A sunset over a beach with silhouettes of people walking. The sky is a mix of blue, orange, and yellow, with the sun low on the horizon. The water reflects the colors of the sky. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of people walking along the beach are visible.

HABITS OF THE 5 SUNFUCKWITHABLY PRODUCTIVE

A GUIDE FOR PEOPLE WHO WANT TO GET FOCUSED,
STAY UNBELIEVABLY PRODUCTIVE, AND MAKE MORE
TIME FOR THE THINGS THAT REALLY MATTER.

BY J A S O N L E N G S T O R F

5 Habits of the Unfuckwithably Productive

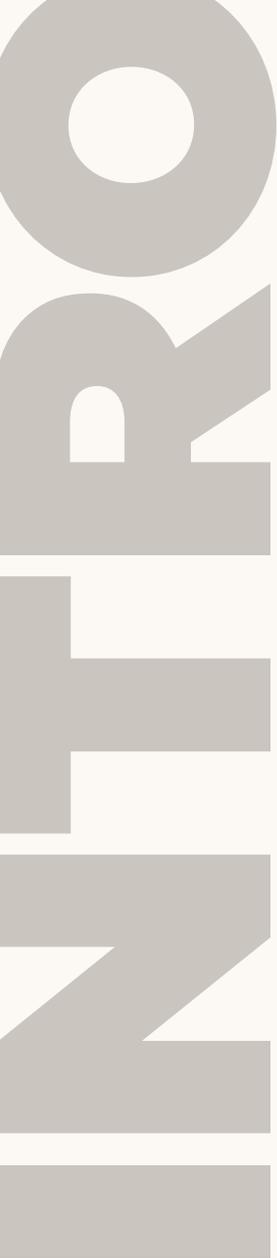
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The advice contained in this document is not intended to substitute for common sense or professional counsel. Please use your head.

Feel free to share this guide with anyone who may benefit from it. Of course, I'd appreciate attribution and/or a link back to my website, but really I just want to see people live happier, healthier lives — and I don't want to let my ego stop that from happening.

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While it's true that there are no shortcuts to the things that matter most, there are some fast lanes.

See, most people believe that all those folks we read about in business magazines — you know the ones with insanely productive lifestyles and unbelievable track records — we believe those folks are special. Superhuman, even.

We believe productive people have some dark magic that the rest of us missed out on. Because who can stay that motivated? Who has that much willpower?

But there's a secret: these **ultra-productive people aren't building their lives through sheer force of will; they're relying on their own good habits to carry them forward.**

And that's the fast lane to the lifestyle you want: building really, really, *really* fucking productive habits.

In my life, **the habits I'll share in this guide helped me transform myself from an overworked, overweight, overextended workaholic to a happy, relaxed — but still successful — real human person.**

In 2013, I worked 70–90 hours each week, and while people all praised my massive output, I was also feeling the negative effects of my lifestyle: I was gaining weight; I wasn't sleeping well, or enough; I was neglecting all the non-business aspects of my life; toward the end, **my beard turned white and started falling out in patches.**

So I spent 2014 working *very hard* on fixing my broken lifestyle. I was convinced my very life depended on it.

And by the end of 2014, **I'd created strong enough habits to drop my working hours below 40 a week — with no drop in my output.** I had lost 30 pounds. I was sleeping like a baby for eight hours a night. And — this is the part that made it all worth it — I was able to chase one of my life-long dreams: I sold all of my things, packed a bag, and left the country to travel the world. (I'm still on the road today, over a year later — I'm currently writing this in Kyoto, Japan.)

Productivity is the key to the lifestyle we want. If we want to truly enjoy our lives, we need to not only put in the work to earn the things we want to enjoy, but put in that work quickly and efficiently to leave time for us to enjoy it.

And, contrary to what you may believe, productivity is not a gift that some people have and others don't. And it's not a matter of unflappable self-discipline or unflinching willpower.

Productivity is simply the end result of cultivating healthy habits.

If you're ready to put in the work to develop these habits for yourself, you'll put yourself in the fast lane toward the lifestyle you dream of — whatever that may be.

LEVERAGE WILLPOWER TO STAY CONSISTENT WITH THE THINGS YOU CARE ABOUT MOST

The biggest struggle in my professional life — actually, just in my life, period — is willpower. Some days I feel like a fucking champion, and I can knock out todo items like Muhammad Ali.

Other days I can barely force myself to open my laptop.

