

**3 BLINDINGLY OBVIOUS**  
*AND THEREFORE PAINFULLY UNDERAPPRECIATED*  
**DAILY ACTIONS**  
THAT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE — STARTING TODAY!



**PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU GET YOUR LIFE BACK  
WITHOUT SACRIFICING YOUR CAREER.**

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

# BEFORE WE GET STARTED

Okay, let me shoot straight with you: you're about to read this (or scan headlines, more likely), and when it's over, you're going to think to yourself, "Well, I already knew all of this!"

That's fair. You do already know all of what I'm about to tell you.

**And that's exactly the problem.**

We tend to hunt for magic bullets, secret strategies, and instant fixes. We read productivity article after productivity article (*15 Unbelievable Productivity Tips of the Disgustingly Rich and Powerful — #7 Will Make You Pee With Astonishment!*) in search of some mythical technique that will change everything.

But the only secret — and it's a poorly-kept secret — is this:

*There's no secret ritual behind successful people; just a few unsexy-but-effective habits, consistently followed every day.*

**TWEET THIS!**

So before you roll your eyes at the obviousness of the advice contained herein, just consider the following:

**Knowing a thing and doing a thing are two very different things.**

## **WHY I WROTE THIS GUIDE**

In 2013 I was pretty sure I was dying.

I found myself in my bathroom, clutching at tufts of whiskers that had fallen out of my beard. Two quarter-sized patches had gone white and started falling out — and they were getting bigger.

Above the bald patches on my chin, my eyes peered weakly from deep within dark circles. My body sagged and bulged as an outward confirmation that my current goals did not include surviving middle-age.

I didn't feel much better than I looked.

I slept little, if at all. The all-nighter was no longer an exotic concept. “Email in bed” wasn’t a guilty anomaly; it was so normal I couldn’t manage to picture waking up without bathing my face in the harsh blue light of my inbox.

My friends stopped calling. When they *did* visit, they’d watch with mixed pity and irritation while I just-five-more-minutes-ed for an hour before putting my computer away.

## **WORK WAS GOING GREAT, THOUGH.**

My business was growing. I had more clients than I could handle, and more leads came in every week.

This idea — my baby web agency that I’d been struggling to keep alive for the last five years — was finally starting to look like a *real* business. I was endlessly proud.

I told myself the sacrifices I was making were necessary if I wanted to be successful. I didn’t get to have my cake and eat it, too.

## **THE CANARY IN THE COAL MINE.**

When my beard started dying, everything changed. Until then, the sacrifices were philosophical: it was my social life, or my overall

alertness. But now? *Now that shit was real*, and it was staring me in the face. (Well, chin.)

So I set out to destroy my career. I chose my life over my business. I made a few changes — the very boring, obvious changes in this guide — so I could have my life back, and I fully expected my business to suffer as a result.

**Instead, my business grew.** And I was happy again. And I had time for previously speculative activities like “hobbies” and “going to the gym”.

The secret behind all of this wasn't a radical new routine, or a killer strategy, or cryptic advice from an elderly stranger. The *real* secret was far more surprising:

*We can become more successful by taking better care of ourselves outside of work.*

**That's what this guide is designed to do: help you take better care of yourself, so you can live a happier life *and* become more successful in your career.**

# WRITE A DAILY LIST OF THINGS THAT MATTER.

**I HAVE A** good memory. It's a point of pride. I brag about it whenever the opportunity arises; spend more than an hour with me over drinks and I'll inevitably slip in the story about how I memorized 25 lines of Shakespeare 10 minutes before I had to recite it in front of my high school English class.

(I nailed it, by the way.)

I bring this up not to brag — well, not *only* to brag — but to provide a little context: I am very good at holding lots of information in my memory.

So when someone told me I should start writing a list, I turned around and told them to fuck right off.

“I know what I'm supposed to be working on,” I'd boast. “I don't need to write it down.”

And truthfully, I was right. I didn't *need* to write things down.

