Wiser Days

LESSONS FROM LIFE

Lessons from life: evidence and reflection on living well

EDITION 1 · DECEMBER 2026



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What the longest study of happiness found

Eight decades of research on what makes a good life

The regrets people name at the end

And how to use regret well while there is time

Making peace with limited time

Attention, time and what matters

Resilience and habits

What actually helps after adversity, and how change sticks

Failing well, and living kindly

Learning from setbacks, and the evidence on gratitude and generosity

Edited by Sukh Sandhu | wiserdaysmag.com

EDITION 1 | DECEMBER 2026

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EDITORIAL

Becoming wiser, one day at a time

By Sukh Sandhu, Editor-in-Chief

Wisdom is rarely a single revelation. It gathers slowly, in ordinary days, from what we notice and what we choose to learn. Wiser Days is a monthly invitation to do exactly that.

Welcome to the first edition of Wiser Days. Our sister titles are about work: leading organisations, managing risk, building careers, teaching well. This one is about the rest of life, which in the end matters more.

Advice about how to live is everywhere, and much of it is either too vague to use or too certain to trust. Wiser Days aims for something in between: essays that are warm and reflective, but grounded in what careful research has actually found. When we cite a study, we name it and say what its limits are. When a popular idea does not hold up, we say so. And we try to end each essay with something small you can do.

In this edition

Part 1, What matters, begins with the Harvard Study of Adult Development, one of the longest studies of adult life ever conducted, and what it found about relationships and wellbeing. It continues with the regrets people name at the end of life and what research on regret suggests about using it well.

Part 2, Getting through and getting better, looks at what actually helps people recover after adversity, how habits form and why most attempts to change them fail, and how to learn from failure rather than simply survive it.

Part 3, Time and other people, explores making peace with the limits of our time and attention, and the evidence on gratitude, kindness and generosity.

A note of care

Wiser Days offers general information and reflection, not medical or psychological advice. If something in these pages touches a difficult place, please talk to someone you trust or to your GP. Lifeline is available on 13 11 14, and Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636.

Thank you for reading the first Wiser Days. If life has taught you a lesson worth sharing, we would love to hear it.

Warm regards,
Sukh Sandhu
Editor-in-Chief, Wiser Days

PART 1

What matters

What eight decades of research and the end of life teach us about living well.

WHAT MATTERS

What the Longest Study of Happiness Found: Relationships, Health and the Good Life

By Sukh Sandhu

For more than eight decades, researchers at Harvard have followed the same group of men, and later their wives and children, asking what makes a life go well. Their clearest answer is not wealth, fame or achievement but the quality of our relationships. This essay looks at what the study actually found, where its evidence is strong and where it is limited, and what an Australian reader might do with it this month.

A study that outlived its founders

In 1938, a group of researchers at Harvard University began following 268 undergraduate men, sophomores drawn mostly from the classes of 1942 to 1944. The project, funded initially by the philanthropist W. T. Grant and known as the Grant Study, set out to understand what allowed healthy young men to thrive. The researchers measured almost everything they could think of: physical health, psychological testing, family background, interviews about values and ambitions.

At almost the same time, and quite separately, the criminologists Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck were studying juvenile delinquency in Boston. As part of that work they recruited a comparison group of 456 boys from inner-city Boston neighbourhoods, many from poor and immigrant families, who had not been in trouble with the law. Those boys became the second cohort.

The two groups were combined in the early 1970s, when the psychiatrist George Vaillant, who had joined the study in 1966, brought them together under one research program. Vaillant led the study from 1972 to 2004. The psychiatrist Robert Waldinger of Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School has directed it since, working with the psychologist Marc Schulz of Bryn Mawr College as associate director. Together, the combined Grant and Glueck cohorts total 724 men.

What makes the project remarkable is its persistence. Every few years, participants answered detailed questionnaires. Researchers reviewed medical records, conducted interviews in participants' homes, and in later decades took blood samples and brain scans and filmed couples talking about their concerns. More than a decade before 2017, the study began including the men's wives. A Second Generation Study now follows the children of the original men, numbering about 1,300 according to a 2017 Harvard Gazette report.

By 2017, according to the same report, only 19 of the original Harvard men were still alive, all in their mid-nineties. The men who enrolled as young students lived through the Second World War, careers, marriages, divorces, illness and old age, and their records span almost the whole arc of a modern life.

The central finding: relationships matter for health

The study's best-known conclusion is simple to state. In Waldinger's words in the 2017 Harvard Gazette interview, the people who were most satisfied in their relationships at age 50 were the healthiest at age 80. The researchers report that satisfaction with relationships in midlife was a better predictor of physical health in later life than cholesterol levels measured at the same age.

In their 2023 book, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness* (Simon and Schuster), Waldinger and Schulz summarise eight decades of data in a single sentence: good relationships keep us healthier and happier. The book is careful to say that this does not mean only romantic partnerships. Friendships, family ties, workplace connections and even brief friendly exchanges with acquaintances all form part of what they call our social fitness.

Vaillant, writing earlier and from his own long tenure, reached a similar conclusion. In *Triumphs of Experience: The Men of the Harvard Grant Study* (Harvard University Press, 2012), he identified the warmth of relationships across life as one of the strongest correlates of later health and contentment. He also identified alcohol misuse as one of the most damaging forces in the men's lives, linked with divorce, depression and early illness. Asked in 2008 what he had learned from the men, he answered, in substance, that the only thing that really matters in life is our relationships with other people.

Smaller studies inside the big one

The longitudinal study has produced many focused papers. One example: Waldinger and Schulz (2010), published in *Psychology and Aging*, asked 47 older married couples, the husbands all in their eighties, to report daily on their mood, health and social contact over eight days. On days when they spent more time with other people, participants tended to be happier. Time spent with a partner was linked with happiness mainly when marital satisfaction was high. And among people in more satisfying marriages, days of poorer physical health were less likely to bring a drop in mood. In other words, good relationships seemed to cushion the ordinary pains of ageing.

This matches findings from outside Harvard. A widely cited meta-analysis by Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy Smith and Bradley Layton (2010), published in *PLoS Medicine*, pooled 148 studies covering 308,849 people. People with stronger social relationships had about 50 per cent greater odds of survival over the follow-up periods studied. The authors concluded that the influence of social relationships on mortality risk was comparable with well-established risk factors such as smoking and alcohol consumption. The association was strongest when researchers used rich measures of social integration rather than simple indicators such as whether someone lived alone.

Midlife relationship satisfaction predicted later health better than cholesterol did. Connection is not a soft extra; the evidence treats it as a health factor.

Why might relationships affect the body?

A natural question is how something as intangible as a friendship could show up in blood pressure or longevity. The study cannot answer this definitively, but Waldinger and Schulz offer an explanation grounded in stress research. Life constantly presents challenges, large and small, and our bodies respond to them with a stress response that is useful in short bursts. The difficulty comes when that response stays switched on for long periods.

Close relationships, in this account, act as a kind of regulator. Talking a problem over with someone we trust, or simply knowing that someone has our back, can help the body return to a calmer baseline. People who are isolated, or whose closest relationships are a source of conflict, may spend more time in a state of chronic stress, with effects that accumulate over years.

This is a plausible mechanism, consistent with wider research, rather than a proven chain of cause and effect. Two cautions follow from it. First, the quality of relationships matters, not just their number: a high-conflict relationship may add stress rather than relieve it. Second, solitude is not the same as loneliness. Many people need and enjoy time alone, and the research is not an argument against it. The concern is the gap between the connection people want and the connection they have.

What the study did not find

It is just as useful to notice what did not predict a good old age in these data. The study's directors and the 2023 book emphasise that wealth, fame and professional status were not the strong predictors many of the young men expected them to be. Some of the Harvard men achieved great public success; the study famously included a future United States president, John F. Kennedy, among its early participants, although his records are sealed. Success of that kind did not protect anyone from loneliness, poor health or unhappiness.

The book also challenges the idea that our early lives fix our fate. Many participants who began in difficult circumstances, including in the Boston inner-city cohort, went on to have warm, stable later lives. Others with privileged beginnings struggled. Waldinger and Schulz argue that it is never too late to improve relationships, and that the study contains many examples of people whose social lives became richer in their sixties, seventies and eighties.

The limits, stated plainly

A good reader of research holds its findings with an open hand. The Harvard study has several important limitations, and its own directors acknowledge most of them.

The original sample was men only, and mostly white. Harvard College admitted only men at the time, and the Grant cohort was selected partly for good health and academic

standing. The Glueck cohort was also all male and white. Women entered the study later, as wives, and then as daughters in the second generation. Findings about men born around 1920 in the United States may not transfer neatly to women, to other cultures or to people living in Australia in 2026.

It is observational. The study watched people live; it could not randomly assign them to warm or cold relationships. That means it can show that relationship satisfaction predicts later health, but cannot prove that the relationships caused the health. Healthier people may find it easier to sustain relationships, and some third factor, such as personality, early family experience or alcohol use, may influence both. The researchers try to adjust for these factors statistically, but adjustment is never perfect.

The sample is small and getting smaller. With 724 men in the original cohorts and very few still living, some later-life analyses rest on small numbers.

Measures changed over time. Questionnaires designed in the 1940s reflected the ideas of their era. Researchers have had to reinterpret older data with newer methods, which brings both insight and room for error.

Unique, therefore hard to replicate. Waldinger told the Harvard Gazette in 2017 that the study will probably never be replicated. That is part of its value, but it also means its specific findings cannot easily be checked by an identical study.

None of this makes the central message wrong. The relationship finding is supported by a large body of independent research, including the Holt-Lunstad meta-analysis above. But it does mean that specific figures from the Harvard study should be read as evidence about one remarkable group of people, consistent with wider research, rather than as universal laws.

The Australian picture: how connected are we?

The Harvard findings land in an Australian context where loneliness is common enough to be treated as a public health issue.

What the AIHW reports

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) draws on the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey to track loneliness and social isolation over time. At November 2026, its topic page on social isolation and loneliness reports that in 2024:

- an estimated 15 per cent of Australians were experiencing loneliness (15 per cent of males and 16 per cent of females)
- people aged 35 to 44 had the highest rate of loneliness, at 17 per cent
- an estimated 15 per cent of Australians aged 15 and over were experiencing social isolation, with men more likely to be socially isolated (18 per cent) than women (12 per cent)
- social isolation among young people aged 15 to 24 rose from 12 per cent in 2019 to a peak of 22 per cent in 2021, before falling to 17 per cent in 2024

The AIHW notes that loneliness (a feeling of being without the connection one wants) and social isolation (having few social contacts) are different things. A person can be surrounded by people and still feel lonely, or live quietly with few contacts and feel content.

What Ending Loneliness Together found

A different measure gives a larger number. Ending Loneliness Together, a national network of organisations working on loneliness, released its *State of the Nation Report: Social Connection in Australia 2023* during Australia's first Loneliness Awareness Week in August 2023. Based on a nationally representative survey of 4,026 Australians aged 18 to 92, using a short version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale, it found that almost one in three people (32 per cent) reported moderate loneliness, and more than one in six (17.5 per cent) reported severe loneliness. Younger adults were more likely than older adults to be lonely.

The two sources use different questions and cut-off points, so their numbers are not directly comparable. What they agree on is that loneliness affects a substantial share of Australians across every age group, and that it is not only an issue for older people living alone.

Source	Measure	Headline figure
AIHW, HILDA data, 2024	Loneliness	15 per cent
AIHW, HILDA data, 2024	Social isolation, aged 15+	15 per cent
Ending Loneliness Together, 2023	Moderate loneliness	32 per cent
Ending Loneliness Together, 2023	Severe loneliness	17.5 per cent

Practical lessons from eighty years of data

The value of a long study lies in what it suggests about ordinary days. The following lessons draw on *The Good Life* and the wider research, translated into steps a busy reader can take.

1. Treat relationships as something you maintain, like fitness

Waldinger and Schulz use the idea of social fitness: relationships, like muscles, weaken without use. Nobody expects to stay physically fit from one burst of effort in 2019. Relationships are the same. The practical move is to schedule connection deliberately rather than leaving it to chance.

