

## THE BIG IDEAS

**Perfectionism**  
vs. Optimalism.

**Fault Finders**  
vs. Benefit finders.

**Time to Fail More?**  
Seriously. Get on that! :)

**Active Acceptance**  
& Choices and actions.

**Appreciate**  
Two meanings.

**How Many Legs**  
Does that dog have?

**Psychological “Injuries”**  
How's your rest?

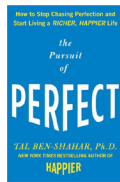
**Recovery**  
Micro, mid & macro.

**Event --> Thought**  
--> Emotion.

**The Platinum Rule**  
Start with the “I.”

*“If the only dream we have  
is of a perfect life, we are  
doomed to disappointment  
since such dreams simply  
cannot come true in the real  
world.”*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar



# The Pursuit of Perfect

How to Stop Chasing Perfection and Start Living a Richer, Happier Life  
BY TAL BEN-SHAHAR · MCGRAW-HILL © 2009 · 272 PAGES

“Perfectionism and optimalism are not distinct ways of being, an either-or choice, but rather they coexist in each person. And while we can move from perfectionism toward optimalism, we never fully leave perfectionism behind and never fully reach optimalism ahead. The optimalism ideal is not a distant shore to be reached but a distant star that guides us and can never be reached. As Carl Rogers pointed out, “The good life is a process, not a state of being. It is a direction, not a destination.”

~ Tal Ben-Shahar from *The Pursuit of Perfect*

[Tal Ben-Shahar](#) is quickly becoming my favorite author/teacher.

In fact, he might already be there. :)

As a former Harvard professor who taught THE most popular class in Harvard's history (on Positive Psychology), he's an incredible blend of brilliant thinker, passionate teacher, scientific-realist and get-out-and-rock-it-dreamer. LOVE. It.

His first book, *Happier* (see Notes), provides us with an inspiring snap shot on the science of happiness packed with wisdom and exercises we can immediately apply to our lives.

This book is all about understanding the perils of pursuing a life of perfection and offers an empowering alternative: the way of the “Optimalist.”

It's one of those books that's an absolute joy to read and a challenge to write a Note on because the book is basically one unending string of \*really\* Great Ideas. I'm excited to share a handful of my favorites with you and if you're resonating with it, me thinks you'll LOVE the book. Let's rock!

## PERFECTIONISM VS. OPTIMALISM

“... psychologists today differentiate between positive perfectionism, which is adaptive and healthy, and negative perfectionism, which is maladaptive and neurotic. I regard these two types of perfectionism as so dramatically different in both their underlying nature and their ramifications that I prefer to use entirely different terms to refer to them. Throughout this book, I will refer to negative perfectionism simply as perfectionism and to positive perfectionism as optimalism.”

Ah, “Optimalism.” It's my new favorite word/concept.

The major difference between a perfectionist and an optimalist?

Well, there are a lot, but they're primarily grounded in how we deal with reality—whereas an optimalist EMBRACES the constraints of reality, a perfectionist REJECTS those constraints and holds herself to impossible standards that result in pain and suffering and other such ickness that include “low self-esteem, eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, psychosomatic disorders, chronic fatigue syndrome, alcoholism, social phobia, panic disorder, a paralyzing tendency to procrastination, and serious difficulties in relationships.”

*" In essence, Perfectionists reject everything that deviates from their flawless, faultless ideal vision, and as a result they suffer whenever they do not meet their own unrealistic standards. Optimalists accept, and make the best of, everything that life has to offer."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

*" Matt, the student who jokingly threatened to report me to his roommate if he saw me unhappy, thought that a person teaching happiness should radiate joy 24-7. Matt's idea was not only unrealistic, it was in fact a recipe for unhappiness."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

*" Change is not a threat but a challenge; the unknown is not frightening but fascinating."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

Ben-Shahar goes off on the philosophical underpinnings of these differences, tracing us back to Plato (unconstrained idealist) and Aristotle (constrained optimalist) and pointing to the macro sociopolitical manifestations of each world view as they show up in communism (unconstrained idealism) and capitalism (constrained optimalism).

We'll save that for a longer chat; for now: know that we want to embrace the constraints of human nature.

The fact is: Failure happens.

We're going to experience negative emotions. That's all \*inevitable\* and if we wanna experience the joy of this precious hero's journey we've GOTTA say yes to it all and learn to do the best with what we've got as we evolve into a creative Optimalist!

How about some more differences between our Perfectionists and Optimalists?!?