But *holy shit* was it helpful when I started doing it.

## **LISTS DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT THAN I INITIALLY THOUGHT.**

When I thought of lists before, I saw them as a means to avoid forgetting things. And while this is technically accurate, it misses the true value of writing a list:

**When we write things down, they become less stressful and easier to prioritize.**

I actually keep two lists:

- A master list of all my projects and todos.
- A daily list of *only the todo items I'm working on today*.

The second list — the list of just what I'm working on today — was the one that made a huge difference for me.

## **A DAILY LIST CLARIFIES WHAT YOU'RE WORKING ON IN A VERY REAL WAY.**

**In order to write a “what I'm doing today” list, you have to choose what you're working on for the day.** That may sound like

a silly thing to call out, but it's surprising how often we tend to sit down "to work" with no clear idea of what we're working on.

I've fed many, *many* hours to "work" that was little more than flipping between projects without actually *doing* anything.

## **A DAILY LIST HELPS BUILD (AND MAINTAIN) MOMENTUM AND MOTIVATION.**

**Writing a list of just a few items — the things that are most important for today — and crossing all of them off is *far more motivational* than crossing those same few items off a list with dozens of items on it.**

There's something extremely satisfying about *completing a list*. But if we're ambitious, our *entire* todo list will never be completed in a single day.

**By creating a daily list, we get the dual benefits of setting specific targets and hitting all of those targets — every day.** That's huge for morale.

# ONE SIMPLE ACTION STEP: WRITE YOUR FIRST DAILY LIST RIGHT NOW.

**TAKE A FEW** minutes right now to look at your day tomorrow. What are the most important? **Make a list for tomorrow with only the todo items that *must be done* by the time you stop working.**

## THE RULES:

- **Be action-oriented.** The items on your list should have real finish lines. Try to avoid generic items like “write”; instead, give specific criteria for completion, such as “write 500 words”.
- **Be conservative.** Finishing four tasks in a day can mean different things: if your list had three items, you got ahead and feel like a champion; if it had five, you fell behind and feel like shit. (**#protip:** my daily list always has *only one item*.)
- **Be consistent.** On the days I write a daily list, I feel calm and in control. On days I *don't* write a list, I always feel like there's something I'm forgetting and that I'm somehow behind.

**After a few days of racking up daily wins, things like procrastination and self-doubt start to fade away** — we're now clear on our goals, and we've got a history of hitting them.

# ACTUALLY MAKE SLEEP AS IMPORTANT AS WE ALWAYS PRETEND IT IS.

**WHENEVER I MEET** someone now who — bleary-eyed and bedraggled — swears they're wired differently and they can function just fine on five hours of sleep per night, I don't argue with them.

Arguing with someone about how much sleep they need is like arguing religion.

Sadly, sleeplessness *is* a religion for many of us who place a high value on ambition. We've painted up sleeping as a sign of laziness, and so we wear the bags under our eyes as a proud badge of *how fucking motivated* we are.

I bought into the all-nighters-or-else school of thought for most of my twenties. I'd sleep five, six hours a night and drag myself through

the next day like a thoroughly-caffeinated zombie, humblebragging about my “epic” late-night workathon.

**BUT A LACK OF SLEEP INCREASES OUR CHANCE OF FALLING BEHIND.**

After staying awake for 18 hours, our brains are functioning at about the same cognitive level as after drinking four or five beers.

**Going to work sleep-deprived is functionally equivalent to going to work drunk.**

As a general rule, our best work happens when we’re clear-headed and alert. When we’re impaired — by alcohol or by exhaustion — our work is sluggish and error-prone. **We may actually do *damage* to our careers by making mistakes that would never have happened if we were fully alert.**

That means that — assuming we want to *truly excel* in our work — we need to treat sleep as sacred.

*ONE SIMPLE ACTION STEP:*  
**COMMIT TO ONE HOUR OF  
NO ELECTRONICS BEFORE  
YOUR IDEAL BEDTIME.**

**THE HARDEST PART** of getting enough sleep is slowing down at the end of the day. If I'm on my phone playing a game, I might sit there until midnight. It's even worse if I'm working on a project.