And for years, I thought that was just how things were: I'd have good days and bad days, and if I had more bad days than good days... what can you do?

I tried to convince myself I was exempt from this. I'd go for hours, pitting my todo list against sheer force of will. And, to be fair, it *did* work — for a while.

Inevitably, I'd hit a wall every few weeks and become utterly useless. Days would pass and I'd be completely unable to will myself to work.

It was only when I stopped viewing willpower as an enemy that things started to change for me. **Instead of seeing willpower as an adversary to be conquered, I thought of it as more of a cycle, like hunger or sleepiness.**

And when I started getting the hang of my willpower cycle, **I saw an incredible uptick in my productivity, consistency, and overall happiness.**

WHEREVER POSSIBLE, REDUCE DEMANDS ON YOUR WILLPOWER.

Throughout the day, we make thousands of tiny decisions. Most of them have no real impact on our happiness — I'll have the same kind of day whether I wear the black t-shirt or the slightly-darker-black t-shirt — but **each decision we make takes a small toll on our ability to make further decisions.**

So wherever it's possible, **remove the tiny decisions that don't matter.**

For example, rather than having to pick out an outfit every day, I removed the decision entirely and **adopted a uniform** of a black t-shirt and jeans.



My uniform.

PHOTO BY [TYLER DYLAN](#)

Every small decision we can eliminate leaves that much more willpower in the tank for when we have important decisions to make: whether we should work on a project or play phone games; whether we should get a healthy meal or grab fast food from a drive-through on the way home; whether we should hit the gym or watch whatever's on television.

FRONT-LOAD YOUR MOST IMPORTANT TASKS TO WORK WITH WILLPOWER.

Each morning, we wake up with a full tank of willpower.

Unfortunately, **it's all too easy to waste that willpower on bullshit** and end up depleted and feeling unproductive.

When we sit down to work, it's tempting to start with small stuff, like checking email, paying bills, and scanning social media. Or we take meetings, or jump into the team chat to catch up, or something equally work-ish that isn't really all that productive.

By the time we get around to doing something impactful, we're drained and end up staring at the computer. And if we *do* end up getting started, it's because of a Herculean effort to overcome our inertia — and that type of effort leads to the burnout that wipes us out for several days at a time.

But if we sit down and dedicate our first hour to the most important thing on our list we don't have to strain so hard to get it done. We can check email and

social media afterward — it's not going anywhere, after all.

I solve this problem by choosing a single priority each day. When I sit down to work, I **only focus on that one thing until it's done** (which typically takes me 1.5–3 hours). After that, any work I do is a bonus, so if I spend time on email or social media, it's not at the expense of what I *should* be doing.

Unlike starting with bullshit, **starting with the most important thing creates a positive willpower feedback cycle**: instead of feeling drained after a morning full of small, work-ish tasks, I feel pumped that I already accomplished something big off my list.

No guilt. No burnout. No procrastination. And it doesn't require any *actual* changes: **simply changing the order in which we tackle our todo list makes it easier to stay productive.**

USE HABIT TRIGGERS TO BUILD A ROUTINE THAT MAKES PRODUCTIVITY AUTOMATIC

While learning to harness our willpower is a powerful tool for boosting productivity, there's still room to improve.

When we're using willpower, it's in response to an *active demand*. Something happens, and it demands our attention: we have to make a choice to do it — or not.

If the things we care about most create active demands, we're leaving an opportunity — every day — to give ourselves an out. If we have to consciously say, "Yes, I choose to do this thing," we'll inevitably have a day where we're feeling tired or unmotivated or depressed or hungry and we'll make an excuse. And then we won't do it. And then we'll end up days or weeks down the road, having made no progress because each excuse made it that much easier to make the next one.

The secret to staying *really* productive — consistently — is to make the decision to start a *passive demand*: one that requires no conscious acceptance on our part.

And the way to do that is to **make our most productive decisions a part of our unconscious daily routines.**

FIND THE HOLES IN YOUR CURRENT ROUTINE, AND FILL THEM WITH THINGS THAT MATTER.

Every day I follow a pattern: I wake up, get out of bed, start the electric kettle in the kitchen, grab my laptop that's charging next to the kettle, get it set up, then make coffee and sit down to write for an hour — all before I check my phone.

But this is a new development for me. Before, I'd start the kettle, grab my phone, and proceed to spend the next hour screwing around on Facebook or playing a game.

