Advice That Actually Worked For Me

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I'm a big fan of "advice posts" and productivity guides. A small, but meaningful, upgrade to your daily routine is worth a lot in the long run. So here's my contribution to the genre.

1. Maximize your baseline energy levels. There is the obvious stuff: figure out a personal exercise practice and do it at least five days a week (I like running). If you don't, you're just leaving a bunch of power on the table.

But there are also less intuitive truths here.

Energy compounds on itself. If you start the morning by getting *something* done (a workout, an important task, writing) then you're going to have a higher baseline energy day overall. It's as though the initial thing gives you a persistent 'boost' throughout the day. Doing additional things becomes easier. Without this boost, there's a good chance I get nothing important done that day.

Most people's mental models of energy are flawed: they think there's a 'tank' of energy that gets depleted as you spend it. This may be roughly true for physical energy, but mental energy is different: *spending* mental energy on things that you consider productive or important *gives* you more mental energy for other things: a positive feedback loop. On the other hand, procrastinating, spending all day scrolling Twitter, or staying in bed all day *reduces* the amount of energy you have to spend; this means you are *less* likely to get anything done.

It's common to get trapped in this negative energy feedback loop: you don't feel like doing something, so you check Twitter for awhile, which reduces your energy levels, which makes you feel worse, but you try and do something anyway, but you're even less energized now, so you decide to go to bed for a bit to rest, but the rest isn't restful... etc.

The way to get out of these energy ruts is to just do something really small (empty the dishwasher! Write one sentence!) and get that tiny reward of accomplishment. This generates a little bit more energy. Use that spark to get something slightly bigger done, and so on.

2. Do the most important thing first thing in the morning, and don't check social media until you've done it. Because energy compounds, the first actions in the day matter a lot: the right actions get you into a positive spiral, the wrong actions get you into a negative spiral. The further into a negative spiral you get, the harder it is to get out. So if you start the morning by doing something you care about (e.g. writing a page of an essay), you are way more likely to have a good, productive and happy day overall, because you've gotten yourself into a positive spiral.

Moreover, even if you don't subsequently do anything, you have at least done that one thing in the day; *most people fail more from many days of zero output than they do from not maximizing output on any given day*, so the key is to stay consistent. [1]

I'm pro social media and think it makes us smarter, but I think it's a bad idea to check it first thing in the morning. A simple rule is just to check it after you've done your 'first thing in the morning'. I don't know why this works, but my folk-theoretic model is something like: you want to get rewards from doing a productive thing, not from doing an unproductive thing, and social media gives you rewards in a way that perniciously substitutes for the kinds of rewards you actually want. Once you have the 'reward', your drive to do things lessens, so by checking Twitter you kill your drive to do the more productive thing. (The analogy to sugar is apt: you want calories from the good stuff, not the sugary stuff.)

3. Tell the right stories about yourself. One of the more underrated insights you can get from reading self-help books is that the story you tell yourself about yourself matters. If you tell yourself you're very energetic person, that feeling tired is temporary, and you keep this belief going, *you actually become more energetic*. If you tell yourself you don't get jetlagged, you might get less jetlagged on average. This goes for many other traits, too -- you can psyop yourself into believing lots of things about yourself which then come true, and make you more like the person you want to be.

(Obviously, tons of disclaimers here. But this sort of thing has worked for me, so I'm writing it down.)

4. Don't sleep too much. Oversleeping also comes at the cost of time you'll never get back. Moreover, there's a good amount of evidence that sleeping more than you need is bad for you. Usually people will tell you to get *more* sleep, but I think this is the wrong direction for many people. The sweet spot seems to be somewhere around 7-7.30 hours, although again this is a genetic thing and can vary!

Some people claim that this is purely psychological and that you can train yourself to get by on four hours a night, but this has never worked for me. I'm making the weaker claim: there is a big difference between 7 hours and 9 hours, you can do a lot with those 2 hours, and often if you're a 9 hour sleeper you can become a 7 hour sleeper, which will end up compounding if you use those extra 2 hours well. [2] So it's worth adopting the resolution to sleep less than you want to.

5. Get in the habit of Fermi estimation, looking up key quantities, and using upper and lower bounds. I've noticed a lot of the smartest people I know do this: they don't take any claims at face value, and check for themselves whether they're plausible. This means, e.g. when they hear a fact, they'll look it up to assure themselves that it's true, because often people cite things that are false or partial.

Engineers and physicists are trained to do this, everyone else has to learn. The usual name for this is Fermi estimation: estimating the rough order of magnitude of an unknown quantity using information that you already know.

Most people don't do this at all — they don't "think in numbers", and the result is that they're easily fooled. Every now and then there's a Twitter meme that goes like "If Elon sent money to every American instead of spending it all on the rockets, [etc.]" and this will go viral because people do not do the math. I noticed this during COVID, too, during those periods in between COVID waves: the risk of getting COVID would drop a hundredfold or more, but people would 'under-correct' their behavior, remaining too risk-averse during relatively safe times, and too risk-loving during times of high infection risk, simply because they didn't get a sense of local case numbers and convert those into probabilities.

Some people do this all the time. For example, SBF models this in his Conversation with Tyler to answer the question of whether blockchain could replace the world's infrastructure (emphasis mine):

> *BANKMAN-FRIED: Basically, if you look at what would it take to have a global-scale blockchain that was replacing substantial fractions of the world's infrastructure. If that's where you start, you can just look at, "Well, okay, what scale would that have to be at?" (…)*
>
> *Answering it varies some, but you're generally going to hear answers that sound like a million, somewhere like 100,000 and 10 million, depending*

on which thing we're thinking about, and it makes sense. If you have a billion users, for instance, which is the kind of thing you might expect of a gigantically successful internet thing—

COWEN: Sure.

