

3 Steps to Design Your Ideal Life

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Know the true value of time; snatch, seize, and enjoy every moment of it. No idleness, no laziness, no procrastination: never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.

PHILIP STANHOPE, 4TH EARL OF CHESTERFIELD

We live in a time of incredible opportunity. Never before have we had the opportunity to architect or engineer our lives, and then have the agency and resources to make it a reality. It's such an exciting time, and the book "Life by Design: Mastering Energy, Money and Leverage in 9 Simple Steps" and the online program "Freedom Formula" can help: it will demystify the process of getting what you want and put you on the fast track to designing the life you are made for.

When I implemented the principles in this book, my clients noticed the significant changes and asked me what I was doing. So I shared what I'd done with a few people. What I found was that they were all looking for the same thing: clarity. Clarity on what they needed to do to get themselves going in the right direction, and, most importantly, clarity on how to stay on track.

That is why I wrote this book, and that is why I expanded these concepts into "Life by Design: Mastering Energy, Money and Leverage in 9 Simple Steps".

Before I outline the core foundational elements of this process, it's important to know where they came from. The seeds of this were planted many, many years ago.

Growing up as a young boy I loved reading and figuring things out. I dreamed about the things I wanted to explore and the machines I wanted to create. I was a regular geek.

And all through my adolescence and early teens there was one person in particular whom I could rely on to keep my life stable. You probably have a person like this in your life. Someone who so long as he or she is there, life as you know it will go on.

Picture that person in your mind right now. And now let me ask you a question. Is there anything worse than when this person lets you down? Well, that's what happened to me. It's not worth going into the details here, and you probably have a similar story of your own, but I'll say this: I counted on this person for everything and one day I realized I couldn't.



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The person who was supposed to always be there was no longer there. She checked out, and in a big way. I was crushed. It was not her fault. That did not change things. It was my mother. She got very sick and in a year and half she died of cancer.

Crushed as I was, I was also determined. I made a silent vow in my heart: “I will never depend on anyone else again.” I didn’t realize it at the time but that vow became the driving force of my life.

And here is the truth: I overcorrected, I way overcorrected. It seems that the next morning I cut my hair, put on a suit and got a job. I wanted control because it felt like everything in my life was suddenly out of control.

I started my own business after I completed my training as a naturopathic physician. I was full of myself, but I was also in control, and there was a broken part of me that needed that.

Then I got married. I was working on my postgraduate degrees, running my business, and looking after my step-son. Everyone around me was telling me it was not possible to do so much, so quickly, but I wanted to prove them wrong.

Life got stressful and fast. Providing for a family and trying to build a business was tough. I got so wrapped up in my drive to succeed that soon the one thing I didn’t want to happen to me was happening.

I was not measuring up. Now I became the person who was not measuring up. My wife and I went through marital challenges. Eventually, even as the business began to succeed, my marriage fell apart. This happens very often to compulsive people.

Well, up to that point my life had demonstrated two unhelpful ways of approaching life. I call the first one “Coasting Along”. That was how my father approached life. He was swept up in the current, coasting along, not choosing his destination and ending up in a place he never would have chosen if he had consciously been aware of it. He was pulled in a hundred different directions and whichever pulled hardest was the focus for the day, week or month. And that, I had decided, was exactly how I was never going to live my life.

Unfortunately, that’s how a lot of people approach life. They just operate automatically. They are caught up in life’s distractions. They don’t think about where they might be going, and before long they end up at a destination they would not have chosen if they were conscious of what they were choosing. The unintended destination may be a health crisis, a marital crisis, a business failure, or a career upset; whatever it is, they end up in a place far from what they thought they were going.