When I started to feel stressed that I wasn't writing enough, I looked at my schedule and realized that **I was unconsciously wasting an hour each morning while I had my coffee.** So I decided to replace the wasteful habit — playing on my phone — with something productive — writing.

My *routine* barely changed at all: I was still spending about an hour each morning having a cup of coffee. However, **the thing I did to occupy myself was swapped out for something beneficial.**

I was going to spend that hour no matter what — so why not try to make it time well spent?

Throughout the day, we all unconsciously follow lots of little routines: what we do between bed and getting ready; what we do between getting ready and starting work; what we do after we leave work; and so on.

If we can notice those routines and spot the holes — the places where we waste time or do things that don't really add any value for us — we can swap out the time-wasting activity for something valuable, and take advantage of our routine to make that valuable activity *automatic*.

CREATE HABIT TRIGGERS THAT MAKE THE PRODUCTIVE THING THE AUTOMATIC THING.

A great way to make productive choices a part of our routines is to create *habit triggers*: an event or thing that cues us to do something else.

When done properly, a habit trigger makes the right thing the easy thing.

For me, charging my computer next to the kettle — and charging my phone out of my eyeline — created a habit trigger: when I started the kettle, I'd be looking at my computer. So the easy thing to do is to pick up my laptop.

Starting the kettle was a habit trigger to set up my laptop for writing. And after a few days, I didn't have to think about it anymore.



I'm going to have coffee every morning. I know I'll spend an hour or so with it. So why not make that time productive?

It was like all of my other routines: when I shower, shave, and brush my teeth, I'm not thinking very hard. They just *happen*, automatically, because that's just what I do.

And now that it's part of my routine and a habit trigger is in place, I wake up, make coffee, and set myself up to do something productive and rewarding. I don't have to think about it; it *just happens*.

USE DISTANCE TO GROW FONDER...AND

No matter how much we try to tell ourselves that we can power through things when we have to, there's no way to be *truly* productive for long periods of time if we're not excited about the work we're doing.

In order to keep productivity at the highest levels, we need to be really fucking stoked to work on our projects. And that — as odd as it might sound — means we need to work *less*.

The culture at work these days pushes the concept of “more is better” aggressively. Offices are designed to be more like home to keep people working later. Employees are under pressure to be a team player, so no one wants to be the first to leave or take a vacation. And everyone has a tiny box in their pocket that constantly reminds them that work is happening and they're not doing it — even at 8pm on a Sunday, *work is happening*.

For freelancers and entrepreneurs, things are just as dismal: everything lives and dies by their efforts, so there's incredible pressure — mostly internal pressure — to adopt an “always on” working style.

But there's no way to be “always on” and not end up burned out.

MAKE THE HEART THE MIND SHARPER

TAKE REAL BREAKS AND STOP WORKING WHEN YOU'RE NOT AT WORK.

In 2013, I was deep in the clutches of the “always on” lifestyle: working 70–90 hours a week, checking email in bed when I woke up and before going to sleep, taking calls through lunch, ignoring friends to handle something at work.

This go-go-go approach had worked for me for years, but **I was starting to notice something that I'd never felt before: I *hated* my job.** I dreaded my projects and resented my clients.

This was a shocking development for me. When I started, I loved my job so much that I did projects for free simply for the joy of creating them.

How the hell had I shifted from “I love this so much I'll do it for free” to “I hate this even though I'm making more money than I ever have before”? The work was just as challenging and exciting as it had always been, so it must have been me who changed.

I was *completely* burned out.



The solution came from an unexpected place: **I tried to ruin my career.**

I started taking long lunches where I'd ignore email. I set up a filter on my email that wouldn't allow messages to get to me between 7pm and 8am. I set my phone to follow the same "office hours".

I was sure this would mean angry clients, lost revenue, and an eventual decline in my career. And at the time, I didn't care — *I just wanted to have my life back.*

But **taking real breaks ended up improving my career in many ways.**

First, **I had room to miss my work.** I found my excitement again. When I'd shut down in the early evening, I'd still have a couple things I wanted to do for the day, and I'd be looking forward to getting them done the following morning.

Second, **taking breaks created logical boundaries between work and life.** My clients barely noticed that I'd stopped checking email at night, so I was free to expect time off. My team was relieved, because if I was taking time off, they felt like they could, too.

What started as a deliberate move to damage my career in hopes of improving my life ended up inadvertently improving both.

SPEND AT LEAST ONE DAY A WEEK OFF ELECTRONICS (OR AT LEAST OFF THE COMPUTER).