2. Notice who is in your life

The book suggests mapping your relationships: who gives you energy, who drains it, who you can call at 3am, who you would like to see more often. This is not about ranking people. It is about noticing where your attention actually goes and whether that matches what you value.

3. Small interactions count

The research is not only about close friends. Brief, friendly exchanges with a barista, a neighbour or a colleague in the lift contribute to a sense of belonging. For people who find deep connection difficult, these small moments are a realistic place to start.

4. Curiosity is a relationship skill

Waldinger and Schulz encourage what they describe as radical curiosity about the people close to us: asking questions we think we already know the answers to. Long relationships can settle into assumptions. Asking a partner, sibling or old friend something genuinely new can revive a connection.

5. Watch the factors that wear relationships down

Vaillant's findings on alcohol are a reminder that some habits quietly erode the relationships that protect us. Work is another. A long career can crowd out friendship until one day, often at retirement, people find their social world has shrunk to their workplace and then disappeared.

6. It is not too late

Perhaps the most hopeful theme of the study is that people's social lives can improve at any age. Retirement, a move, a loss or an empty nest can be a turning point towards new connection as well as away from it.

A relationship audit for this month

The following checklist turns the research into action. Work through it over four weeks.

Week	Focus	One action
1	Map	List ten people who matter to you; mark when you last had a real conversation
2	Reach out	Contact three people on the list you have drifted from
3	Deepen	Ask one close person a question you have never asked before
4	Widen	Join or rejoin one regular group: a club, class, team or volunteer roster

Some further prompts:

- Is there one relationship you have been meaning to repair? What is the smallest first step?
- When did you last see a friend without a screen in the room?
- If work disappeared tomorrow, who would still be in your weekly life?
- Is there a neighbour, colleague or family member who may be lonely and would welcome a call?

For leaders and managers

Many readers of this magazine lead teams. The research has workplace implications, framed here as our view rather than as findings of the Harvard study itself. In our view, workplaces are one of the main places adults form social ties, and decisions about hybrid work, team structure and meeting design affect whether people have the chance to connect. Leaders can make room for unstructured conversation, protect time for teams to meet in person where practical, and pay attention to staff who seem withdrawn. None of this replaces support outside work, but it helps.

When loneliness is heavy

Loneliness is a common human experience, and it is not a personal failing. When it persists, or comes with low mood, hopelessness or thoughts of self-harm, it is important to talk to someone. A general practitioner is a good starting point and can discuss options, including a mental health treatment plan. For support at any hour, Lifeline is available on 13 11 14, and Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636. In an emergency, call 000.

This essay offers general information drawn from published research. It is not medical or psychological advice.

The long view

The young men who walked into a Harvard clinic in 1938 could not have known that their answers would still be studied in 2026. Most of them have now died. What they left is an unusually long record of how lives unfold, and a finding that is easy to say and harder to live: the people we love, and who love us, shape how well we age.

The study cannot tell any of us exactly what to do. It can, however, prompt a useful question for the month ahead. Not "how am I doing?" but "who am I doing it with?"

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WHAT MATTERS

The Regrets People Name at the End of Life: What They Teach the Living

By Sukh Sandhu

An Australian palliative carer's account of what dying people wished they had done differently has been read by millions. Psychologists, working separately, have spent three decades studying how regret works and why some regrets last. This essay sets the observations beside the research and offers a practical way to use regret as a guide rather than a weight.

A blog post that travelled the world

In 2009, Bronnie Ware, an Australian who had spent several years working as a carer for people in the last weeks of their lives, wrote a blog post called "Regrets of the Dying". In it she described the things her patients most often said they wished they had done differently. The post spread widely; by 2012 it had reportedly been read by around eight million people. Ware expanded it into a book, *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing*, first published in 2011, with a widely distributed Hay House edition in 2012. The book has since been translated into more than two dozen languages.

The five regrets, as Ware wrote them, are:

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

It is worth being precise about what this list is. Ware's book is a memoir and a set of reflections drawn from her personal experience of caring for people at the end of life. It is not a research study. Ware presents the five as the regrets she heard most often, but the book does not report a survey of a defined sample, systematic recording of responses or counted frequencies. The list reflects what she heard, what she remembered and what struck her as important, filtered through her own life and values. The book also tells her own story of change, which is part of its appeal.

That does not make the observations worthless. Careful, compassionate attention to people at the end of life is a form of knowledge in its own right. But it does mean the list should be read as testimony rather than as data. When the psychologists Shai Davidai and Thomas Gilovich published research on regret in 2018, they described Ware's observations

as anecdotal, while noting that they were consistent with their own findings. That is a fair summary.

> *Ware's list is observation, not research. Its value is that it matches, in broad strokes, what careful studies of regret have found.*

What the research says about regret

Action and inaction: the Gilovich and Medvec findings

The modern psychology of regret owes much to Thomas Gilovich of Cornell University and Victoria Husted Medvec, now of Northwestern University. In a 1995 review in *Psychological Review*, "The Experience of Regret: What, When, and Why", they drew together a series of studies, including their own earlier work, on how people experience regret over time.

Their central argument was about timing. In the short term, people tend to regret actions more than inactions: the thing we said, the purchase we made, the job we took. Over the long run, the pattern reverses, and regrets about things we failed to do become more prominent: the course we never took, the person we never told how we felt, the risk we never took.

Gilovich and Medvec proposed several reasons. Regrettable actions tend to prompt us to do something: apologise, repair, reframe or learn. Over time, the pain of these regrets fades. Regrettable inactions, by contrast, remain open. Because we never found out what would have happened, the imagined alternative can grow more attractive with time. We also tend to forget the fears and obstacles that held us back, so in hindsight the failure to act looks less understandable than it did at the time.

The finding has not gone unchallenged. Daniel Kahneman argued in 1995 that long-term regrets about inaction are often wistful rather than painful, a softer kind of emotion than the hot regret of a recent mistake. In 1998, Gilovich, Medvec and Kahneman published a joint paper in the same journal, "Varieties of Regret: A Debate and Partial Resolution", which acknowledged that different kinds of regret feel different. Later replication work, including a 2022 preregistered replication by Siu Kit Yeung and Gilad Feldman, found the temporal pattern in a weaker form and not in every original study. The fair conclusion is that the action and inaction distinction is real and useful, but not an iron law.

Ideal selves and ought selves

In 2018, Davidai and Gilovich published "The Ideal Road Not Taken" in the journal *Emotion*. Across six studies, they asked people about their regrets and classified them according to whether they involved the ideal self (who we hope and wish to be: our aspirations and goals) or the ought self (who we feel we should be: duties and obligations).

People's most enduring regrets more often involved falling short of their ideal self. The researchers suggest a reason. When we fail an obligation, we usually feel pressure to fix it, and once fixed it fades. Failures to pursue our aspirations are easier to postpone, so they linger.

This maps neatly onto the first item on Ware's list: the courage to live a life true to oneself.

Daniel Pink's World Regret Survey

The writer Daniel H. Pink brought regret research to a general audience in *The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward* (Riverhead Books, February 2022). For the book, Pink ran two data projects. The first, the American Regret Project, was a survey of 4,489 American adults designed to be representative of the population. The second, the World Regret Survey, invited people anywhere to submit a regret online. By the time the book was published, it had collected regrets from more than 16,000 people in 105 countries, and it continued to grow afterwards.

Pink is clear that the World Regret Survey is not a random sample, so he cautions against drawing strong conclusions from comparisons between countries. Its value lies in the patterns that recur across thousands of personal accounts.

From this material Pink proposed four core regrets:

Core regret	What it sounds like
Foundation	If only I'd done the work: saved, studied, looked after my health
Boldness	If only I'd taken the chance: spoken up, started the business, travelled
Moral	If only I'd done the right thing: been honest, been faithful, been fair
Connection	If only I'd reached out: called my friend, made amends, stayed close

Pink reports that connection regrets were the largest of the four groups, and that inaction regrets outnumbered action regrets in his data, by roughly two to one overall, consistent with the earlier research. Three of Ware's five regrets fall comfortably into his categories: boldness (living true to oneself, expressing feelings) and connection (staying in touch with friends).

Pink's central argument is that the popular slogan "no regrets" is mistaken. Regret is uncomfortable, but it is also one of the most useful emotions we have, because it points directly at what we value.

Putting the sources side by side

Bringing these strands together, a reasonably consistent picture emerges, with appropriate caution about the different kinds of evidence.

Source	Type of evidence	Key point
Ware, 2011 and 2012	Personal observation	Dying people spoke of courage, overwork, feelings, friends, happiness
Gilovich and Medvec, 1995	Review of studies	Over time, inactions loom larger than actions
Davidai and Gilovich, 2018	Six studies	Lasting regrets more often concern the ideal self
Pink, 2022	Large surveys, non-random global sample	Four recurring regret types; boldness and connection

Source	Type of evidence	Key point
		prominent

The convergence is striking. Different methods, from different directions, point to the same lesson: the regrets that last tend to be about the life not lived and the people not reached.

Reading the overlap carefully

The overlap between Ware's list and the research is real, but it should not be overstated. The studies above mostly asked healthy adults, often students or online volunteers, to recall regrets. Ware listened to people in the final weeks of life, a very different situation. Her patients were also a particular group: the people she personally cared for, in one country, at one period, who chose to talk with her. And the research categories are broad enough that many personal stories can be fitted into them after the fact.

What the convergence does suggest is that some themes recur whether one asks a dying person, a university student or thousands of strangers online. Courage, connection and the sense of a life lived on one's own terms keep surfacing. That is a reasonable basis for reflection, even if it is not proof of a universal pattern.

Why regret is worth listening to

It would be easy to read all this as a set of warnings. A more useful reading treats regret as information.

Research on regret suggests that it serves several functions. It helps us learn from mistakes and improve future decisions. It sharpens our sense of what matters, because we only regret losing things we value. And, handled well, it can motivate change. The difficulty is that regret handled badly turns into rumination: going over the same ground repeatedly without moving.

Pink's book draws on psychological research to suggest a three-part approach to working with regret, which can be summarised as follows.

Disclose

Talk about the regret, or write about it. Putting an experience into words tends to organise it, making it less vague and overwhelming. Writing privately for a few minutes about a regret, what happened and what it means can turn a shapeless feeling into something you can examine.

Be kind to yourself

Self-compassion means treating your own failing as you would treat a friend's: acknowledging it honestly, recognising that mistakes are part of being human, and declining either to wallow or to dismiss. This is not letting yourself off the hook. Research on self-compassion suggests that people who respond kindly to their own mistakes are often more willing to take responsibility and try again, not less.

Step back

Self-distancing means looking at the regret from a little further away: in time ("how will I see this in ten years?"), in space ("what would I tell a friend in this situation?") or in language (thinking about yourself in the third person). Distance helps shift attention from the pain to the lesson.

For action regrets, Pink's advice is to undo where possible: apologise, repair, make amends. For inaction regrets, the advice is to act where the chance remains, and to apply the lesson to future choices where it does not.

Four traps when handling regret

In our view, drawing on the research above, there are four common ways that regret goes wrong. Recognising them is half the work.

Rumination without action

Going over a regret again and again, especially late at night, can feel like processing it. Often it is the opposite: the same thoughts, in the same order, with the same painful conclusion. A useful test is whether thinking about the regret produces anything new, such as a decision, a lesson or a step. If not, it may be time to write it down, talk to someone, or deliberately turn attention elsewhere.

The "no regrets" stance

Refusing to admit regret can feel strong, but it closes off learning. Pink's argument, that the "no regrets" slogan is mistaken, rests on this point: if we never let ourselves feel regret, we lose one of the clearest signals we have about what matters to us.

Harsh self-judgement

Some people respond to regret by punishing themselves, as if suffering were a form of repair. It rarely is. Self-criticism tends to make people defensive and less willing to look honestly at what happened. Self-compassion, as described below, is not softness; it is the condition that makes honest reflection bearable.

