and it has caused me to have so much self-doubt! This challenge has to do with whether or not we believe we can change. When we lack confidence in ourselves, it's incredibly difficult to muster the motivation needed to stay on track. If we don't think we'll succeed, we are more likely to give up at the first sign of difficulty or to not even try at all.

This pessimistic mindset becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as our lack of effort leads to the very failure we feared. I have often experienced moments of self-doubt when writing or creating something new, asking myself "who are you to offer wisdom to anyone?" It's painful and it makes procrastination tempting, whether with solitaire or with another rabbit hole of research—anything to avoid getting words on paper.

Knowing that this avoidance can become a vicious cycle I find myself thinking of an old Henry Ford cliché: "Whether you think you can, or you think you can't - you're right."



05

TOOLS TO OVERCOME

Self-Doubt Stalemate

As a coach, I often heard clients say, “I’m just the kind of person who…” after which they would finish that sentence any number of self-dooming ways. I’m the kind of person who has no willpower, can’t finish what they started, can’t stick with anything, etc. These beliefs were so ingrained that reframing them became a pillar of our work. Changing behavior is a skill, not something we either can or cannot do—but many of us need a lot of convincing to believe this.

As always, the first and simplest strategy is to just get started. “Just write,” I tell myself. Whether I’m a good or bad writer shouldn’t be my concern right now. If the blank page keeps staring back at me, I might need to move to a reframing approach.

At this point, many a self-help guru would start talking about the power of “positive thinking.” But I have to admit that going into full cheerleader mode (I can do it! I believe in myself!) is more likely to make me roll my eyes than turn my frown upside down. I have found it easier, and just as effective, to aim for neutral. Instead of saying “this book is practically writing itself! You are Hemingway!,” which no amount of cognitive effort could get me to believe, I might ask myself: “Do you know you can’t write this book?” The answer, even my most pessimistic self has to admit, is “No, I don’t know that. And in fact, the chapters I’ve already finished would suggest otherwise.” I still don’t know whether I can do it, but I also no longer believe I can’t, which is a place to start.

Another strategy to address self-doubt is to focus on progress and growth over time. By setting incremental goals and celebrating small wins along the way, we build momentum. And yes, this goes back to the planning stage—but there’s no time like the present to start a better cycle.

006 Insignificance Trap

WHEN IT'S A DROP IN THE BUCKET

A final self-control challenge is similar to self-doubt, but instead of our ability to accomplish the task at hand we doubt that it matters at all. This happens when we fail to connect our actions to our values and long-term goals. What could one day of [insert habit] matter, we think? I need change today.

When we fall into this trap, even the simplest acts of self-discipline can feel pointless. Our response might be to do nothing, or it might be to overcorrect—twenty pushups? What about TWO HUNDRED—which is a recipe for fatigue fallout later. (The rest of the week: zero pushups and a lot of Advil.)

However grand our goals, if we can't see how our day-to-day choices contribute to them, we're likely to falter. Why put in the effort to study for an exam when it feels like just one small test in a long academic career? Why bother saving a small amount of money when it seems insignificant compared to our overall financial goals?

Like so many of these pitfalls, the Insignificance Trap creates a bad cycle. If we dismiss the importance of our actions, we'll see fewer results and progress towards our goals. This reinforces the belief that our actions don't matter, digging us in deeper.

06

TOOLS TO OVERCOME

Insignificance Trap

The way out of the trap is to trust that “Little By Little, A Little Becomes a Lot!” It’s important to set aside our fear and skepticism in favor of accepting that the right choice, taken again and again, turns into something that matters.

I made a series of poor choices about money through the first 45 years of my life. In saving for retirement the key, as everyone knows, is to start early...which I didn’t. I’ve since wised up, but when I look at the amounts that I will be able to save over the next 15 years they seem too small. Not ENOUGH. Why bother? Of course, this is part of the thinking that got me here in the first place. And the reality is that 100k dollars saved is not as good as a million—but it is much better than 10k, and 10k is better than 0k.