Even though it might *feel* like all we do is work, there are still dozens of other things that happen in our lives, and all of them require attention.

If we spend all of our time working, the stress and guilt of ignoring our personal lives begins to build, and it takes its toll on our happiness.

Worse, **the things we ignore stay at the edges of our awareness, robbing us of focus** because there's a nagging sense that we really ought to take care of that things soon.

But because we know willpower is a finite resource, we also know that it usually doesn't happen when we try and run errands after work. **If I've just put in a nine-hour day, the *last* thing I want to do is head to the DMV and renew my registration, or do laundry, or try to make progress on a hobby project.**

Honestly, it'll be a goddamn miracle if I have enough willpower just to choose something to watch on Netflix *and* pick a restaurant to order for delivery.

We need to create space to live the rest of our lives, and working seven days a week robs us of that

opportunity. But with the ease of keeping in touch at work through chat and email, it's *really* hard to stop working for a full day. Especially if we like our jobs.

But **taking that full day off is good for our careers**, too. In addition to creating additional space to miss our work (and boost our excitement to get back to it), it leaves us a full day's worth of willpower to take care of all the adult responsibilities that aren't work-related.

This does two powerful things for our productivity:

First, **a day off removes the stress of having backlogged personal tasks hanging around in the back of our minds**. We can fully focus on our work, because there's no guilt about ignoring our other responsibilities.

Second, **taking a day off prevents us from trying to fit in a personal task while we're at work**. Booking a dentist's appointment while you're supposed to be working is bad for your company and bad for your career, and — if that kind of thing is widespread among the employees of a business — absolutely crushing for morale.

Don't let a day off become a dirty word in your life. **Take at least one day off per week — preferably a full day off electronics — to give the rest of your life the attention it deserves**. This will boost your productivity, lower your stress levels, and generally result in a happier lifestyle.



I took a trip to Alaska in mid-2014. In Thorne Bay, there's no phone service and no internet. After ten days, I felt unbelievably refreshed and couldn't wait to get back to work.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF POSITIVE PRESSURE TO TURBOBOOST YOUR EFFICIENCY

Pressure has a bad reputation these days. And that's fair: most of the pressure we deal with today is negative.

But, if we're being totally honest, most of that negative pressure is self-imposed.

For the first few years of my career, I was guilty of a common freelancer's mistake: **I would procrastinate for as long as possible.**

I did this in high school, too: if I had a paper due on Friday — no matter how long in advance the assignment was given — I would wait until Thursday night to start working on it.

As a professional, **procrastination creates the worst kind of pressure:** if I miss a deadline, I'm endangering my livelihood. If I lose that client, I now have less income, and my quality of life decreases. If I let all my deadlines pass unmet, I end up with no income, and I risk losing any of the comforts and security I've amassed for myself.

I'd put off replying to clients. I'd delay on following up with leads.

There was no reason for this; I just felt resistance about starting, so I'd put it off for as long as possible.

But there's another kind of pressure: the positive kind.

By self-imposing pressure with lower risks, we can leverage the same productivity that happens under negative pressure, but without the negative consequences and damage to our relationships.

CREATE TIME CONSTRAINTS: WORK IN TIMED BLOCKS.

Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.

— Cyril Northcote Parkinson

Maybe it's because we were raised on game shows — *Legends of the Hidden Temple*, anyone? — but **it's hard to resist the challenge of racing a clock.**

If I set out to write an article, but I don't set a timer, I'll work a little, head over to Wikipedia to answer some idle question, get interested, head to Twitter to share, forget what I was doing, stare blankly at the computer, remember, work a little more, and repeat the process until I'm too tired to continue.

However, with a timer, I've just told myself that I can get the outline done in 90 minutes, and each minute that passes reminds me that I'm not done yet.

It creates a positive kind of pressure: I told myself I could do this thing in a set period of time, and the timer keeps me honest. Will I prove myself to be a liar? Or will I show that I'm as smart as I think I am?

It becomes a game, and if I win, I feel awesome *and* I've finished my current project. If I lose, no problem: I made a bunch of progress, so I'll take a quick break and then set a new timer to start a new challenge.

For me, the magic number is 90 minutes. **Between each timed block, I take a break of at least ten minutes where I stand up and don't look at any screens.**

Since I've started this, **I rarely work more than six hours a day, but I'm producing more work than I ever did when I was working ten-plus hours a day.**

CREATE HARD STOPS: MAKE DATES AND DON'T BRING A CHARGER.