Hindsight bias

Looking back, it is easy to forget what we knew at the time, what we feared and what constraints we were under. Gilovich and Medvec noted this pattern as one reason inaction regrets grow over time: the obstacles fade from memory and only the missed opportunity remains. A fairer review asks, "Given what I knew and felt then, was my choice understandable?" Often the answer is yes, and that recognition can ease the sting while keeping the lesson.

The unsent letter

One exercise many people find helpful combines disclosure and distance. Write a letter to someone connected to a regret: a friend you lost touch with, a parent who has died, a younger version of yourself. Say what you wish you had said. Do not send it, at least not straight away. The aim is to put the feeling into words, which often clarifies whether there

is still something to do in the real world. Sometimes, after writing, people realise they would like to reach out after all. Sometimes they find the letter itself was enough.

Using regret in advance

The most practical value of this body of work is that it can be used before the fact. If we know that, years from now, we are more likely to regret what we did not do, especially in the domains of courage and connection, we can let that knowledge shape decisions now.

This is not an argument for reckless action. Foundation regrets, about failing to save, study or look after our health, are also common. The point is balance: noticing when fear, inertia or other people's expectations are steering us away from what we actually value.

A regret pre-mortem

Try this exercise. Imagine yourself at 85, looking back at the next five years. Then answer:

1. What will I most wish I had tried?
2. Who will I most wish I had kept close?
3. What will I wish I had said, and to whom?
4. What will I wish I had started saving, learning or protecting?
5. What will I be glad I stopped doing?

Write the answers down. Then pick one, and identify the smallest step you could take this week.

Applying the lessons at work

Many of the regrets on Ware's list involve work, directly or indirectly: working too hard, losing touch with friends, deferring happiness. In our view, the lesson is not that work is bad. Meaningful work is one of the great sources of satisfaction in a life. The lesson is that work tends to expand to fill available space, and that the costs to relationships and health accumulate quietly.

For leaders, the research suggests some practical moves:

- Make it normal for people, including yourself, to take their leave.
- Avoid rewarding visible overwork as a proxy for commitment.
- Encourage people to raise concerns early; a moral regret is often a concern that went unspoken.
- When someone makes a mistake, separate repair from blame, so that action regrets can be addressed and closed.

A checklist for this month

Step	Action	Time needed
1	Write privately for ten minutes about one regret	10 minutes
2	Classify it: foundation, boldness, moral or connection	2 minutes
3	If it is an action regret,	15 minutes

Step	Action	Time needed
	identify one possible repair	
4	If it is an inaction regret, identify whether the chance remains	15 minutes
5	Do the regret pre-mortem above	20 minutes
6	Take one small step on a boldness or connection item	Varies

Some prompts for reflection:

- Is there someone you have meant to thank, or apologise to, for years?
- Is there a decision you are postponing because of what others might think?
- When did you last let yourself enjoy something without justifying it?

When regret becomes heavy

Regret is a normal and often useful emotion. Sometimes, though, it becomes persistent and painful, especially after a loss, a relationship breakdown or a serious mistake. If regret is accompanied by ongoing low mood, guilt that will not shift or thoughts that life is not worth living, please talk to someone. A general practitioner can help and can refer you to a psychologist or counsellor. Lifeline offers crisis support at any hour on 13 11 14, and Beyond Blue is available on 1300 22 4636. In an emergency, call 000.

This essay provides general information only and is not medical or psychological advice.

The gift in a list

There is something moving about the fact that Ware's simple list resonated with millions of readers. Perhaps it is because most of us already know what it says. We know we should call our friends, say what we feel and stop deferring the life we want until some imagined later. The research adds something important: it explains why we keep putting these things off, and why they matter more with time.

Regret, in the end, is a form of caring. We only regret what we value. The task is not to live without regret, which is impossible, but to let the regrets we can foresee guide the choices we still have.

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PART 2

Getting through and getting better

Resilience after adversity, habits that last, and learning from failure.

GETTING THROUGH

Resilience, What Actually Helps: The Evidence on Getting Through Hard Times

By Sukh Sandhu

For much of the twentieth century, experts assumed that serious loss or trauma would leave most people deeply damaged. Research since the early 2000s has told a more hopeful and more complicated story: many people cope better than expected, and the things that help are often ordinary. This essay sets out what the evidence shows, which popular ideas it does not support, and how to look after yourself and others when life is hard.

A quiet revolution in how we think about adversity

When George Bonanno, a clinical psychologist at Teachers College, Columbia University, began studying bereavement in the 1990s, the prevailing view held that grief must be worked through. People who did not show visible distress after a death were often thought to be in denial, or at risk of a delayed reaction that would surface later.

Bonanno's research challenged that view. In a 2004 paper in *American Psychologist*, "Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive After Extremely Aversive Events?", he argued that resilience in the face of loss and potential trauma is more common than had been believed. He also argued that resilience is distinct from recovery, and that there are many, sometimes unexpected, pathways to it.

Part of the reason earlier theories got this wrong, Bonanno suggested, was who they studied. Much of what clinicians knew about grief and trauma came from people who sought treatment or showed great distress. Those people needed and deserved help, but they were not the whole picture. The many people who coped reasonably well were largely invisible to researchers.

The four trajectories

The most influential idea from this research is that people's responses to adversity follow different patterns over time. Rather than a single expected course of collapse followed by gradual healing, Bonanno and colleagues describe several distinct trajectories.

Trajectory	What it looks like
Resilience	Some distress at first, but relatively stable, healthy functioning throughout
Recovery	Significant difficulty for months, followed by gradual return to previous functioning

Trajectory	What it looks like
Chronic distress	Severe difficulty that persists for a long period
Delayed reaction	Coping at first, with difficulties emerging or worsening later

The resilient trajectory does not mean feeling nothing. People who follow it often report sadness, intrusive memories, poor sleep or disorientation in the early days or weeks. What distinguishes them is that these reactions are relatively short-lived and do not stop them functioning in their relationships and daily lives.

A 2018 review in *Clinical Psychology Review* by Isaac Galatzer-Levy, Sandy Huang and George Bonanno examined 54 studies that used statistical methods to identify these patterns after potentially traumatic events. Across these studies, resilience was the most common trajectory, followed by recovery, then chronic distress and delayed reactions. Averaged across populations, about two thirds of people followed the resilient pattern, but estimates differed between populations, and studies without data from before the event were more prone to bias, so exact proportions vary from study to study.

The key message is not that everyone is fine. A meaningful minority of people experience lasting difficulties, and they need support. The message is that distress after adversity is normal, that most people recover or remain broadly steady, and that a period of struggle is not a sign that something is permanently broken.

> *Resilience is common, but it is not universal and it is not the absence of pain. Most people hurt, and most people come through.*

What resilience is not: five myths

Myth 1: Resilient people do not feel distress

Resilience research consistently finds that people on resilient trajectories still experience grief, fear and sadness. Resilience describes the overall pattern of functioning over time, not an emotional shield.

Myth 2: Everyone needs to process trauma by talking about it straight away

Bonanno's work on resilient trajectories casts doubt on the idea that everyone exposed to a frightening event needs immediate structured discussion of it. Some people find talking helpful; others cope by focusing on practical tasks or by taking a break from thinking about what happened. In our view, the safer principle is to offer support and listen, without pressing people to talk before they are ready. Anyone with persistent distress should be supported to get professional help.

Myth 3: Resilience is a fixed personality trait

Some people may be more naturally resilient than others, but research suggests that resilience comes from many sources, including relationships, circumstances, resources and coping strategies. It is better thought of as a process than a trait. The same person may cope well with one loss and struggle with another.

Myth 4: Growth is guaranteed after trauma

The idea that people can grow through suffering has deep roots and real support. But, as discussed below, the research on post-traumatic growth is more complicated than popular accounts suggest, and the expectation of growth can become a burden.

Myth 5: Resilience means coping alone

Perhaps the most damaging myth is that strong people do not need help. The evidence points the other way. Social support is one of the most consistently identified factors associated with coping well after adversity.

Post-traumatic growth: real, but handle with care

In 1996, the psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun published the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, a questionnaire measuring positive changes people report after struggling with major life crises. They described growth in areas such as relationships with others, a sense of new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change and appreciation of life.

Many people do report these changes, and their reports deserve respect. But researchers have raised important questions about how the changes are measured. Most studies ask people after a crisis how much they think they have changed, which relies on memory and interpretation.

A 2009 study in *Psychological Science* by Patricia Frazier and colleagues tested this directly. Because they had measured students before and after traumatic events occurred in their lives, they could compare perceived growth with actual change over time. They found that self-reported growth was generally unrelated to measured change in the relevant areas. Perceived growth was even associated with increased distress, while actual growth was associated with decreased distress. Perceived growth was also linked with positive reinterpretation coping, and the authors suggested that perceived and actual growth reflect different processes, so reporting growth may partly be a way of coping rather than evidence that change has occurred.

This does not mean growth never happens. Later research suggests genuine positive change is possible for some people. But it does suggest some cautions:

- Growth is not a requirement or a measure of how well someone has coped.
- Telling someone in pain that "everything happens for a reason" or that they will "come out stronger" can feel dismissive.
- If growth comes, it usually comes alongside, not instead of, real loss and difficulty.

Why individual stories mislead us

There is a reason the myths above persist. The stories we hear about adversity tend to be the dramatic ones: the person who fell apart, or the person who emerged transformed. The much larger group who struggled for a while, leaned on others and gradually returned to ordinary life rarely makes the news, because their story does not feel like a story.

Resilience research corrects for this by following many people over time, including those who never seek help. That is what makes trajectory studies valuable. They show the full range of responses rather than the most visible ones. They also remind us that we cannot predict how any one person will respond from the outside, and that it is wise not to assume.

What actually helps

The evidence on what supports people through adversity points to a small number of ordinary but powerful factors. None of them is a cure, and they are not a substitute for professional care when that is needed. But they are a reasonable foundation.

Connection

Social support is among the most consistently identified protective factors after adversity. This includes practical help (meals, lifts, help with forms), emotional support (someone who listens without judgement) and simple company. The research on relationships and health more broadly, discussed in our essay on the Harvard Study of Adult Development, reinforces the point.

For those supporting others, presence often matters more than finding the right words. A short message saying "thinking of you, no need to reply" can mean a great deal.

Sleep

Sleep and mood are closely linked. Disrupted sleep is common after stressful events, and poor sleep can make it harder to regulate emotions and think clearly. Sleep guidelines from sleep science organisations generally recommend that most adults aim for seven to nine hours a night, though individual needs vary. During hard times, perfect sleep is unrealistic, but some habits can help: keeping regular wake times, getting morning daylight, limiting alcohol and caffeine, and winding down without screens. Persistent sleep problems are worth raising with a GP.

Routine and the basics

When life is upended, small routines can provide a sense of stability: regular meals, a daily walk, a fixed time to call someone. Physical activity has well-documented benefits for mood. None of these needs to be ambitious. On a very hard day, a short walk is enough.

Meaning and purpose

Many people find that adversity prompts questions about what matters. Meaning can come from relationships, faith, work, creativity, caring for others or contributing to a cause. Research on coping suggests that being able to make some sense of what has happened, or finding purpose in the present, is associated with better adjustment for many people. This cannot be forced, and meaning often emerges slowly.

Flexible coping

One of the most practically important ideas in Bonanno's later work is flexibility. In his 2021 book, *The End of Trauma: How the New Science of Resilience Is Changing How We Think About PTSD* (Basic Books), he argues that resilience does not come from one

essential coping strategy. Instead, it comes from the pragmatic, flexible use of different strategies depending on the situation.

In practice, flexibility means having more than one way to cope and noticing whether a strategy is working. Sometimes it helps to express feelings; sometimes it helps to set them aside for a while and focus on a task. Sometimes reaching out is right; sometimes solitude is needed. A person who can only cope in one way may struggle when that way does not fit the situation.

