

How to be in charge of your Self -Rob Wiltbank

Without deliberate practice, you are commonly pushed around by outside forces before you are conscious of their effects on you. The following is intended to make you more aware of the challenges to being in charge of your Self. Unless you *intentionally* work to know your Self, you are simply a walking nerve, sensing and reacting.

Many of the things you think you know about your Self are full of deceit. Your body, mind, ego, and personal story persistently get in your way. Below are highlights of the forces studied in the fields of Biology, Psychology, Sociology, and Economics that show how we are often not in charge of our selves. Simply being conscious of these patterns dramatically reduces their effect on you. As your awareness becomes habitual, you can exercise discipline in how you respond to them and actually use them to your advantage. With that awareness and discipline, you will be able to recover from the mistakes you make and be even more consistently in charge of your Self.

Biology

You are not your body; it is merely a machine. This machine affects your ability to know and express who you are. It has sensors and programmed responses that attempt to use energy efficiently in order to survive and reproduce. When your body is unhealthy this is easy to see; it commands your attention through pain. A healthy person wants many things, an unhealthy person wants only one thing.

These effects are more subtle when your body is functioning normally. Research into stimulus and response patterns shows how different biochemical states effect mood, preferences, and practices. We shop differently when hungry, interact differently when depressed, work harder with adrenaline. Assertiveness, irritability, and sexual interest all vary with hormone levels. Our reasoning varies with the effects of sleeping. Things you believe are YOU, your personality and your behavioral patterns, actually vary dramatically with your biological state.

You can directly affect this state with exercise, nutrition, sleep, social interaction, sunlight, and drugs. If you don't keep your machine healthy it is VERY difficult to be in charge of yourself. Even if you keep it healthy, but remain unaware of how its biochemistry influences you, you won't be in charge of your Self.

Psychology

You are not your mind, it is merely a computer. Until you become intentional with it, it is commonly your adversary. Through evolution and your upbringing, you have formed memories, habits, and biases that effect you *before* you experience conscious thought.

Your interaction with the physical world is filtered and interpreted by your mind before you can reason about it. These interpretations create emotions that effect your biology and your future interpretations, in a powerful loop. If you remain unaware of your patterns of interpretation, and don't practice thinking through them, you won't be in charge of your Self.

Become aware of your patterns of interpretations, and the emotions that result from them:

1. Use personal reflection, books, and conversations with people you trust. After learning these things about your psychology, you can re-program your mind by DOING different things.

2. Practice Naïve over confidence, meaning that unless you have *direct* evidence that you can't do something, start by believing that you probably can and work to make it so. You can't just think your way through psychological change, you have to also act your way through it.

Sociology

You are not your relationships. The roles and identities we connect with, and the expectations of others associated with them, make it hard to be in charge of our Self. The expectations associated with roles and identities arise from traditions, prejudices, guilt, mockery, and role models. We translate these expectations into Should's: rules & obligations with which you feel pressured to comply.

Compliance to Should's is an unstable state. When you are in learning mode, doing what you should is an effective way to learn by doing. But if these should's do not become intrinsic desires you will not sustain them. Midlife crises are often simply the collapse of your ability to sustain Should's that aren't intrinsic to you. (BTW: if you find yourself in this crisis state beware: what you think you want *instead* is also off because *you still aren't actually in charge of yourself*. Until you fix this fact you will just flail around.)

J.G.A.I: People accidentally extrapolate small things into their identities. Each identity you hold entails a set of expectations (should's) that influence the interpretation of your observations, preferences, and goals in unconscious ways. Accidental identities form by being casually judgmental. The process works like this: a casual **J: judgement**, by yourself or others based on a fact, is **G: generalized** into a pattern about your Self that is not a fact, which you then **A: abstract** and slowly turn into an **I: identity**. (example: **J:**I missed that shot...**G:**I'm bad at basketball...**A:**I am bad at sports...**I:**I'm not an athlete.) JGAI creates an ever longer list of should's, entangling you in the baggage of identities that are NOT really you.

Stay ahead these forces by:

1. Reflecting on your motivations. Are they intrinsic or extrinsic? Reduce the things you are doing to comply to extrinsic needs/demands.
2. Work to ignore the casual judgments that arise in your own mind, and from the passing commentary of other people. When you can't, at least avoid extrapolating from them.
3. Be intentional about who you spend your time with, avoid people that undermine your progress.

Economics

You are not your assets. Until you work to understand the above effects of your body, your mind, and your relationships you are quite easily manipulated. When you are not intentional about thinking through their impact on you, you accidentally compete with other walking nerves (unintentional people who aren't in charge of themselves) for the same things. As a result, those things seem scarce and risky.

In the face of scarcity and risk, humans respond to incentives in systematic ways. If you don't know your Self well, these incentives are often more in charge of you than you are. People and systems will tantalize or threaten your body, mind, and relationships with things they want you to buy or work toward for their own interests, not yours. To be in charge of your Self:

1. Identify what punishments and rewards you experience in your life, literally inventory them. Being conscious of them reduces their force.
2. Reflect on the patterns you see in that inventory, consider your relationship to fear of loss, excitement for wealth, excitement for status. What moves you? Is that what YOU want?

3. Consciously separate needs from wants; needs are less manipulated than wants *when you are in charge of your Self*. **Avoid letting wants become “fixed” into needs; lower your fixed costs.**

Maintain and Advance

Reducing the forces that exist when you misunderstand your body, mind, relationships, and motivations is the foundation of being in charge of your Self. But, like gravity these forces don't stop; it takes work to maintain this state. You will sometimes do things that are inconsistent with who you are. These moments of Self-betrayal ALWAYS hurt (sometimes a little, sometimes a lot) and cause you to experience feelings of guilt and self-doubt.

Your ego will try to blame this self-betrayal and guilt on others. If ignored, these feelings will affect you through the mechanisms described above and erode your progress. Do NOT leave them unaddressed; take responsibility for them and repair them. If you do not, you will mistakenly come to believe that things outside of you can control YOU rather than you being in charge of your Self.

Create practices to help you remember the insights you gain about your Self over time.

1. Do the work of thinking deeply, alone and with others you trust, actively reflect, project, visualize, imagine, investigate.
2. From that work, create artifacts that remind you of important thinking and insights (journals, poems, pictures, music, etc). Spend time reviewing them to remember who you are.
3. Invest real energy into relationships that help reinforce your progress (critical side note: the effects of specific relationships change as you become more in charge of yourself, pay attention).

In this work, principles are more important than rules. Compliance to rules is very rarely expressive of who you are. Expressiveness comes from within. Determining what principles you are actually committed to will help you know the difference between compliance and expressiveness. In your most challenging times, you will express principles but you will simply break rules. ***At your best you can be so expressive of your principles that you'll know what to do without thinking or choosing.***

As you repair the mistakes you make along the way and work to remember your progress, you will eliminate self-doubt and know that you are actually in charge of yourself.

Some reading suggestions to keep going, in the general order of biology, psych, sociology, economics.

The Male Brain. and The Female Brain. Both by Brizendine
The Extended Mind by Annie Murphy Paul
Psycho Cybernetics by Maxwell Maltz
The Inner Game of Tennis by Gallwey
Masters of Social Psychology by Schellenberg
Leadership & Self Deception by Arbing Institute
The Road Less Traveled by Peck
Seven Habits of Highly Effective People by Covey
Predictably Irrational by Ariely
Nudge by Thaler and Sunstein

Readings through the side door: books to learn to directly manage your mind to be in charge of your Self.

Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu
The Power of Now by Tolle
Man's Search for Meaning by Frankel
I Am That by Sri Nisargadatta