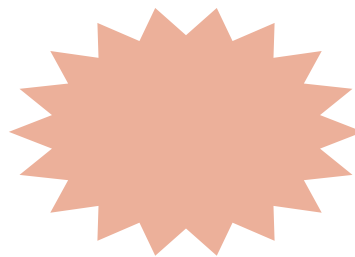
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But the alternative — that’s where I was, and you may be there too

— is what I call “The Compulsive Life”. This is the overcorrection to “Coasting Along”. This is the type of person that takes great pride in setting and achieving goals. They are hyper-driven on making progress. But this person is so driven at excelling in one area of their life that they often neglect the other areas, and that’s what happened to me. You ignore, until it is too late, whatever does not contribute to your goals. And if you are not careful, it can lead to the destruction of important relationships, your health, and a lot more. We get so rewarded for being successful and appreciated for being ‘On time, on target’ that we keep doing more and more.

Before we go any further I want to underline something. In neither approach was the person doing destructive things intentionally. What’s interesting is that “Coasting Along” and “The Compulsive Life” are really two sides of the same coin. They may seem like polar opposites, but they have more in common than you may think.

Firstly, both these approaches are largely unconscious approaches to life. Secondly, both will take you to destinations you would never consciously choose. Both are often characterized by feeling that you are being pulled in different directions. Both will end up using your energies in ways you never intended. Both will lead to unintended consequences. I call this The Option A choice (see image below).



Option A

Each little edge represents another priority that sucks energy, another commitment that you will struggle to keep and feel guilty about for failing, something that will wear you down until you hit burnout or worse.

Thankfully, there is a third alternative, what I call “Life by Design”, which leads to a life of freedom. This is a life of being conscious of choosing a destination, developing a plan, and



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following a proven process that ensures we get there. It doesn't mean there won't be detours. It does mean living intentionally and giving ourselves every advantage we can to stay on track and succeed both in business and in life. I call this the Option B choice, or Life by Design. There is only one major priority (see image below).



Option B

How are you living now? Are you spending your time the way you want to? Or are you at the mercy of forces outside your control?

Now, the way to start living a more designed life with known destinations and wanted outcomes is by asking and answering critical questions. Your answers to these questions will provide the foundation on which you build everything else.

Before I had clear answers to these questions my work consumed me. I was constantly stressed. I was present for my business but absent from everything else. Yes, I eventually developed a business that became very financially successful. But outside of that, my life was a mess. I made some improvements but they were just cosmetic. My marriage crashed and I experienced several serious health concerns.

Now fast forward to today. The "Life by Design" process has completely revived my career, my relationships, and my health. I am having more impact helping more people now than ever before.

This process has kept me from getting side-tracked, and it's given me the freedom to breathe and enjoy life. Financially, I am making more, running more businesses than before. And most importantly, my life is way less stressful.

Common reasons for doing time-management programs are to experience peace of mind, be more prepared for the unexpected, and have a smoother ride through life. These are all excellent reasons to manage time.



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Personal Experience of Priorities

Let me give you an example of my own priorities. My first priority today is me. But it didn't use to be.

The truth is that if you don't exercise appropriate self-care you're not going to be of any use to anybody. For example, if you don't deal with your emotional baggage then you are going to drag that into any relationship you have. If you don't take care of yourself physically (which applied to me at one point), you are asking for something serious like a heart attack or some other health crisis.

Some health issues can't be avoided; I get that. Nevertheless, as we all know, a lot of health issues are self-inflicted. An appropriate level of self-care is vital if you want to lead a rewarding life and have the resources you need to truly serve others.

My succeeding priorities are my wife, my children, and then my work. My work is way down the list because I know that my work will flourish when I have a rich personal life.

Years ago, when I was living "The Compulsive Life", my priorities weren't in this order. But going through the "Life By Design" process, starting with asking questions, I made an important discovery which contradicts a lot of people who say you can win at business or you can win at life but you can't win at both.

But here is my contrary experience: you can't win at one without winning at the other. Success means both. Don't let the urgent take precedence over the important. Don't convince yourself that the situation you are now in is temporary. Why? Because temporary things have a way of first becoming permanent and then becoming a lifestyle. So don't just drift along or drive compulsively. Take the third path, ask the third question: "What commitment will I make now to achieve my ideal future?"

A few years ago, before I formalized "**Life by Design**", I was working on my schedule for the forthcoming year. I thought I had a well-thought-out plan, but remembered that one year earlier I had had the same thought but had grossly over-committed myself. So I looked at my plan again, estimated the number of hours needed to achieve it, and realized that I had underestimated the time and resources I required. I needed 500 more hours to achieve that plan.