A simple way to apply this:

1. Notice what the situation is asking of you right now.
2. Choose a coping approach that fits (talking, distraction, problem solving, rest, physical activity).
3. Check after a while: is this helping?
4. If not, try something else.

Grief does not follow a script

Bereavement is where much of this research began, and it deserves its own note. Many people have heard of the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The idea comes from the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, which was based on her work with people who were themselves dying, not with the bereaved. Over time, the stages were widely applied to grief in general, and often treated as a sequence that everyone must pass through.

Bonanno's research on bereaved people does not support the idea of a fixed sequence. People grieve in different ways and at different paces. Some feel waves of intense sadness that come and go, interspersed with ordinary moments and even laughter. Bonanno has described this oscillation as a natural feature of grief, one that gives people respite and allows them to keep functioning. Others grieve more steadily over a longer time. Neither pattern is wrong.

For those who are grieving, and for those supporting them, this offers some freedom. There is no correct way to feel, no stage you must reach by a certain date, and no need to justify a good day. Equally, there is no shame in grief that remains heavy for a long time; that is a reason to seek support, not a failure.

The first weeks after a hard event

Drawing together the research above, here are some practical suggestions for the first few weeks after a loss, a frightening event or a major setback. They are general and will not suit everyone.

1. **Expect a reaction.** Poor sleep, difficulty concentrating, irritability, tearfulness and intrusive thoughts are common early responses to adversity, and for most people they ease over time.
2. **Lower the bar.** This is a time to do the essentials and let other things wait. Tell your manager or a trusted colleague if work needs to flex.
3. **Accept practical help.** If people offer, let them. Give them something specific to do.

4. **Keep one or two anchors.** A daily walk, a regular phone call, a meal at the same time.
5. **Go easy on alcohol.** It can feel like relief in the moment but tends to disrupt sleep and mood.
6. **Use different coping tools.** Talk when talking helps; take a break when you need one.
7. **Watch the trend, not the day.** Bad days are normal. What matters is whether things are gradually easing.

Signs that more help may be needed

Professional support is worth seeking if, after several weeks, distress is not easing or is getting worse; if you cannot manage daily tasks, work or relationships; if you are relying on alcohol or other drugs to cope; if you feel numb, hopeless or persistently on edge; or if you have thoughts of harming yourself. In any of these situations, speak to a GP, or call Lifeline on 13 11 14. If you are in immediate danger, call 000.

A personal resilience plan

The following table can be used to plan ahead, before a crisis, or to take stock during one. It is a prompt for reflection, not a clinical tool.

Area	Questions to ask	My plan
People	Who can I call? Who can help practically?	Write two names
Body	What helps me sleep, eat and move?	One habit to protect
Routine	What small routine anchors my day?	One fixed point
Meaning	What matters to me right now?	One way to act on it
Coping options	What are three different ways I can cope?	List three
Warning signs	What tells me I need more help?	Note them
Professional help	Who would I contact?	GP name and number

Supporting someone else

Many readers will be on the other side of adversity: supporting a colleague, family member or friend. Some guidance, offered as our view informed by the research:

- **Show up.** Practical help is often more welcome than advice.
- **Listen more than you speak.** Resist the urge to fix or to compare with your own experience.
- **Do not prescribe a timeline.** People's trajectories differ.
- **Avoid pressure to feel a particular way,** including pressure to be positive or to grow.
- **Keep in touch over time.** Support often falls away after the first few weeks, just when some people need it most.

- **Know when to encourage professional help,** especially if distress is persistent, worsening or includes thoughts of self-harm.

For managers

Workplaces often see people at their most stretched. In our view, managers can support resilience by being flexible about leave and workload after a loss or crisis, checking in privately and regularly, making sure staff know about the organisation's Employee Assistance Program if one exists, and avoiding assumptions about how someone should be coping. A manager does not need to be a counsellor; they need to be humane and to know where to point people for help.

Steps for this month

- Fill in the personal resilience plan above, even if life is currently going well.
- Identify one person you could support this month, and contact them.
- Protect one sleep habit for four weeks: a fixed wake time is a good start.
- Practise flexibility: next time something goes wrong, deliberately try a different coping strategy from your usual one.
- Save Lifeline and Beyond Blue numbers in your phone, for yourself or someone else.

Getting help

Resilience research is encouraging, but no one should feel they must manage alone. If you are struggling, a general practitioner is a good first step and can discuss support options, including a referral to a psychologist. Help is also available at any hour:

- **Lifeline:** 13 11 14 (24 hour crisis support and suicide prevention)
- **Beyond Blue:** 1300 22 4636 (support for anxiety, depression and wellbeing)
- **Emergency:** 000

This essay offers general information from published research. It is not medical, psychological or clinical advice, and it is not a substitute for professional care.

The ordinary miracle

The psychologist Ann Masten coined a phrase that captures what decades of resilience research suggest: resilience is "ordinary magic". It comes not from rare heroic qualities but from everyday human resources: relationships, routines, a sense of purpose, and the capacity to adapt.

That is a hopeful message, and an achievable one. Most of us cannot control what happens to us. We can, however, invest now in the things that help when hard times come: the people we would call, the habits that steady us and the flexibility to try something different when our usual approach is not working.

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GETTING THROUGH

Habits That Stick: What the Research Says About Making Change Last

By Sukh Sandhu

Most of us have tried to build a better habit and watched it fade within weeks. The research on habit formation suggests the problem is rarely a lack of willpower; it is that we try to change behaviour without changing the conditions that drive it. This essay explains what studies actually show about how habits form, why the "21 days" myth is wrong, and how to design a month that gives a new habit a fair chance.

What a habit is, and is not

In everyday speech, a habit is anything we do often. Psychologists use the word more precisely. A habit is a behaviour that has become automatic: it is triggered by a cue in our environment, such as a time, a place or a preceding action, and it runs with little conscious thought.

Wendy Wood, a social psychologist at the University of Southern California, has spent much of her career studying this automatic side of behaviour. In her 2019 book, *Good Habits, Bad Habits: The Science of Making Positive Changes That Stick* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), she reports one of her signature findings: in studies where people recorded what they were doing throughout the day, around 43 per cent of their actions were things they did almost daily, in the same context, usually while thinking about something else.

That figure matters because it changes where we should look for change. If much of what we do is driven by context rather than deliberate choice, then motivation and good intentions will only take us so far. Wood's argument, supported by decades of research, is that we change habits most effectively by changing the contexts that cue them.

> *Habits are triggered by context, not by intention. To change a habit, change what surrounds it.*

The popcorn experiment

A study by David Neal, Wendy Wood and colleagues, published in 2011 in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* under the title "The Pull of the Past: When Do Habits Persist Despite Conflict With Motives?", illustrates the point memorably.

Researchers gave cinemagoers boxes of popcorn. Some were fresh; some were a week old and stale. People who did not usually eat popcorn at the movies ate less of the stale popcorn, as you would expect. But people with a strong habit of eating popcorn at the

cinema ate about as much stale popcorn as fresh. Their hands kept moving to the box regardless of taste.

Then the researchers changed the setting. In a meeting room rather than a cinema, even habitual popcorn eaters ate much less of the stale popcorn. Without the cue of the cinema, the habit weakened, and their actual preferences took over.

The lesson is twofold. Habits can persist even when they no longer serve us, and they are closely tied to the settings in which they formed. That is both the challenge and the opportunity.

How long does it take to form a habit?

The 21 day myth

A widely repeated claim says a new habit takes 21 days to form. This figure is often traced to a 1960 self-help book by the plastic surgeon Maxwell Maltz, who wrote that it took patients a minimum of about 21 days to adjust to changes such as a new appearance. It was an observation, not a study of habit formation, and it described a minimum rather than a typical time. Over decades of retelling, it became a rule.

What Lally and colleagues found

The best-known scientific study of habit formation time is by Phillippa Lally, Cornelia van Jaarsveld, Henry Potts and Jane Wardle at University College London, published online in the *European Journal of Social Psychology* in July 2009 and in print in 2010 as "How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world".

The researchers recruited 96 volunteers. Each chose a new eating, drinking or physical activity behaviour to carry out daily in a consistent context, such as eating a piece of fruit with lunch or going for a run before dinner. Every day for 12 weeks, participants reported whether they had done the behaviour and how automatic it felt.

The findings, with their limits:

- Of the 96 volunteers, 82 provided enough data for analysis.
- For many participants, automaticity rose along a curve: quickly at first, then levelling off towards a plateau.
- For the 39 participants whose data fitted this curve well, the median time to reach 95 per cent of their plateau was 66 days.
- The range was very wide: from 18 days to an estimated 254 days.
- The study lasted 84 days, so longer estimates were projections from each person's curve, not observed directly.
- Missing a single opportunity to perform the behaviour did not materially affect habit formation.
- More complex behaviours, such as exercise, tended to take longer to become automatic than simpler ones, such as drinking a glass of water.

It is worth stressing what this study is. It is a modest-sized study of mostly young volunteers performing simple behaviours they chose themselves. The 66 day figure is a median from a subgroup, and the spread is enormous. The study does not support a rule

that every habit takes 66 days. What it does support is a more realistic expectation: many habits take around two months or more to feel automatic, the time varies greatly between people and behaviours, and occasional lapses are not fatal.

Claim	Evidence
Habits take 21 days	Not supported; traces to an observation about adjustment, not a study
Habits take 66 days	A median from one study's subgroup; real range 18 to 254 days
Missing a day ruins it	Not supported; one missed opportunity made little difference
Simple habits form faster	Consistent with Lally and colleagues' findings

Implementation intentions: the power of if and then

One of the most robust findings in behaviour change research concerns a simple planning technique called implementation intentions, developed by the psychologist Peter Gollwitzer.

In a 1999 paper in *American Psychologist*, "Implementation Intentions: Strong Effects of Simple Plans", Gollwitzer distinguished between goal intentions ("I intend to exercise more") and implementation intentions, which specify when, where and how a person will act, usually in an if and then form: "If it is 7am on a weekday, then I will walk around the block before breakfast."

The idea is that an implementation intention links a specific situation to a specific response in advance. When the situation arises, the response is triggered with less need for deliberation, a little like a habit in miniature.

The evidence is substantial. A 2006 meta-analysis by Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran, published in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, examined 94 independent tests and found that forming implementation intentions had a medium to large positive effect on goal attainment (an average effect size of d = 0.65). Later work has continued to support the technique, while showing that effects vary across behaviours and settings.

How to write a good implementation intention:

1. Choose a specific cue: a time, a place, or an existing action ("after I pour my morning coffee").
2. Choose a specific, small action ("I will write three lines in my journal").
3. Put them together in an if and then sentence.
4. Write it down, and say it to yourself.
5. Add a plan for obstacles: "If it is raining, then I will do ten minutes of stretching indoors instead."

Designing your environment

Wood's research suggests that the most effective habit change strategies work with context rather than against it. Three ideas stand out.

Friction

Small barriers make behaviours less likely; removing them makes behaviours more likely. Wood calls these forces friction. Putting the phone in another room adds friction to mindless scrolling. Laying out walking shoes by the door removes friction from an early walk. Keeping fruit on the bench rather than in the crisper makes it the easy choice.

Stable cues

Habits form most readily when a behaviour is repeated in a consistent context. Doing the same thing at the same time, in the same place, or after the same preceding action, helps the cue and response become linked. Lally and colleagues built this into their study by asking participants to choose a consistent context.

Reward

Behaviours that are followed by something enjoyable are more likely to be repeated. Wood notes that rewards help most when they come immediately and are linked to the behaviour itself: listening to a favourite podcast only while walking, for instance.

Lever	Ask yourself	Example
Friction	What makes the good habit harder than it needs to be?	Pack the gym bag the night before
Cue	What existing routine can I attach this to?	Floss straight after brushing
Reward	What makes this enjoyable right now?	Coffee with a friend after the walk
Removal	What cues trigger the habit I want to stop?	Delete the app from the home screen

Breaking unwanted habits

The same principles apply in reverse. Because unwanted habits are triggered by cues, the most reliable approach is often to disrupt or avoid the cues, rather than relying on resisting the urge each time.