## FAULT FINDERS VS. BENEFIT FINDERS

"Optimalists tend to be benefit finders—the sort of people who find the silver lining in the dark cloud, who make lemonade out of lemons, who look on the bright side of life, and who do not fault writers for using too many cliches. With a knack for turning setbacks into opportunities, the Optimalist goes through life with an overall sense of optimism."

Seeing that *optimalist* and *optimism* come from the same Latin word for "best" (*optimus*), it makes sense that an *optimalist* would be an *optimist*, eh? :)

I love the distinction between "fault finders" and "benefit finders."

Which are *you*?

Do you focus on the lemonade when you get a lemon or do you prefer to complain about what life gives you?

Now seems like a good time to drill down.

What's the #1 thing that's stressing you out right now?

If it's \*really\* bothering you, we can rest assured that you're in fault finding mode. The best way to get your optimism (and therefore "Optimalist") on?

Get into a BENEFIT FINDING mode.

What're the Top 3 things you can really appreciate about your current challenge?!?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## TIME TO FAIL MORE? :)

"One of the wishes that I always have for my students is that they should fail more often (although they are understandably not thrilled to hear me tell them so). If they fail frequently, it means that they try frequently, that they put themselves on the line and challenge themselves. It is only from the experience of challenging ourselves that we learn and grow, and we often develop and mature much more from our failures than from our successes. Moreover, when we put ourselves on the line, when we fall down and get up again, we become stronger and more resilient."

One of the key attributes of a perfectionist is a deep fear of failure.

Ben-Shahar tells his stories as a recovering perfectionist and I used to be so bad that when I started my career at Arthur Andersen, I stressed over making sure the letter to a client was folded perfectly and the stamp was on the envelop perfectly before I could send it out.

*"The pain associated with the fear of failure is usually more intense than the pain following an actual failure."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

*"Paradoxically, our overall self-confidence and our belief in our own ability to deal with setbacks may be reinforced when we fail, because we realize that the beast we had always feared is not as terrifying as we thought it was."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

*"Taking the constraints of reality into consideration, the Optimalist then works toward creating not the perfect life but the best possible one."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

*"The notion that we can enjoy unlimited success or live without emotional pain and failure may be an inspiring ideal, but it is not a principle by which to lead one's life, since in the long run it leads to dissatisfaction and unhappiness."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

Um, yah. Not a very empowering place to play. :)

From the need to do the mundane perfectly to the fear of failing at something significant (like a relationship, new business, presentation, etc.), we've gotta learn to reorient ourselves to the idea of failure.

We talk about this A LOT in these Notes and it's an essential key to Getting Our Greatness On. Two of my favorite Great Ideas on this come from two Michaels: Reverend [Michael Beckwith](#) and Michael Jordan.

Beckwith says this about "mistakes" in his Great book [Spiritual Liberation](#) (see Notes): "A conscious realization of our innate oneness with the Ineffable does not mean that we will never make a mistake again. Even enlightened beings burn their bagels once in a while. It's important to maintain a sense of humor because this is how you will stop being afraid of making a mistake. You'll make some, but so what? That's why they're called mis-takes. Humor relaxes the uptight ego. You get a new cue from your inner Self and simply say, 'I missed my cue, so let's do a second take.' Your willingness to take the risk of making a mistake is actually an expression of courage and a willingness to grow from them. Mistakes are about getting the blessing in the lesson and the lesson in the blessing."

And Jordan shares this mojo: "There was never any fear for me, no fear of failure. If I miss a shot, so what?"

And: "I've missed more than nine thousand shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times I've been trusted to take the winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

Is it time for you to fail a little more? If so, get on that! :)

## ACTIVE ACCEPTANCE & CHOICES

"We all have an image of our ideal self, an elaborate construct of the kind of person we would like to be. While it is not always possible to feel as this constructed self would (fearless and compassionate at all times, for example), we can act in accordance with its ideals (courageous, generous, and so on). Active acceptance is about recognizing things as they are and then choosing the course of action we deem appropriate and worthy of ourselves. It is about recognizing that at every moment in our life we have a choice—to be afraid and yet to act courageously, to feel jealous and yet to act benevolently, to accept being human and act with humanity."

Ah, I love that.

Reminds me of [Dan Millman's](#) work (see Notes on [Body Mind Mastery](#) and [Everyday Enlightenment](#)) and his friend [David Reynolds'](#) great book [Constructive Living](#) (see Notes).

A psychotherapist who blends the best of Zen Buddhism and Western Psychotherapy, [Reynolds](#) teaches us that we need to accept whatever emotion we're feeling and then ask ourselves the very important question: "Now what needs to be done?"