BANKMAN-FRIED:—then a billion users. If there's, what, 100,000 seconds in a day, if each user does 10 clicks per day, on average, then I think that gets you a million transactions per second, ballpark. (...)

Then you say, "Well, okay, what's that mean for a blockchain?" **Well, it means that if you want a blockchain to really get to a truly global scale, you want that blockchain to be processing millions of transactions a second**. *(...)*

If you look at most blockchains today, they cannot support millions of transactions per second. Ethereum cannot support millions of transactions per second. Today, it can support ten. Ten is the number of transactions per second it can support. Ten is off by six orders of magnitude from where it needs to get. It's not close.

As you can see, the above exercise helps you understand, very quickly, just how much scaling is required for blockchains to handle critical infrastructure. If you ask that question and don't do the estimation, you're just making up fluff: "well, if we work on a scaling for a year, maybe then?" or whatever. Whereas if you realize there's a *six order of magnitude improvement* required, then you can start figuring out if Ethereum's current plans are going to get them that amount, and you'll understand something more deeply about the world as a result. [3]

A related helpful thinking technique is putting bounds on things: "well, it's not as high as X, and it's not as low as Y, so given that it's somewhere in between those numbers we can assume it's roughly Z".

For example, if I ask you when strong human level AGI will come about, you might experience some mental paralysis, or just answer honestly that you don't know. But you do have some intuitions here, which this exercise draws out: you'd be very surprised if it came about next month, and you'd probably also be surprised if humanity hadn't invented it by 2150, say, so you can at least conclude that your model of the world predicts that it's likely to fall somewhere in between next month and 2150. Well, that's already a surprising conclusion! It implies that your grandkids will

probably see AGI. Not so far away, is it?

6. Whenever you make a claim or an argument, try and imagine the strongest possible argument against it. In chess, a thing that distinguishes a good player from a worse one is that the good player tests their potential move against the opponent's *strongest possible replies*. Weak players often play 'hope chess': they launch an attack, and assume their opponents will go along with their plans by playing weak responses. As a result they don't see how their attack might fail, and they lose.

Stronger players make a mental habit of checking their opponent's strongest responses and this allows them to pick the move that is in fact the best one.

This sounds obvious, but it's actually *very* hard to do and requires practice and training: it's as though your brain *resists* the mental motion of modeling your opponent as strong too, as though it 'wants' the idea to work and blocks you from thinking about the resources your opponent actually has.

A similar thing goes in life: people very rarely model out the very best arguments against their positions and then adjust accordingly. It's hard to do, it's painful, and the rewards are not obvious unless you strongly care about truth. But if you do want true beliefs, this mental habit is essential.

7. Write regularly, and learn to 'think in writing'. This is true for literally everyone, regardless of whether you want to be a writer or not, whether you want to publish or not. Just have a Google Doc in which you add a page a day of whatever's on your mind. This has a million benefits, but a simple one is just clearing your cache: if you don't do this, your brain sort of gets clogged by all the things you have on your mind, whereas if you 'empty' your brain onto a page that creates room for new thoughts.

If you really want to be a clear thinker, you need to learn to 'think in writing'. I like Holden Karnofsky's guide to this.

8. Do a weekly review. Every Sunday, sit down for an hour with a text editor and review your week. What went well, what went poorly, and what you're aiming for in the next coming week. I find this is a useful way to force myself to get out of 'doing mode' and into 'reflection mode', and often surfaces useful insights / things that I could be improving about my life. This goes into my plan for the next week, which sets off a set of slowly compounding improvements.

9. Synthesize things as you read. Just because you've read something, doesn't mean you've understood it; your brain has to come up with its own encoding. Whatever

understanding things is, it's related to compression. Which implies that you want to read and then restate in your own words, so that your mind is forced to compress the thing. Ideally several times, in varying ways.

Once you've done this, you are much more likely to retain the thing, and to actually grasp it; and if you're struggling with this exercise, then you don't understand the thing and should go back and look at it again. (This is also a useful bullshit filter -- try and restate someone's claim in a different way, and see if it still holds up).

When I say 'restate it in several different ways', one useful way would be drawing it. Just draw a schematic representation of what you thing is being said. Another would be to state it as though you're writing an article for simple words Wikipedia.

10. Map out problems using logic trees. This is a classic problem-solving and brainstorming technique, also known as morphological analysis. It'll be familiar to any consultant, as it's 80% of their secret sauce.

Take a problem, say analyzing a business's profits (as in consulting). Break it down into *logically exhaustive possibilities*, e.g. "revenue" and "costs". Break down each branch further into its component parts, e.g. revenue becomes price * quantity. Follow this process recursively, each time breaking the tree down into components.

Now you have a full map of the possibilities and can start to answer questions like "how do we increase profits?" by listing out all available options. This often helps you spot options that other people will overlook.

You might consider this example simplistic and MBA-ish, but Ed Boyden uses this in a scientific/invention context, and demonstrates an example applied to climate/energy around minute 14 of this video.

I found this technique especially useful when tackling ambiguous problems in a startup. Questions that seem like "how do we grow faster?", can be reduced to lower-level components that are easier to reason and brainstorm about, and because you're making sure each 'layer' of the tree is mutually exhaustive, you're not missing anything.

Footnotes

[1] I owe this insight to Tyler Cowen, whose own advice posts on this topic are very good and influenced this one.

[2] As Alexey Guzey has pointed out, sleep can be thought of as similar to hunger in this way: everyone accepts that you

shouldn't just eat whenever you feel like it or you're likely to overeat, but for some reason people don't apply the same reasoning to sleep.

[3] Tyler points out that trial lawyers also do this very well.