Wood's research highlights an interesting window: major life changes, such as moving house, starting a new job or a change in family circumstances, disrupt existing cues, which can make it easier to drop old habits and build new ones. If you are going through a transition, it may be a good time to set up the routines you want.

Some practical strategies:

- **Change the setting.** Rearrange the space where the unwanted habit happens.
- **Add friction.** Make the unwanted behaviour slightly harder.
- **Substitute.** Plan a different response to the same cue ("If I feel the urge to check my phone in a meeting, then I will write a note instead").
- **Track.** Simple daily records make automatic behaviour visible.

A 30 day habit plan

Given the research, a month will not make most habits fully automatic. But it is long enough to set up a habit well, test what works, and build momentum. The plan below assumes one small habit at a time.

Days	Focus	What to do
1 to 3	Choose	Pick one small, specific behaviour; write your if and then plan
4 to 7	Design	Remove friction, set the cue, choose an immediate reward
8 to 14	Repeat	Do it daily in the same context; tick a simple tracker
15	Review	What is working? What gets in the way? Adjust the plan
16 to 21	Strengthen	Keep the context stable; add an obstacle plan
22 to 28	Steady	Continue; if you miss a day, simply resume the next day
29 to 30	Reflect	How automatic does it feel? Decide whether to continue or extend

Choosing a good first habit

The best first habits are small, specific and tied to an existing routine. Some examples:

- After I sit down at my desk each morning, I will write my three priorities for the day.
- After dinner, I will walk for ten minutes.
- When I get into bed, I will put my phone on the charger across the room.
- After I make my first coffee, I will drink a glass of water.
- When I finish a meeting, I will write one action item before opening my email.

Tracking without perfectionism

A paper or digital tracker with a tick for each day is simple and effective. The aim is not a perfect streak. Lally and colleagues found that a single missed opportunity did not materially affect progress. In our view, the useful rule is: never miss twice if you can help it, and never let a missed day become a reason to quit.

After day 30

The research suggests that many habits need longer than a month to feel automatic, so plan to continue. At day 30, ask:

1. Does the behaviour now happen with less effort?
2. Has the cue started to prompt it automatically?
3. What would make it even easier?
4. Is it time to add a second habit, or to strengthen this one further?

Three habits, designed

To show how the principles fit together, here are three worked examples. Each combines a stable cue, an implementation intention, reduced friction and an immediate reward.

Example 1: Daily movement

- **Goal intention:** I want to be more active.
- **Implementation intention:** If it is 12.30pm on a workday, then I will walk for 15 minutes before lunch.
- **Friction removed:** Walking shoes kept under the desk; a 15 minute block saved in the calendar.
- **Reward:** A favourite podcast, kept only for the walk.
- **Obstacle plan:** If it is raining, then I will walk the stairs or corridors for 10 minutes.

Example 2: Reading instead of scrolling

- **Goal intention:** I want to read more and use my phone less at night.
- **Implementation intention:** When I get into bed, then I will read a book for 10 minutes.
- **Friction removed:** The book left on the pillow each morning; the phone charged in the kitchen.
- **Friction added:** Social media apps moved off the home screen.
- **Reward:** The pleasure of the book itself, chosen for enjoyment rather than self-improvement.

Example 3: A weekly money check

- **Goal intention:** I want to keep on top of my spending.
- **Implementation intention:** After Sunday breakfast, then I will spend 10 minutes reviewing the week's transactions.
- **Friction removed:** A saved shortcut to the banking app; a simple one-page template.
- **Reward:** A second coffee, enjoyed while doing it.

Notice that none of these relies on a surge of motivation. Each makes the desired behaviour the easy, obvious thing to do at a specific moment.

Common mistakes

In our view, drawing on the research above, most failed habit attempts share a few features:

- **Starting too big.** An hour at the gym every day is a project, not a habit. Start with something you could do on your worst day.
- **No specific cue.** "More often" and "when I have time" are not cues. Tie the behaviour to a moment.
- **Changing too much at once.** Several new habits compete for attention. Build one, then add the next.
- **Relying on motivation.** Motivation fluctuates; context is more reliable.
- **Treating a lapse as failure.** The evidence suggests a single missed day matters little. Quitting after a lapse matters a great deal.
- **Expecting speed.** If a habit still feels effortful after three weeks, that is normal, not a sign that it will never stick.

Habits at work

For managers and teams, habit research has practical implications. In our view, organisations rely heavily on habits, from how meetings start to how decisions are recorded, and most of these were never deliberately designed. Some ideas:

- Attach new practices to existing routines (for example, a two minute safety or wellbeing check at the start of a regular meeting).
- Remove friction from desired behaviours: make the right form, template or tool the easiest one to find.
- Add friction to unwanted ones: require a brief reason for after hours emails, for instance.
- Use transitions, such as a restructure or office move, as an opportunity to reset team habits.
- Be realistic about time: a new practice may take months, not weeks, to become how things are done.

A note on wellbeing

Habits can support health and wellbeing, but no habit plan is a substitute for professional advice. If you are trying to change a habit related to alcohol, other drugs, eating, gambling or a health condition, a general practitioner is a good place to start. If low mood is making change hard, or you are struggling, support is available at any hour from Lifeline on 13 11 14 and Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636.

This essay offers general information from published research. It is not medical, psychological or health advice.

Small, consistent, and kind

The research on habits is reassuring in a quiet way. It suggests that our failures to change are rarely evidence of weak character. They are more often the predictable result of trying to override automatic behaviour with willpower, in settings that keep cueing the old pattern.

The alternative is less heroic and more effective: choose one small behaviour, attach it to a stable cue, make it easy, make it pleasant, and repeat it with patience. Expect it to take longer than a self-help slogan promises. Forgive the missed days. And notice, somewhere around the second month, that the thing you once had to remember has started to happen on its own.

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GETTING THROUGH

Failing Well: What the Evidence Says About Learning From Things That Go Wrong

By Sukh Sandhu

Failure is one of the few experiences every life is guaranteed to contain, yet most of us are taught little about how to handle it. This essay sets out Amy Edmondson's practical typology of failure, examines what research really shows about growth after setbacks, checks some famous failure stories against the record, and offers a simple way to debrief your own.

Why failure deserves better thinking

There are two unhelpful ways to talk about failure. The first treats it as shameful, something to hide, explain away or blame on someone else. The second, popular in start up culture and motivational posters, celebrates it indiscriminately: fail fast, fail often, failure is just learning. Both miss something important. Some failures are genuinely avoidable and should be prevented. Others are the unavoidable price of trying something new and should be welcomed. Treating all failures alike, whether with shame or with applause, makes it harder to learn from any of them.

That distinction sits at the heart of *Right Kind of Wrong: The Science of Failing Well*, published in 2023 by Amy Edmondson, the Harvard Business School professor best known for her research on psychological safety in teams. The book won the Financial Times and Schroders Business Book of the Year Award in 2023. Its contribution is not a slogan but a set of categories, and categories are useful because they tell you what to do next.

Edmondson's three kinds of failure

Basic failures

A basic failure happens in known territory. There is established knowledge about how to do the thing, and the failure results from a mistake: inattention, a skipped step, an assumption not checked, a lack of training. Sending the wrong attachment to a client, forgetting to lock a door, or miscalculating a dose because of a misplaced decimal are basic failures. They usually have a single, identifiable cause.

The right response to basic failure is prevention. Checklists, training, standard procedures, error proofing and a culture where people feel able to speak up about small errors before they compound all reduce basic failures. Edmondson does not romanticise them. They are

not "learning opportunities" in any grand sense, although each one can teach us something about where our systems are fragile.

Complex failures

Complex failures arise from several factors interacting, none of which would have caused the failure on its own. They happen in familiar settings (hospitals, supply chains, financial institutions, households) where many things are going on at once and small deviations can line up in unlucky ways. A supplier delay coincides with a staff absence, an unusual order and a software update, and a customer is badly let down. No one decision explains the outcome.

The right response to complex failure is vigilance and resilience. That means paying attention to weak signals and near misses, building in buffers, and making it easy for people at the front line to raise concerns early. Complex failures cannot be eliminated entirely, but they can become less frequent and less severe.

Intelligent failures

Intelligent failures are the ones worth having. Edmondson defines an intelligent failure as an undesired result in new territory. They happen when people try something that has not been done before, in a way that is thoughtful, and the result does not go as hoped. A Harvard Business School summary of the book lists four conditions:

1. **New territory.** The attempt breaks new ground rather than repeating known work.
2. **A credible opportunity.** There is a genuine goal and a meaningful reward if it succeeds.
3. **Informed by available knowledge.** The attempt rests on homework and a reasonable hypothesis, not a random guess.
4. **As small as possible.** It risks only the time, money and reputation needed to learn what you need to learn.

A well designed clinical trial that finds a drug does not work is an intelligent failure. So is a small pilot of a new service line that shows customers will not pay for it, or a carefully planned career experiment, such as a short secondment into a new field, that reveals the field is not for you.

The right response to intelligent failure is to extract the lesson quickly, share it so others do not repeat it, and design the next attempt.

Type	Territory	Typical cause	Best response
Basic	Known	A single error or lapse	Prevent with checklists, training, speaking up
Complex	Familiar but busy	Several factors interacting	Watch for weak signals, build buffers
Intelligent	New	Reasonable bet that did not pay off	Learn fast, share, try again smaller or smarter

> *Not every failure is a lesson worth paying for. The skill is telling the preventable from the pioneering.*

Edmondson's typology is a framework, not a scientific law. Real failures can blur categories, and a single project can contain all three. But the framework gives people a common language, and in our view that is its greatest value. In a team that uses it, someone can say "this was a basic failure, so let's fix the process" or "this was an intelligent failure, so let's write up what we learned" without either blaming or excusing.

Does failure make us stronger? What research shows

The idea that adversity builds strength is ancient. The research is more nuanced than the proverb.

Some adversity, not none and not a lot

In 2010, Mark Seery, Alison Holman and Roxane Cohen Silver published "Whatever does not kill us: Cumulative lifetime adversity, vulnerability, and resilience" in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Using a national United States panel of 2,398 people assessed several times between 2001 and 2004, they found a U shaped pattern. People who reported some lifetime adversity had lower distress, less functional impairment, fewer post traumatic stress symptoms and higher life satisfaction than both people who reported no adversity and people who reported a great deal. Those with some prior adversity were also least affected by recent adverse events.

The authors were careful to note that their data were correlational and cannot establish cause. And the finding does not say adversity is good. High levels of adversity were clearly associated with worse outcomes. What it suggests is that moderate exposure to difficulty, survived, may be associated with greater capacity to cope with later difficulty.

Near misses in science

One of the most interesting studies of professional setbacks was published in *Nature Communications* in 2019 by Yang Wang, Benjamin Jones and Dashun Wang at Northwestern University. They looked at early career scientists who applied for a major United States National Institutes of Health grant and compared those whose applications scored just below the funding threshold (near misses) with those who scored just above it (narrow wins). Because the two groups were so similar in quality at the point of application, the comparison is close to a natural experiment.

The setback had two opposing effects. Near misses were more likely to disappear permanently from the NIH funded system, with the setback predicting more than a 10 per cent higher chance of leaving. But among those who stayed, near misses went on to outperform narrow winners in the longer run, publishing a greater share of highly cited "hit" papers. The authors tested whether this was simply because weaker people dropped out and found that screening alone did not account for the difference.

This is a striking result, but it has limits. It concerns one profession, one type of setback and one measure of success. It also contains a sobering finding often left out of retellings: a single near miss pushed a substantial number of capable people out of their field. Setbacks can make some people stronger and drive others away.

Learning across repeated attempts

A related paper by Yian Yin, Yang Wang, James Evans and Dashun Wang, published in *Nature* in 2019, studied sequences of failed attempts in three very different domains: NIH grant applications, start up ventures and attempted terrorist attacks. They found that people and groups who eventually succeeded and those who did not looked similar at the start, but differed in how they used their earlier failures. The authors' model suggests the difference lies in how much each new attempt builds on earlier ones. Those who went on to succeed tended to keep and reuse more of what they had learned, and their attempts improved measurably over time. Those who did not tended to show little improvement from one attempt to the next.