You might be stressed, afraid, depressed. You feel like giving up or yelling or whatever.

The optimalist within reminds us: Welcome to life.

And, as we actively accept things as they are, we get to reflect on our ideals, realize we always have a choice, and ask ourselves: "Now what needs to be done?"

## APPRECIATE: TWO MEANINGS

"The word appreciate has two meanings. The first meaning is 'to be thankful,' the opposite of taking something for granted. The second meaning is 'to increase in value' (as money appreciates

*"Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard noted 'To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily. Not to dare, is to lose oneself.'"*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

*"The first step was to accept the reality that I could not have it all. While it seems obvious that you cannot work fourteen hours a day and remain fit and healthy and be a devoted father and husband, in my perfectionist fantasy world, nothing was impossible."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

*"As J. P. Morgan once remarked, 'I can do a year's work in nine months, but not in twelve.'"*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

*"The problem in today's corporate world, as well as in many other realms, is not hard work; the problem is insufficient recovery."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

in the bank). Combined, these two meanings point to a truth that has been proved repeatedly in research on gratitude: when we appreciate the good in our lives, the good grows and we have more of it. The opposite, sadly, is also true: when we fail to appreciate the good—when we take the good in our lives for granted—the good depreciates."

Ah, appreciation. As you know if you've read many of these Notes (specifically those on Positive Psych), it's H.U.G.E.!!

What are you most appreciative of in your life?!?

Appreciate it and watch it appreciate! :)

## HOW MANY LEGS DOES THAT DOG HAVE?

"Abraham Lincoln once jokingly asked, 'How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg?' His answer? 'Four. Calling a tail a leg doesn't make it a leg.'"

Love that. Reminds me of Aldous Huxley's brilliant comment: "Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored."

One of the Big Ideas Tal comes back to again and again throughout the book is the fact that, whereas a perfectionist tends to ignore reality, an optimist accepts it.

This is the cornerstone of [Byron Katie's \*Loving What Is\*](#) (see Notes) and [Tolle's \*The Power of Now\*](#) (see Notes). And, as [Ben-Shahar](#) addresses many times throughout the book, it's one of the key pillars in [Nathaniel Branden's \*Six Pillars of Self-Esteem\*](#) (see Notes).

It's simple: We've gotta accept reality.

How about you? Are you ignoring something that you might wanna pay more attention to? Now a good time to accept it and create your life with that constraint honored?

## PSYCHOLOGICAL "INJURIES"

"In the psychological realm, injuries come in the form of emotional harm; feeling lethargic, anxious, or depressed are some of the signals that we need some time to recover. These signals, unlike physical injuries, are more subtle and easier to discount. And it is not uncommon for a person to continue working just as hard, if not harder, while the mind and the heart are pleading for a break."

Tal was the youngest Israeli national squash champion and went after the world-championship as any world-class perfectionist would: by overtraining! (And, eventually injuring himself.)

Just as an athlete runs the risk of injuring herself if she trains too hard, so can we psychologically injure ourselves through our overworking. We've GOTTA build in regular rest cycles if we want to stay healthy and at the top of our game.

Here's a Big Idea on how:

## RECOVERY: MICRO, MID & MACRO

"The rising levels of mental health problems, coupled with improved psychiatric medication, are thrusting us toward a brave new world. To reverse direction, rather than listening to advertisers who promise us the wonder drug, the magic pill that will improve performance and mood, we need to listen to our nature and rediscover its wonders. Regular recovery, on the micro-, mid-, and macrolevels, can often do the work of psychiatric medicine, only naturally."

Tal's a big fan of the great book, [The Power of Full Engagement](#) (see Notes), and has some tips on how we can make sure we're managing our energy properly.

*"Those who understand that failure is inextricably linked with achievement are the ones who learn, grow, and ultimately do well. Learn to fail, or fail to learn."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

*"Acceptance is not a call for mediocrity, for compromise, but rather a prerequisite for the attainment of optimal success and happiness on a personal as well as interpersonal level."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

*"Helen Keller, who in her lifetime knew much suffering, as well as joy, noted that 'character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved.'"*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

First, we've gotta realize that we're not robots/machines. And, if we were, we'd be the kind of machines that needed a 15 minute break every hour or two (micro-level recovery), a seven to nine hour break every day + one day off per week (mid-level recovery) and a two to four week break every year (macro-level recovery)!

You treating your precious machine well!?!? :)

Let's take a quick inventory:

- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ I take "micro-level" breaks of ~15 minutes every hour or two
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ I take "mid-level" breaks of 7-9 hours of sleep/day + 1 day off/week
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ I take "macro-level" breaks of 2-4 weeks off/year

How're you looking? Where can you work within the constraints of your life to optimize?!