A timer creates a *soft stop* — the app dings, or the music fades out, and I know the block is over, but if I choose to, I'll keep working anyways.

Sometimes I'm on a roll, and so this is a good thing.

Other times, my inertia makes me feel like standing up and walking around the room is just too much work. So I fall back into my unproductive habit of wasting time under the guise of doing work-ish things.

To keep this in check, most days I **create a *hard stop*: a non-negotiable time at which I must stop working, no matter what.**

Similar to a timer, **a hard stop creates a kind of positive pressure.** I know I *have* to stop working at 5pm, so I'm very motivated to get the things on my list done quickly.

An easy way to create a hard stop is with a dinner reservation or setting a time to meet friends. We have people expecting us to be somewhere at a certain time, so we have a real motivation — a prize, so to speak — to encourage us to race the clock.

However, some of us really struggle with showing up on time because of exactly this kind of thing — what we might call the “five more minutes” problem — which doesn't make an appointment enough of a hard stop.

If you're one of those people — and I am — you can do what I do: **leave your charger at home. No matter how badly you want those five more minutes, you can't make your battery last longer.** You get your six hours or so, and then it's lights out. No negotiations.

I've never been so productive as when I have 5% battery left while chasing a small bug in a project.

CREATE A BUBBLE (WITHOUT GETTING FIRED) TO STAY ULTRA-FOCUSED

Probably the hardest part about staying productive is focusing in the first place. When I was running my agency, I looked forward to *starting* my focused work around 7pm, because that was when I knew I'd finally be able to work uninterrupted.

There are several threats to our focus, and all of them have sneaky ways of keeping us from getting into the zone and doing *really* productive work.

First, **the people around us — our family, friends, and coworkers — are a constant, if well-meaning, source of distraction.** They want to share something, or get a quick opinion, or ask a question. And each small interruption takes us away from the deep focus that's required for us to not only be really productive, but to truly enjoy our work.

Second, **our phones blink, beep, and buzz, demanding our attention for countless reasons** — most of which probably don't merit the interruption.

And third, **our own emotional state blocks our focus.** If we're stressed, angry, anxious, or depressed, it's hard to get into the zone. (Though, hopefully, the habits we've already discussed will go a long way toward lowering stress and anxiety — at least the work-related variety.)

So if we want to become really productive, we need to find a way to eliminate distractions — without becoming hermits, alienating the people close to us, or deleting our Facebook accounts.

“GO DARK” WHENEVER YOU’RE IN A WORK BLOCK.

Most people *fucking hate* this advice. But the people I've convinced to try it have all had the same experience: **by going dark during work blocks, we're can get into a state of deep focus quickly and keep that focus for the entire working block.**

To go dark, we simply need to take advantage of the “Airplane Mode” and “Do Not Disturb” settings on our various devices. Remember, the timer for each work block is fairly short (ninety minutes or less), so we're not leaving anyone hanging for long.

Here's my current working style: **I have three or four work blocks each day.** Most days I put two to three solid blocks into something big — like writing this guide or building a new website — and one into less demanding work, such as clearing my inbox or reading up on industry trends.



There's some subtle magic in play, here, too: **I am completely unreachable for 4.5–6 hours each day, but I'm able to check for emergency messages (voicemail, text messages) every 90 minutes** — and, if it's a day that I've sent out a new post or email broadcast, I can scan my email responses for signs of trouble between blocks without interrupting the primary focus of my work.

The delay is short enough that the world can't burn down while I'm holed up with a project, but I'm still able to protect a huge amount of undisturbed time for high-impact work each day.

Going dark takes a bit of expectation-setting with people who are physically near you — namely, my girlfriend and I had to work together to figure out how to respect each other's working styles in order to make this work — but **the initial discomfort of setting boundaries pays dividends when you finish your entire todo list in just over four hours a day.**

USE TOOLS TO GIVE YOURSELF A FOCUS-ENHANCING ADVANTAGE.

While clearing distractions creates the space to do the work, **it can still be challenging to get ourselves internally motivated to focus.**

Ambient distractions still remain, like a loud conversation at a nearby desk or table, music playing on the radio, or plain internal resistance to getting started.