So to make sure I get enough sleep, I **clear an hour before bed to get ready for bed and read — no electronics or television.**

***THE RULES:***

- Decide what time you need to wake up (e.g. 7am).
- Set a bedtime that will give you 7½–8 hours of sleep (e.g. 11pm).
- One hour before your bedtime (e.g. 10pm), shut down your electronics and get ready for bed.

It might feel like sleeping longer just means fewer hours in the day, but after catching up on sleep, **you'll likely find that you've actually gained time** that was previously spent staring groggily at a screen, or fixing mistakes that were made due to exhaustion.

# PUT YOUR PHONE DOWN AND ACT LIKE A PERSON.

**SMARTPHONES ARE GREAT** at solving problems that were caused by smartphones.

“You can check your email on your phone!” (*...now that smartphones have made phone-based email ubiquitous.*)

“You can get emails from your boss at midnight!” (*...now that smartphones have made it possible for your boss to micromanage you from their bathtub.*)

“You can download apps to edit spreadsheets on your commute!” (*...now that smartphones have created the expectation that all hours can — and should — be productive working hours.*)

I fell into this trap like a thing into a place-that-sounds-great-but-results-in-a-horrible-and-grisly-death.

I'd check my phone in mid-conversation. In mid-sentence. I'd take phone calls during dinner. I'd be that asshole in line trying to manage social media while also paying for my groceries.

I was always around, but never really *there*; I was on the internet, making sure my empire of selfies and clever tweets was still intact.

In the meantime, my friends were viewing me as less and less of a person worth engaging, because I was clearly prioritizing my online relationships over the flesh-and-blood connections sitting in front of me.

I worried that if I looked away — even for an hour — I'd allow the world to fall apart. A client would need something, or I'd miss a huge opportunity if I wasn't keeping vigil over my phone.

## **HOW I WON BY TRYING TO FAIL**

When I made my decision to take back control of my life, my first act of defiance was to break up with my phone. The relationship was toxic, and entirely one-sided.

I asked my friends to help keep me accountable, and they introduced me to iPhone Chicken (which I'll introduce to you at the end of this section).

The first few days were spent in a suspended state of low-level terror, during which I was convinced that all of my worst-case scenarios were playing out without my knowledge.

But then, after seeing the results — that taking an hour or two between email checks or social media feed refreshes went *entirely unnoticed* by everyone except me — I settled into a healthier relationship with my phone, and rekindled much healthier relationships with the people in the room with me.

# ONE SIMPLE ACTION STEP: PLAY IPHONE CHICKEN AT DINNER.

**ONE OF THE** most effective ways to make something stick is to turn it into a game. If that game has real consequences, even better. So when I was introduced to iPhone Chicken, it immediately earned my grudging respect — and my friends ate a few meals for free.

## THE RULES:

- Upon sitting down to dinner, **everyone places their phones face-down on the table.**
- For the duration of the meal, **touching phones is off-limits.**
- **First one to check a phone pays the check** (or does the dishes).

Let your phone-free time become an hour or so of *total presence*: pay attention to only the people sitting with you; try to actually taste the food you're eating; treat a lull in the conversation as a chance to think, not a signal to check in online.

**#protip:** start small. Give yourself permission to leave your phone unchecked for the span of just a single meal each day. Put it into silent, airplane, or do-not-disturb mode to disable notifications.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR JASON LENGSTORF

**I'VE BEEN A** remote worker for over a decade, both as the owner of a web design agency, and later as a consultant for some of the world's most innovative companies. In 2014, I sold everything I couldn't fit into a carry-on suitcase and started traveling the world with my girlfriend, Marisa.

I write about how I'm finding balance, happiness, and meaning in my life on my blog, [lengstorf.com](http://lengstorf.com). Sometimes I overshare on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#).