(Remember: No need to get upset with ourselves with where we're falling short (that would be the perfectionist's way of dealing with life!). Let's be good optimalists, honor the constraints of our lives and build in the regular recovery that'll best serve us! :)

## EVENT → THOUGHT → EMOTION

"The basic premise of cognitive therapy is that we react to our interpretation of events rather than directly to the events themselves, which is why the same event may elicit radically different responses from different people. An event leads to a thought (an interpretation of the event), and the thought in turn evokes an emotion. I see a baby (event), recognize her as my daughter (thought), and feel love (emotion). I see the audience waiting for my lecture (event), interpret it as threatening (thought), and experience anxiety (emotion)."

This is one of those Big Ideas we come back to in nearly every Note: the fact that it's NOT the event, in itself, that creates our emotional state; rather, it's what we THINK about the event that creates our emotional response.

Change the thoughts and we can change our emotions.

As Tal continues: "The goal of cognitive therapy is to restore a sense of realism by getting rid of distorted thinking. When we identify an irrational thought (a cognitive distortion), we change the way we think about an event and thereby change the way we feel. For example, if I experience paralyzing anxiety before a job interview, I can evaluate the thought that elicits the anxiety (if I am rejected, it will all be over and I will never find a job) and reinterpret the event by disputing and replacing the distorted evaluation with a rational one (although I really want this job, there are many other desirable jobs out there). The distortion elicits an intense and unhealthy fear of failure; the rational thought reframes the situation and puts it in perspective."

So, do you have any "cognitive distortion" gremlins running around in your head right now that you might wanna reframe?

Sweet. Get on that! :)

(And, the next time you find yourself stressed, you might want to pause for a moment, see if you can identify the event that occurred PLUS the interpretation you gave it and how that combo leads to your emotional state. Then, see if there's a more empowering reframe you can rock! :)

## THE PLATINUM RULE

"Why the double standard, the generosity toward our neighbor and the miserliness where we ourselves are concerned? And so I propose that we add a new rule, which we can call the Platinum Rule, to our moral code: 'Do not do unto yourself what you would not do unto others.'"

So, we all know the Golden Rule, eh?



*"The emotional life that the Perfectionist expects is one of a constant high; the Optimalist expects his life to include emotional ups, emotional downs, and everything in between. The Perfectionist rejects painful emotions that do not meet his expectation of an unwavering flow of positive emotions; the Optimalist permits himself to experience the full range of human emotions."*

~ Tal Ben-Shahar

It's echoed across basically all moral codes and goes something to the effect of "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

Of course, that's wonderful wisdom.

However, it presupposes a very important idea: That we actually love ourselves!!!

Recognizing that need, I love [Tal](#)'s Platinum Rule: "Do not do unto yourself what you would not do unto others."

If your friend/loved one made some mistakes in a big presentation at work or on an exam or whatever, would you YELL at her throughout her presentation and then all the way home and then all night? Telling her what an idiot she is and all that jazz?

Riiiiight... We'd \*never\* do that.

So, why do that to ourselves?!?

Fact is, we simply can't give what we don't have. Tal quotes [Ayn Rand](#) who, in [The Fountainhead](#) (see Notes) reminds us: "To say 'I love you' one must know first how to say the 'I'."

And he offers this wisdom as well: "When the Dalai Lama was then asked to clarify whether indeed the object of compassion may be the self, he responded: 'Yourself first, and then in a more advanced way the aspiration will embrace others. In a way, high levels of compassion are nothing but an advanced state of that self-interest. That's why it is hard for people who have a strong sense of self-hatred to have genuine compassion toward others. There is no anchor, no basis to start from.'"

So, let's remember the Platinum Rule as we go out and rock our greatest Optimalist lives: "Do not do unto yourself what you would not do unto others."

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,  
you'll probably like...

[Happier](#)

[The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem](#)

[The Fountainhead](#)

[Flow](#)

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[The Now Habit](#)

[The How of Happiness](#)

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## About the Author of "The Pursuit of Perfect"

TAL BEN-SHAHAR



Tal Ben-Shahar is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Happier*. He taught the most popular course at Harvard University and currently teaches at the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, Israel. He consults and lectures around the world to multinational organizations, the general public, and at-risk populations. He obtained his Ph.D. in organizational behavior and his B.A. in philosophy and psychology from Harvard. For more information visit [TalBenShahar.com](#).

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](#).