For individuals, the practical lesson is that repetition alone is not enough. What matters is whether each attempt keeps what worked and changes what did not.

The problem with "post traumatic growth"

Popular writing often cites post traumatic growth, the idea that people commonly report positive changes after trauma, such as deeper relationships or a new sense of purpose. The concept, developed by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun in the 1990s, has generated a large literature. But there is a measurement problem. Most studies ask people afterwards whether they have grown.

In 2009, Patricia Frazier and colleagues published a study in *Psychological Science* that measured people before and after a traumatic event. Among 122 participants who experienced trauma between assessments, self reported growth did not correspond well with actual measured change in the same areas. Perceived growth was linked to a coping style of positive reinterpretation. In other words, people's sense that they had grown may partly reflect how they make sense of the event, not a measurable change.

This does not mean growth after hardship never happens, or that people who report it are mistaken about their own lives. It means we should be cautious about claims that suffering reliably makes people better, and gentle with anyone who does not feel transformed by a painful experience.

Mindset

Carol Dweck's research on growth mindset, the belief that ability can develop with effort, is often linked to failure. The evidence for mindset interventions in schools is real but modest. A large national experiment in the United States, published by David Yeager and colleagues in *Nature* in 2019, found that a short online growth mindset program produced small improvements in grades for lower achieving students. A 2018 meta-analysis by Sisk and colleagues in *Psychological Science* reported weak overall effects. In our view, mindset is a helpful frame but not a cure. How you interpret a failure matters, and so does what you do next.

Famous failures: what the record shows

Stories of famous people who failed before they succeeded are everywhere, and many are embellished or invented. Here are several that hold up, and two that need correcting.

Stories that hold up

J.K. Rowling. The manuscript of the first Harry Potter book was turned down by a series of publishers, widely reported as twelve, before the small London publisher Bloomsbury accepted it. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was published in June 1997 with a modest first print run. Reported numbers vary between accounts, but the core of the story, repeated rejection before acceptance, is well documented.

James Dyson. Dyson has said he built 5,127 prototypes of his cyclonic bagless vacuum cleaner over about five years before he had a design he was satisfied with, describing 5,126 of them as failures. The company's own history repeats the figure. The first Dyson branded machine, the DC01, went on sale in the United Kingdom in 1993, years after the prototyping began, following struggles to license the technology to established manufacturers.

Walt Disney. Disney's first animation company, Laugh-O-Gram Films in Kansas City, was forced into bankruptcy in 1923. The National Archives at Kansas City holds the bankruptcy case file. Disney moved to California the same year, where he and his brother Roy founded the studio that became The Walt Disney Company.

Steve Jobs. Jobs co-founded Apple in 1976 and was pushed out of the company in 1985 after a boardroom struggle. He went on to found NeXT and to lead Pixar. Apple bought NeXT in a deal announced in December 1996, and Jobs returned, later becoming chief executive. In his 2005 Stanford commencement address he said that being fired from Apple turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to him, because it freed him to start again.

Stories that need correcting

Michael Jordan was not simply "cut". The story that Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team is one of the most repeated failure anecdotes in sport, and Jordan himself has often told it that way. The fuller record is that as a sophomore at Laney High School in North Carolina in 1978, he tried out for the varsity team and was placed on the junior varsity instead, where he played a full season. It was a real disappointment and, by his own account, a powerful motivator. But "placed on the junior team" is not the same as "cut from basketball".

Edison's "10,000 ways" quote is a later paraphrase. The line "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work" is widely attributed to Thomas Edison. Quote Investigator, which traces quotations to their earliest documented sources, found that the earliest version appears in a 1910 biography, *Edison: His Life and Inventions*. In that account, his long time associate Walter S. Mallory recalled Edison, months into work on a nickel iron storage battery, cheerfully saying he had got a lot of results, because he now knew several thousand things that would not work. The neat "I have not failed" version is a later reworking, and it should not be presented as Edison's words.

> *A failure story is most useful when it is true. Embellished versions teach the wrong lesson: that success was always inevitable.*

The pattern across the true stories is not that failure guarantees success. It is that these people kept going, changed approach, and had enough resources and support to try

again. Many people who fail repeatedly do not go on to fame, and the stories we hear are a heavily selected sample.

How to debrief your own failures

Organisations have developed good tools for learning from failure. Most of them translate well to personal life.

The after action review

The United States Army developed the after action review in the 1970s as a way to learn from exercises and operations. It is built around four questions:

1. What did we expect to happen?
2. What actually happened?
3. Why was there a difference?
4. What will we keep doing, and what will we change?

The spirit matters as much as the questions. An after action review is meant to be about learning, not blame. It works best soon after the event, while memory is fresh, and it is honest about what went well as well as what did not.

Blameless reviews

Technology companies and safety critical industries such as aviation and healthcare have adopted blameless reviews of incidents. The premise is that people almost always act sensibly given what they knew at the time, so the useful question is not "who got it wrong?" but "what in the situation made this outcome likely?" This matches Edmondson's view that blame drives failure underground, where nobody can learn from it.

Blameless does not mean consequence free. Deliberate misconduct and repeated recklessness are different matters. But for honest mistakes and complex failures, a blameless approach surfaces far more information.

The premortem

Psychologist Gary Klein described the premortem in the *Harvard Business Review* in 2007. Before a project starts, the team imagines that it has failed badly and each person writes down the reasons why. Klein drew on research by Deborah Mitchell, Jay Russo and Nancy Pennington from 1989 showing that imagining an outcome has already happened (sometimes called prospective hindsight) helps people generate more possible explanations for it. A premortem cannot prevent all failures, but it can surface risks that people are reluctant to raise.

A personal failure debrief template

Use this after a setback at work or at home. It takes about 30 minutes, and it is more useful written than thought.

Step	Question	Notes
1. Describe	What happened, in plain facts?	No adjectives, no verdicts
2. Classify	Basic, complex or intelligent?	It may be a mixture
3. Expect	What did I expect, and why?	Name the assumptions

Step	Question	Notes
4. Explain	What were the contributing factors?	List at least three
5. Credit	What went well despite the outcome?	Be specific
6. Keep and change	What will I keep, and what will I change?	One of each at least
7. Share	Who else could learn from this?	Consider telling them

Two habits make the template work. First, separate the decision from the outcome. A good decision can lead to a bad result through bad luck, and a poor decision can be rescued by good luck. Judge the decision on the information you had at the time. Second, look for the next smallest test. If the failure was intelligent, what is the cheapest way to try again with what you now know?

Talking to yourself kindly

Research on self compassion, a field shaped by Kristin Neff and others, suggests that treating yourself with the kind of understanding you would offer a friend is associated with greater willingness to acknowledge mistakes and try again, rather than less accountability. The evidence is mostly correlational, but the practical point is simple. Harsh self criticism tends to make people hide failures, including from themselves. A steadier internal voice makes honest debriefing easier.

What to do this month

1. **Classify three recent failures.** Choose one from work and two from personal life. Label each as basic, complex or intelligent, and note the appropriate response.
2. **Run one formal debrief.** Use the seven step template on the most significant setback of the past six months.
3. **Hold a premortem.** Before your next important project or decision, spend 20 minutes imagining it has failed and listing why.
4. **Design one intelligent failure.** Identify one small, low cost experiment in new territory that you have been avoiding, and set a date to try it.
5. **Correct one myth.** Next time someone repeats the Edison or Jordan story, share the fuller version. Accuracy is a form of respect for the lesson.

For leaders, add a sixth step: at your next team meeting, describe one of your own recent failures and what you learned. Edmondson's research on psychological safety suggests that leaders who model this make it easier for others to speak up early, which is when failures are cheapest to fix.

When failure hurts more than it should

Some failures are painful in ways a template cannot reach: the end of a business, a career setback that affects your family's security, a relationship breakdown, or a public mistake. If a setback leaves you with persistent low mood, hopelessness, sleeplessness or thoughts of self harm, please speak to your GP or contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 at any time, or

Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636. This essay is general information, not psychological or medical advice.

A closing thought

Failing well does not mean failing often, and it does not mean pretending failure feels good. It means telling apart the failures you should have prevented from the ones that were the honest cost of trying something new, learning from both without drowning in blame, and keeping enough of what you learned to make the next attempt better. The research does not promise that every setback leads to growth. It does suggest that what we do after a failure shapes what it becomes.

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PART 3

Time and other people

Making peace with limited time, and the evidence on gratitude, kindness and generosity.

TIME AND OTHER PEOPLE

Making Peace With Limited Time: Finitude, Time Affluence and the Attention We Give Away

By Sukh Sandhu

If you live to eighty, you will have roughly four thousand weeks. This essay looks at what Oliver Burkeman's book of that name actually argues, what the research on time affluence says about money, stress and happiness, and what the more careful studies of phones and attention can and cannot tell us.

The arithmetic that unsettles people

Eighty years is about 4,160 weeks. Written down, the number looks small, and that is the point Oliver Burkeman wanted to make when he titled his 2021 book *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*. The book, published in the United States by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in August 2021, spent time on the *New York Times* bestseller list and was named by *Time* among its must-read books of that year.

It is easy to mistake it for another productivity manual. It is closer to the opposite. Burkeman, a former psychology columnist for *The Guardian*, spent years testing time management systems and concluded that many of them rest on a false promise: that with enough technique we can eventually get on top of everything. His argument is that we cannot, that we never could, and that accepting this is not defeat but the beginning of a saner relationship with time.

For readers who run businesses, sit on boards or manage teams, the argument lands with particular force. Most of us have never been more efficient, and many of us have never felt more pressed for time. This essay takes that tension seriously and tries to separate what is a philosophical claim, what is research evidence, and what is our view.

What Burkeman actually argues

Summaries of *Four Thousand Weeks* sometimes reduce it to "do less". That misses the structure of the book. Its main ideas can be grouped into five claims.

1. The efficiency trap

Burkeman's central observation is that becoming more efficient rarely produces the feeling of having enough time. Clear your inbox faster and you tend to receive more email, because replies generate replies. Become known as someone who gets things done and more things are sent your way. Demands expand to absorb the capacity you create. He

calls this the efficiency trap, and it explains why so many productivity gains disappear into new obligations rather than free afternoons.

Related to this is what he describes as convenience culture. Tools that remove friction from daily life save minutes, but the freed minutes fill with other tasks, and sometimes the friction we removed (queuing in a shop, cooking a meal, writing a letter) turns out to have held things we valued, such as contact with other people.

2. Every choice is a closing of doors

Because time is finite, every decision to do one thing is a decision not to do countless others. Burkeman argues that we should stop treating this as a problem to be solved and start treating it as the condition that gives choices their meaning. Committing to a career, a relationship, a place or a project means letting go of alternatives. He encourages what he calls the joy of missing out: the recognition that missing out is not a failure of planning but proof that you chose something.

3. Distraction is often a flight from discomfort

One of the book's more striking claims is that much of what we call distraction is a way of escaping the discomfort of our limits. When a task is hard, uncertain or confronts us with our own inadequacy, the phone or the browser tab offers relief. On this view, better apps and stronger willpower will only partly help, because the urge to escape comes from inside. The more durable response is to notice and tolerate the discomfort.

4. The future cannot be secured in advance

Burkeman draws on the observation that tasks usually take longer than expected (sometimes called Hofstadter's law) and on a broader point: no amount of planning makes the future certain. Plans are statements of present intention, not guarantees. Much anxiety comes from demanding a certainty that time cannot give.

5. Leisure should not become another task

He also warns against instrumental leisure, the habit of treating rest, hobbies and holidays as investments in future productivity. Borrowing the term "atelic" from the philosopher Kieran Setiya, he defends activities done for their own sake, with no endpoint to reach: a walk with no step count, music played badly for pleasure. He adds what he calls cosmic insignificance therapy: in the vastness of time, our individual worries are small, and seeing that can be freeing rather than depressing, because it lowers the stakes on getting every day right.