That was a major wake-up call. I felt really desperate because so many things — the current businesses, future projects, my staff — were riding on me. I felt exhausted. I thought there had to be another way.



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And there was. It took three months to reconfigure everything. It took another six months to change and implement all the ways of thinking about managing time, energy, and resources that I had been doing for the last forty years. Once I did, and got everyone in my companies on board, everything changed.

Suddenly I had time to exercise almost every day, and go on movie dates with my wife once a month instead of twice a year. Plus, my companies became more profitable.

So often we make a mountain out of a molehill; this loss of perspective can be disastrous over a long period of time. And it really comes down to making that one single commitment. So let me ask you this right now. As we've been talking about this, you have probably been thinking of a commitment you need to make, right? Maybe it's a tough conversation you need to have. Maybe it's an action you need to take. What is it for you? What's the thing that's going to move the needle?

Your decision may push you outside of your comfort zone, but listen: all the important stuff happens outside your comfort zone. If you feel uncomfortable just thinking about this, fantastic! Embrace it. That's right where you should be. Nothing really changes inside the comfort zone.

What is the next single commitment you need to make, if you want to live a life by design, if you want to be courageous, if you don't want to live by default, if you don't want to be in overdrive?

Before embarking on a time- and energy-management program, you ought to decide if this is a suitable choice for you. If you cannot give up television time, surfing the Internet endlessly, or chatting on your Facebook account, this may not be for you. The easiest method to make this assessment would be to ask yourself the following distinct questions:

- What is the number one priority in your life?
- Do you want to achieve more with less effort?
- Do you want to have a higher quality of life?
- Are you prepared to spend one hour a day organizing your life so that you can plan at the beginning of the day and reflect at the end on how you did?

I hope you are clear about your answers to the above questions. These same questions are asked by everyone who is motivated to make more of his life. You have now taken the first step towards managing resources for greater productivity!



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Life Design takes more than getting up one afternoon and saying, “Oh, I need to manage my time to live life well.” Sure, that is a necessary starting step; you must always first invest in yourself mentally. Overall, designing your life will bring a huge sense of achievement to you. Also, preparing for this is a stimulating undertaking, which is the real reason that some people elect to start.

Life Design also gives you a new outlook on things. As soon as you manage your time better, you begin to recognize that you can accomplish just about anything in this world. You become clearer about what the important things in life are about.

Motivations for managing time are different from one individual to another; ensure your reasons are clear to you.

Identify The Difference That Makes The Difference

What if we can seize control of our lives instead of being at the mercy of a media that encourages conspicuous consumption? What if we choose to do only what adds meaning and value to our lives, the lives of our families, and communities?

Everything changes when we accept accountability for our lives, when we exercise our freedom to choose wisely and well. We can ascend to the next level of achievement and growth in our lives when we replace what we find trivial with what makes the vital difference. We are no longer trapped in other people’s agendas. We are free to make meaningful choices.

What if instead of buying more stuff, we focused on creating more space to think, breathe, and be? What if we stopped trying so hard to make money we don’t need, to buy things we don’t want, to impress people we don’t really care about?

What if we stopped measuring our progress in life by how busy we are? Instead, we measured it by how much time we spent meditating, pondering, communicating, and enjoying time with the most important people in our lives. How would we live differently?

I have always been acutely aware of how little time I have and how limited my energy and resources are. So I need to make sure that I use my time and energy optimally to make a difference to myself, my family, and my community.

I had the time to reflect on the meaning of my life when I had a near- death experience when I was about forty-two. Years from now, when I reach the same point again, I want to make sure



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I have no regrets about how I spent my time after that near-death experience. What about you?

The 3 Steps to Designing Your Ideal Life are

1. Evaluate
2. Discard
3. Implement

1) EVALUATE

One of my seminar participants once accused me of making life “boring” by insisting on prioritizing and planning. She felt that she wanted to be in the moment and be spontaneous. It took her a few years before she realized that you can be truly spontaneous only when you have a disciplined approach, developed core skills, and then set time aside for spontaneity.