However, **using a few tools, we can remove the inertia and the ambient distractions to clear the runway for an incredibly productive working block.**

I'm a big believer in white noise these days. **White noise has the effect of “turning off the world” while I'm working.** I can't hear the people around me, or the music that's playing, or — honestly — anything short of a yell, and this leaves my mind free of the interjections that happen when I overhear someone talking and lose my train of thought, or hear a song I know and forget what I was doing because I start thinking about the song. **White noise completes the bubble: it's just me and my current task.**

I use [Noisli](#) for this because it comes with a timer that fades out the noise when my working block ends.

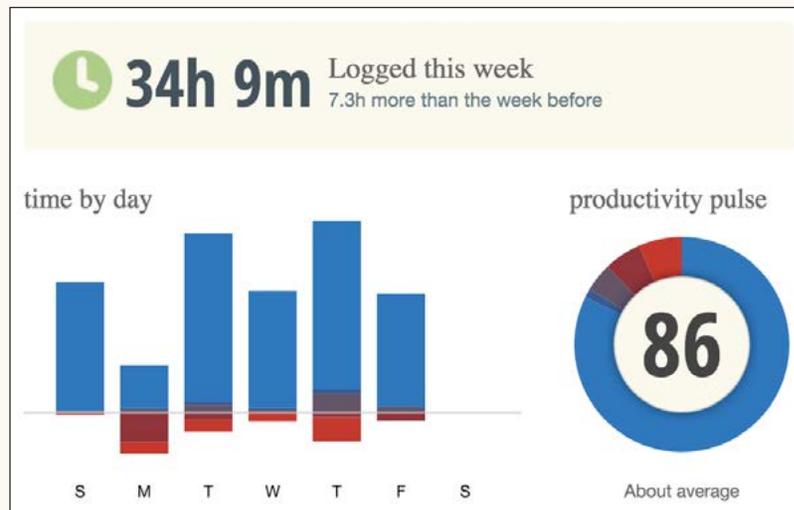
To further enhance the “turn off the world” effect, get some high quality, noise-canceling headphones. I opted for the [Bose QC20](#), which are a little pricey, but I haven't regretted the decision in the least. When I put the headphones in, it's like the world around me goes underwater, and I can barely hear anything — before the music comes on. With white noise I may as well be watching a movie on mute.

If you struggle with staying on task, you can replace your willpower with software: for example, tools like [RescueTime](#) and [Freedom](#) will block distracting websites for a period of time you define — say, a working block — and prevent you from pulling up Facebook when you've told yourself you need to work.

Productivity habits aren't sexy. They're usually not mind-blowing. No one ever looks at my phone in Airplane Mode and says, "Holy shit, dude, that's so awesome!"

But what *is* mind-blowing are the results of adopting good productivity habits.

By using the habits laid out in this guide, I've been able to create a lifestyle where this is a normal week for me:



A recent screenshot from my [RescueTime](#) dashboard. The unproductive (red) time is Netflix, social media, and email.

I SPEND LESS THAN 40 HOURS TOTAL ON A COMPUTER EACH WEEK.

And over the last year, in under 40 hours a week, I've been able to:

- Keep up with a full-time contract, turning in quality work and earning an extension offer.
- Write consistently, posting over 30 articles.
- Create an in-depth product for finding direction and improving focus with [my friend Nate Green](#) (more details on that later).
- Build several just-for-fun projects, such as my [cost-of-living comparison tool](#).

And with all the time I'm *not* on the computer, I've been able to live in 10 countries around the globe, experiencing as much of this world as I can.

So, no, the habits themselves aren't that sexy. They seem a little restrictive, a little rigid, a little grumpy-old-mannish. But *they work*. And they'll work for you.

Every one of my coaching clients who's adopted these habits has seen huge improvements in their productivity, and subsequently in their work-life balance and overall sense of happiness.

I want everyone to have that sense of balance and happiness. I want *you* to have it. So give these a try.

Welcome to the new, more productive — and happier — life you've always deserved.

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Jason Lengstorf is an author, coach, and consultant. He specializes in helping people who are too busy free up extra hours to pursue things that truly matter to them.

Learn about Jason's coaching at clarity.fm/jlengstorf.

In 2014, Jason left a high-stress job with long hours in favor of a healthier working style. He's been living his dream of traveling the world ever since.

Read more of his story at lengstorf.com.

DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO WOULD BENEFIT FROM IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY? SHARE THIS GUIDE!

SHAREABLE (POTTYMOUTH VERSION):

Adopt these 5 habits to become unfuckwithably productive: <https://lengstorf.com/productivity-habits/>

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SHAREABLE (GRANDMA-FRIENDLY VERSION):

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