The ten tools

The book closes with an appendix of ten suggestions for living within limits. In brief:

Tool	What it means in practice
Fixed volume productivity	Keep a short "open" list of about ten tasks; add one only when one is finished
Serialise, serialise, serialise	Work on one major project at a time to completion
Decide in advance what to fail at	Choose areas where you will accept being mediocre for now
Focus on what you have completed	Keep a "done" list each day, not just a to do

Tool	What it means in practice
	list
Consolidate your caring	Choose a few causes to support well rather than many thinly
Embrace boring, single purpose technology	Make devices less compelling, for example by using greyscale
Seek novelty in the mundane	Pay closer attention to ordinary life rather than chasing escape
Be a researcher in relationships	Meet difficult moments with curiosity rather than control
Cultivate instantaneous generosity	Act on a generous impulse now rather than later
Practise doing nothing	Sit for a few minutes without trying to achieve anything

Elsewhere in the book he offers three principles for protecting what matters: pay yourself first with time (do a little of your most important work before the day's demands arrive), limit work in progress (fewer projects in flight at once), and resist the pull of middling priorities that crowd out the things you care about most.

Some reviewers have found the appendix less persuasive than the argument, describing parts of it as platitudes. In our view, its value is less in any single tool than in the stance behind them: a deliberate choice to stop chasing completeness.

> *Burkeman's claim is philosophical, not empirical: you will never get through everything, so choose what to neglect on purpose.*

What the research says about time and wellbeing

Burkeman writes as an essayist. To see where his ideas meet evidence, it helps to turn to research on what psychologists call time affluence (the feeling of having enough time) and its opposite, time poverty.

Time poverty is common

Ashley Whillans, a behavioural scientist at Harvard Business School, summarised a decade of this research in *Time Smart: How to Reclaim Your Time and Live a Happier Life* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2020). A Harvard Business School summary of her work cites Gallup data showing that the share of working Americans who said they never had enough time rose from 70 per cent in 2011 to 80 per cent in 2018. Those are United States figures and survey wording matters, but few Australian managers would find them surprising.

Whillans' argument is that time poverty is not just an inconvenience. In the research she reviews, people who feel chronically short of time tend to report lower happiness and more stress. Her book offers practical "time smart" strategies, including treating time as a resource to be valued in decisions alongside money, and noticing small "time confetti", the fragments of time scattered by interruptions that add up to surprisingly little usable leisure.

Buying time: the 2017 study

The best known study in this field is Whillans, Dunn, Smeets, Bekkers and Norton, "Buying time promotes happiness", published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in 2017. It had two parts.

1. **Surveys of 6,271 people** in the United States, Canada, Denmark and the Netherlands. Respondents who spent money on time saving services, such as paying someone to clean, cook or run errands, reported higher life satisfaction, after accounting for income.
2. **A field experiment with 60 working adults in Vancouver.** Each participant received $40 on two consecutive weekends. On one weekend they were asked to spend it on a time saving purchase; on the other, on a material purchase. The order was counterbalanced. A research assistant phoned each participant at 5 pm on each spending day to collect ratings. After the time saving purchase, people reported more positive mood, less negative mood and less time pressure, and the reduction in time pressure helped explain the improvement in mood.

The limits matter. The survey evidence is correlational. The experiment was small, short and conducted in one city, and $40 for a weekend is a modest test. It shows that a time saving purchase can lift mood on the day; it does not show that outsourcing chores will transform a life. It also assumes discretionary income, which many households do not have. The finding is best read as a nudge to examine one's own spending: if you can afford it, a small purchase that removes a disliked task may do more for your wellbeing than another possession.

Is there such a thing as too much free time?

A useful counterweight comes from Marissa Sharif, Cassie Mogilner Holmes and Hal Hershfield, whose 2021 paper in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* asked whether more discretionary time is always better. Using data from the American Time Use Survey on about 35,000 people, and two online experiments, they found an inverted U shape. Wellbeing rose with free time up to around two hours a day, was broadly flat to around five hours, and then declined. Too little time was linked to stress; too much was linked to a weaker sense of being productive. The decline was smaller when people spent their spare time on activities that felt worthwhile, including social ones.

The authors and coverage of their work were careful to say these are general patterns, not prescriptions for individuals. But the finding fits Burkeman's argument surprisingly well. The goal is not to maximise empty time. It is to have enough time, and to use it on things that feel meaningful.

Attention, devices and the limits of the evidence

No discussion of time in 2026 can avoid phones. Here the public conversation is loud and the evidence is mixed, so it is worth being precise.

Shrinking attention on screens

Gloria Mark, a professor emerita of informatics at the University of California, Irvine, has studied how people switch attention while working on screens since the early 2000s. In

her 2023 book *Attention Span*, and in interviews, she reports that the average time people spent on one screen before switching was about two and a half minutes in her early studies, and about 47 seconds in studies run between 2016 and 2020. These measures come from observing and logging people at work on computers and phones. They describe how often we switch, not a fixed limit on what the human brain can do.

Mark's advice is notably moderate. She does not recommend abandoning social media. She suggests setting limits on the most engaging apps, keeping goals visible, scheduling demanding work for the times of day when your attention is strongest, and taking breaks before exhaustion rather than by rigid timer. She also argues that workplaces can help with quiet periods free of messages.

Email frequency and stress

A useful experiment comes from Kostadin Kushlev and Elizabeth Dunn, published in *Computers in Human Behavior* in 2015. For one week, 124 adults were asked to check email only three times a day; for another week they were asked to check as often as they could, with notifications on. The order was counterbalanced. During the limited week participants reported significantly lower daily stress, and lower stress predicted better wellbeing on several measures. Compliance was imperfect: those asked to check three times a day averaged about 4.7 checks, against about 12.5 in the unlimited week and a usual habit of about 15. Even so, it is one of the clearer pieces of evidence that batching a communication channel can reduce stress.

The "brain drain" study and its replications

A widely shared 2017 study by Adrian Ward and colleagues reported that the mere presence of one's own smartphone, even switched off and face down, reduced performance on tests of working memory and fluid intelligence. It became one of the most quoted findings in the field. Later attempts to reproduce it have been far less supportive. A direct replication by Ruiz Pardo and Minda, published in *Acta Psychologica* in 2022, found no difference in performance whether phones were on the desk, in a pocket or bag, or outside the room. A separate replication by Matthias Hartmann and colleagues at the University of Bern, with 302 participants, also found no overall effect of phone location on memory tasks.

This does not prove phones are harmless to concentration. It means the specific claim that a phone's presence alone drains your mental capacity is not well established, and we should not repeat it as settled fact.

Screens and wellbeing in young people

The debate about adolescents is the most heated. In a 2019 paper in *Nature Human Behaviour*, Amy Orben and Andrew Przybylski analysed survey data covering roughly 300,000 adolescents and parents in the United Kingdom and United States and found that digital technology use had a negative but very small association with wellbeing, accounting for at most 0.4 per cent of the variation. In the same data, being bullied had a much larger association, while getting enough sleep and eating breakfast had positive associations of much greater size. The study is correlational, the measures of screen use

were crude, and an average effect can hide serious harm to particular individuals. Other researchers interpret the wider body of evidence as more concerning.

Australia has taken a policy position in this debate. Since 10 December 2025, under the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024, platforms designated as age restricted must take reasonable steps to prevent Australians under 16 from creating or keeping accounts. The law must be independently reviewed within two years of commencement. Whatever one's view, it is a law, not a research finding, and the research on its effects will take years to mature.

What we can say with reasonable confidence

Claim	State of evidence
Frequent switching between screens is common	Well documented in observational workplace studies
Batching email can reduce stress	Supported by a randomised within person experiment, with modest compliance
A phone's mere presence drains cognitive capacity	Not reliably replicated
Average screen time strongly harms teen wellbeing	Contested; large studies find small average associations
Time saving purchases can lift mood	Supported by survey and small experimental evidence

In our view, the sensible conclusion is not that technology is irrelevant, but that the most useful question is personal: does this particular habit, at this particular time, serve the life you want to lead?

Bringing it together

Burkeman's philosophy and the research point in a similar direction, even though they work in different registers. Both suggest that the feeling of having enough time comes less from squeezing more into each hour and more from deliberate choices about what to drop, what to protect and where to place attention. Both caution against treating every minute as an investment. And both suggest that some time freed up should go to people and activities that feel worthwhile, not to more work.

For leaders there is an extra dimension. The time pressure in an organisation is partly created by its leaders: the meetings they call, the messages they send late at night, the number of priorities they declare at once. A manager who limits work in progress for a team, protects quiet hours and models sensible email habits is shaping the time affluence of other people, not just their own.

> *Time is not a resource to master. It is the medium in which a life happens, so choose deliberately where it goes.*

Practical exercises

These exercises are general information drawn from the ideas and research above. They are not medical or psychological advice. If time pressure has tipped into persistent

distress, sleeplessness or low mood, talk to your GP, or call Lifeline on 13 11 14 at any hour, or Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636.

Exercise 1: The four thousand week audit (30 minutes)

1. Write down the five things you most want your remaining weeks to contain. Be concrete: "teach my daughter to sail", not "family".
2. Look at your calendar for the past fortnight. Estimate the hours given to each of the five.
3. Note the three biggest consumers of your time that are not on the list.
4. Choose one of those three to reduce deliberately this month, and one item on your list to "pay first" with a fixed block each week.

Exercise 2: Fixed volume list

- Split your tasks into an open list (everything) and a closed list of no more than ten items.
- Only work from the closed list. Add an item only when one is completed or consciously abandoned.
- At the end of each day, write a short done list. Notice what you actually achieved.

Exercise 3: Decide what to fail at

Pick one area of life where you will accept being average for the next three months, and say so out loud to someone it affects. Examples include a perfectly tidy house, an exhaustive reply to every email, or attending every optional event. Revisit the choice at the end of the quarter.

Exercise 4: A time for money check

If your budget allows, choose one disliked recurring task and price the cost of outsourcing it for a month. Compare it with a material purchase of similar cost you were considering. The 2017 research suggests the time saving option may do more for your mood, though the effect is modest and depends on your circumstances. If outsourcing is not affordable, consider whether a household or team can swap or share disliked tasks instead.

Exercise 5: Batch one channel

For two weeks, check email (or one messaging app) at three set times a day. Turn off notifications for that channel between checks. Keep a simple one to ten stress rating each evening and compare the two weeks with your usual pattern.

Exercise 6: Ten minutes of nothing

Once a day, set a timer for ten minutes and sit without a device, a book or a goal. Burkeman suggests this builds tolerance for the discomfort that drives much distraction. If ten minutes feels long, start with three.

What to do this month

Week	Action
Week 1	Complete the four thousand week audit and choose one thing to "pay first"

Week	Action
Week 2	Set up a fixed volume list and a daily done list
Week 3	Batch one communication channel and track your evening stress
Week 4	Name one area to fail at, and review what changed

For leaders, add one team action: agree on a shared rule for out of hours messages, or reduce the number of concurrent priorities by one.

A closing thought

There is a sentence in most people's working lives that goes something like "once I get through this busy patch, I'll finally have time for what matters". Burkeman's challenge is that the busy patch is not a patch. It is life, and the things that matter have to be done inside it, imperfectly, before everything else is finished. The research does not prove that philosophy right, but it is consistent with it: people seem to be happiest not when they have conquered time, but when they have enough of it and spend it on purpose.

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TIME AND OTHER PEOPLE

Gratitude, Kindness and a Good Life: What the Research Really Supports

By Sukh Sandhu

Gratitude journals and random acts of kindness have become staples of wellbeing advice. This essay looks at the studies behind them, including the replication attempts and meta-analyses that put their effects in proportion, and at what the latest national data say about how Australians give their time.