Something is better than nothing. This reframe is a good first response to the insignificance trap because even a cynic has to admit it’s technically true. Going further, we might be able to recognize that there is a reward right now for living according to our values. Even if a given choice doesn’t have cosmic significance, it impacts how we feel about ourselves.

Picking up litter while we jog might be a small act in the grand scheme of environmental conservation—but if it’s something we’ve decided to do, in line with values we care about, following through will mean bringing ourselves that much closer to the person we want to be while we’re here on this planet. And those are great stakes indeed.



I'm Eric Zimmer

**Behavior coach, podcast host,
and creator of the "Wise
Habits" program.**

At the age of 24, I was homeless, addicted to heroin, and facing long jail sentences. In the years since I not only found a way to overcome these obstacles to create a life worth living, but I now also help others to do the same.

I have worked as a behavior coach for the past twenty years, coaching thousands of people worldwide on how to make significant life changes and create habits that help them achieve the goals they've set for themselves.

Our award-winning podcast is based on an old parable about two wolves at battle within us. With over 800 episodes and over 25 million downloads, the show features conversations with experts across many fields of study about how to create a more meaningful life.

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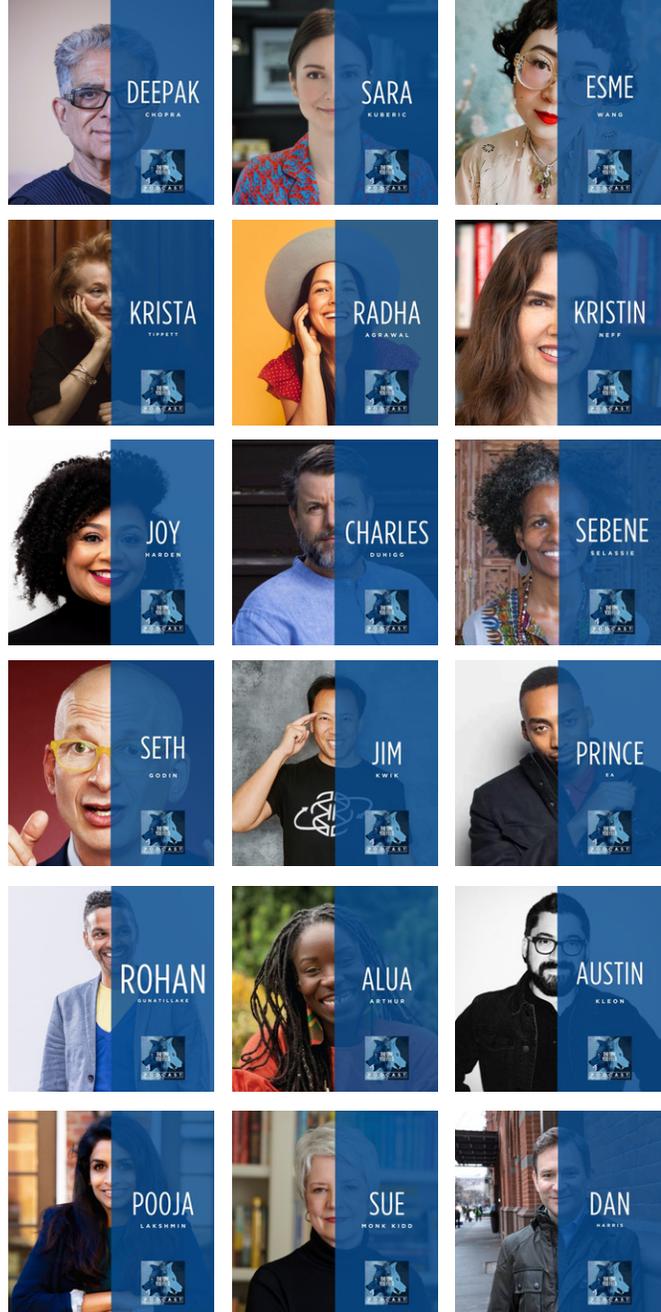
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