So in order to understand what really matters to you, you need to explore and evaluate. Those who eventually become crystal clear about what matters do so because they have the benefit of hindsight, experience, and evidence that something really works for them.

To explore all that is relevant and possible, you need a base from which you can narrow down what is clearly the core for you, the crucial “difference” that makes the difference. You have to explore and evaluate a broad range of possibilities in depth before you can conclude about what really works. So you need to test things out in small ways before committing in a big way to what matters to you.

Contrast this approach with many Singaporeans who finish school, go to college then polytechnic or university, then go out into the workforce. They know nothing about what truly matters in their personal, emotional or professional lives. They accept conventional perspectives about what is important. Then in their late thirties or forties they start struggling with overwhelming doubt. In private conversations in my office they often plaintively ask me, **“What is my life purpose?”**

If you believe, as I did when I was living my “Compulsive Life”, that being driven and being overly busy was a sign of productivity, you also believe that creating the space and time to think, explore, and reflect is a luxury. Yet, these very activities are the cure to the curse of focusing on trivialities while missing the core issues in your life. They are crucial for identifying the difference that makes the difference.



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Dedicated “Life Designers” spend significant chunks of time exploring, questioning, arguing, and thinking. The purpose of the exploration is to hone in on what truly matters. To focus on the difference that makes the difference

2) DISCARD

You have to become really clear about what matters. However, are you really ready to get rid of what you should “throw away”?

In other words, it is not enough to identify what activities and commitments do not work for you. You have to actively discard them. You have to discard the “clutter” in your life so that you can have a well-designed and meaningful life and make vital contributions in what really matters. You will also do it in such a way that you become more respected, acknowledged, and valued in your home, workplace, community, and society at large.

Getting rid of the clutter will not be easy. There will be that nagging fear that you gave away the specially-designed shoes that would have been perfect for the awards ceremony you have been invited to. This feeling is perfectly normal. Research has shown that when we don’t own something we value it less. Those that we own we assign a higher value to and so find it harder to dispose of. The critical question is, “If I did not own this shoe, how much would I be prepared to spend to buy it?” Similarly, the critical question when deciding what to declutter is, “If I did not have this opportunity, what would I be prepared to sacrifice to get access to it?”

Of course, throwing away old shoes is a lot easier than saying “No” to what seems like an incredible opportunity coming your way. However, remember that in the Life Design model, whenever you don’t say “No” to something, you are agreeing by default.

3) IMPLEMENT

Whether our goal is to plan a birthday party for our child, climb up the ladder at work, or complete a project at work, we tend to think of implementation as hard work, something we need to force and make happen.

However, the Life Design model is very different. We don’t need to force implementation; because of the prior stages of Evaluate and Discard, a system has been created for removing obstacles and making implementation effortless.

These three elements — Evaluate, Discard, Implement — are parts of an iterative, cyclical process that moves you towards higher levels of performance and personal satisfaction.



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In Chapter 1, we spoke about how to keep your shoe rack in order. Do this in an organized fashion and it feels effortless; do this in a haphazard, fitful fashion, however, and it morphs into a nightmare scenario.

To achieve this effortless state, all the elements required of the previous two stages have been well explored and the necessary steps clearly delineated. Appropriate resources have been acquired; timelines have taken into consideration the flow of energy and resources, and how people operate.

While compulsive types force execution of plans, those who understand the Designed Life implement effortlessly. When all unnecessary details have been eliminated, habits automated, and sequences streamlined, implementation becomes a seamless piece of the whole. We naturally want to do things the easy way.

In the next section, we look at the elements and the sequence required to make things effortless when implementing. This is the basis for the well-designed life.

The table below outlines the difference between the Compulsive Life model doing standard time-management techniques and the **Designed Life model**.

Compulsive Life	Designed Life
I have unlimited energy	I have limited energy and resources
I make life choices in the moment	I choose deliberately
I respond to whatever comes up	I stay with my priority
I will seize every opportunity	I will not be detracted from my priority