Old virtues, new evidence

Almost every moral and religious tradition praises gratitude and generosity. Over the past twenty five years, psychologists have tried to test whether practising them makes people happier, not just better. The results are real, encouraging and, in places, smaller than the popular coverage suggests. That combination is worth understanding, because it changes how you might use these practices. If you expect gratitude to cure depression, you may be disappointed. If you expect it to add a modest, reliable lift to ordinary days and to strengthen your relationships, the evidence is on your side.

This essay distinguishes three things throughout: what the research finds, what its limits are, and what, in our view, a sensible reader might do with it.

Gratitude: the study that started a field

Counting blessings versus burdens

The most cited experiment on gratitude is Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough's "Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life", published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 2003. It reported three studies.

Study 1. University students were randomly assigned to one of three groups. Each week, one group listed up to five things they were grateful for, a second listed hassles, and a third listed neutral events that had affected them. After the weekly exercises (192 participants were included in the analysis), the gratitude group felt better about their lives as a whole and were more optimistic about the coming week than the comparison groups. They also reported fewer physical complaints and spent significantly more time exercising. Interestingly, the weekly gratitude exercise did not change global measures of positive or negative mood.

Study 2. A daily version, run over a shorter period, compared gratitude listing with hassles and with downward social comparison (thinking about ways one is better off than others). Daily gratitude was associated with higher positive mood. Participants in the

gratitude condition were also more likely to report having helped someone with a personal problem or offered emotional support, a hint that gratitude may encourage kindness.

Study 3. Adults with neuromuscular diseases were randomly assigned to a daily gratitude exercise or a control condition. The gratitude group reported more positive mood, more sleep and better sleep quality, greater optimism and a stronger sense of connection to others. Notably, the improvements in wellbeing were also apparent to their spouses or significant others, who rated them independently.

The authors were measured in their conclusions. They wrote that the gratitude groups showed heightened wellbeing across several, though not all, outcomes, and that the effect on positive mood appeared to be the most robust finding.

What later research found

Two decades on, the gratitude literature is large enough to be summarised by meta-analysis, which pools results across studies.

A 2021 meta-analysis by David Cregg and Jennifer Cheavens in the *Journal of Happiness Studies* examined whether gratitude interventions reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety. Across 27 studies with 3,675 participants, they found a small effect in favour of gratitude at post test (a standardised effect of about 0.29). Many of the comparison conditions were ordinary writing tasks, such as writing about a class schedule, and gratitude exercises produced only small advantages over them. In coverage of the study, the authors said gratitude exercises would not be something to recommend as a treatment, pointed to established therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy for lasting relief, and noted that the evidence included few clinical samples. They also observed that gratitude practices may still have other benefits, such as for relationships.

This pattern, a modest effect that shrinks when compared against active alternatives, is common in positive psychology. It does not mean gratitude practices are useless. It means they are one helpful habit among several, not a clinical treatment.

Claim	State of evidence
Gratitude exercises can lift positive mood	Supported, with small to moderate effects
Gratitude improves life appraisals and optimism	Supported in early experiments, including Emmons and McCullough
Gratitude treats depression or anxiety	Not supported as a standalone treatment; small effects at best
Gratitude may encourage helping others	Some supportive evidence, more research needed

Gratitude is a good habit, not a medicine. Expect a gentle lift, not a cure.

Why gratitude might work

Researchers have proposed several mechanisms, none fully settled. Gratitude may counter the tendency to adapt quickly to good things, so that we keep noticing what we have. It may shift attention away from comparison and grievance. And because gratitude is usually directed at someone, it may strengthen relationships, which are among the most consistent predictors of wellbeing in the research literature. In our view, the social

pathway deserves more attention than it gets: a thank you said to a person probably does more than one written privately in a notebook.

Kindness: spending money on others

The 2008 Science study

In 2008, Elizabeth Dunn, Lara Aknin and Michael Norton published "Spending money on others promotes happiness" in *Science*. The short paper reported three pieces of evidence.

1. **A survey of 632 Americans.** Spending on others, including gifts and charitable donations, was associated with greater happiness. Spending on oneself was not.
2. **A study of employees receiving a profit sharing bonus** at a Boston company. The share of the bonus that people spent on others predicted their later happiness better than the size of the bonus did.
3. **A small experiment with 46 people.** Participants were given $5 or $20 in the morning and asked to spend it by 5 pm, either on themselves or on someone else (a gift or a donation). In the evening, those who had spent on others reported greater happiness. The amount did not seem to matter.

The finding was elegant and widely reported, and it has influenced charitable giving campaigns and workplace programs.

Replications and limits

Because the original experiment was so small, researchers have since tested it more rigorously, and the results are worth knowing.

In 2020, Lara Aknin, Elizabeth Dunn and colleagues published a registered replication report in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, in which the methods were set out in advance to reduce the risk of selective reporting. Its first study, the closest to the original design, involved 730 participants assigned to buy a small goody bag either for themselves or for a sick child at a local hospital, and found a clear effect: those who gave reported greater momentary happiness. Two further studies used recall of past spending rather than actual spending. One, with about 1,950 adults, did not find the predicted effect; the other, with 5,199 participants, found a small effect.

In 2022, a team led by Garam Kim and including Leif Nelson and Minah Jung published a close replication of the original 2008 experiment in *PLOS ONE*, with 133 participants given $10. Using the original analysis, they found no significant difference in happiness between people who spent on themselves and those who spent on others. An exploratory measure of happiness taken immediately after spending did show a small advantage for prosocial spending. The authors described their results as mixed and argued that the original experiment had been substantially underpowered.

Earlier, a 2013 paper by Aknin and colleagues in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* used Gallup World Poll data from 136 countries and found that donating to charity was associated with greater happiness in most of them, in rich and poor countries alike. That is a correlational finding, but its breadth suggests the link is not unique to North American students.

The fair summary is that giving to others probably does produce a modest emotional benefit for the giver, especially in the moment, but the effect is smaller and more fragile than the original study implied.

Kindness and wellbeing more broadly

Two meta-analyses

A 2018 meta-analysis led by Oliver Scott Curry at the University of Oxford, published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* under the title "Happy to help?", pooled 27 experiments with more than 4,000 participants in which people were asked to perform acts of kindness. It found a small to medium effect on the wellbeing of the person being kind (an effect size of about 0.28). The effect did not appear to depend on age, sex or the type of kind act. The authors found no indication of publication bias, but discussed limitations in the existing studies and called for research on a wider range of outcomes and on kindness directed at different kinds of people.

A larger 2020 meta-analysis by Bryant Hui and colleagues, published in *Psychological Bulletin*, examined 201 studies with almost 200,000 participants and found a modest overall association between prosocial behaviour and wellbeing (a correlation of 0.13). The authors noted that this average masked substantial variation depending on who was helping, how, and which kind of wellbeing was measured. Much of the evidence in this review was correlational, so it cannot show which way the effect runs. Happier people may simply help more.

Study	Scope	Main finding	Key limit
Curry et al. 2018	27 experiments	Small to medium lift from acts of kindness	Limited range of outcomes studied
Hui et al. 2020	201 studies	Modest link between prosociality and wellbeing	Much of it correlational
Aknin et al. 2020	Registered replication	Clear effect in closest design, mixed elsewhere	Recall studies weaker
Kim et al. 2022	Close replication	Mixed results	Single sample of students

> *The evidence supports kindness as good for the giver, modestly. The best reason to be kind is still that it is good for the receiver.*

Volunteering and health

Volunteering is the most organised form of kindness, and researchers have asked whether it benefits volunteers' health. A 2013 systematic review and meta-analysis by Caroline Jenkinson and colleagues in *BMC Public Health* found that in long term observational studies, volunteering was associated with lower depression, higher life satisfaction and better wellbeing, and with lower mortality (a pooled risk of death about 22 per cent lower among volunteers across five cohort studies). However, the experimental evidence was much weaker, and the authors concluded that the causal mechanisms were unclear. Healthier, wealthier and more socially connected people are more likely to volunteer in the first place, which can make volunteering look more beneficial than it is.

How Australians give their time

The Australian Bureau of Statistics released its *General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2025* on 6 May 2026. At November 2026, it is the most recent national picture of volunteering.

Measure (people aged 15 and over)	2025 result
Formal volunteering through an organisation, past 12 months	23 per cent (25 per cent in 2020, 30 per cent in 2019)
Total formal volunteering hours, past 12 months	618 million (490 million in 2020, 596 million in 2019)
Informal volunteering (unpaid help to people outside the household), past four weeks	30 per cent (28 per cent of men, 31 per cent of women)
Weekly in person contact with family or friends outside the household	53 per cent

Two things stand out. First, the share of Australians volunteering through organisations has not recovered to pre pandemic levels. Second, those who do volunteer are giving more time: total hours in 2025 were higher than in either 2019 or 2020. Volunteering Australia, the national peak body, analysed the same survey and estimated that about 9.5 million Australians volunteered formally, informally or both in 2025. Adding the formal and informal rates together would overstate the number of volunteers, because many people do both, and the two measures use different reference periods (12 months for formal volunteering, four weeks for informal help).

These figures matter for wellbeing as well as for the community organisations that depend on volunteers. Sport clubs, emergency services, aged care visitors, school canteens and environmental groups all rely on unpaid time. If the research is right that helping others gives modest benefits to helpers, then the decline in formal volunteering is a loss on both sides of the ledger.

What the research does not say

Before turning to practice, it is worth naming some common overclaims.

- **Gratitude does not require ignoring real problems.** Emmons and McCullough's participants still listed hassles in other conditions; the point was to notice good things, not to deny bad ones. Forced positivity in the face of grief, injustice or hardship can feel dismissive.
- **Kindness is not a self help tool first.** If people perform kind acts only to boost their own mood, recipients may notice, and the benefit may shrink. The research measures effects on givers, but the moral case does not depend on them.
- **Effects are averages.** A small average effect can hide large benefits for some people and none for others. If gratitude journalling feels hollow to you, a different practice, such as a thank you letter or helping a neighbour, may suit you better.
- **Money is not required.** The prosocial spending studies used small amounts. Time, attention and practical help are forms of generosity open to almost everyone.

Simple practices

These practices are drawn from the studies above. They are general information, not medical or psychological advice. If low mood, anxiety or loneliness are persistent or severe, please see your GP, or contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 at any time, or Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636.

1. A weekly gratitude list

Following the Emmons and McCullough Study 1 design, once a week write down up to five things from the past week for which you are grateful. Be specific ("my colleague covered my shift on Thursday") rather than general ("my job"). Weekly may be enough; some researchers suggest daily lists can become routine and lose their effect, though the evidence on ideal frequency is limited.

2. Say it to the person

Once a fortnight, tell someone directly what they did and why it mattered to you. A short message, a call or a handwritten note all count. This adds the social dimension that a private journal lacks.

3. A small prosocial spend

Once a month, spend a small amount on someone else: a coffee for a colleague, a donation to a cause you care about, a gift for a neighbour. Notice how you feel that evening. The replication evidence suggests the effect may be small, so treat it as an experiment rather than a guarantee.

4. A kindness day

Rather than scattering kind acts through the week, try choosing one day to do several deliberate kind things, such as helping with a task, checking in on someone who is isolated, or offering a skill. Keep a brief note of what you did and how it felt.

5. Try volunteering, matched to you

If you have time to give, consider a formal volunteering role, using Volunteering Australia and your state or territory volunteering peak body to find options. Match the role to your skills and interests, and start with a short trial. Informal help counts too. Nearly a third of Australians give unpaid help to people outside their household in any four week period, and if formal volunteering does not fit your life, regular help to neighbours, family or friends is a valuable form of giving in its own right.

A practical framework: the giving audit

Question	Your answer
Who helped me in the past month, and have I thanked them?	
Who in my circle might be struggling or isolated?	
What skill or time could I offer without overcommitting?	
Which one cause would I most like to support this year?	

Question	Your answer
What is one kind act I can do this week?	

What to do this month

1. **Week 1:** Start a weekly gratitude list. Write five specific items on the same day each week.
2. **Week 2:** Send one message of thanks to someone who has not heard it from you before.
3. **Week 3:** Make one small prosocial purchase or donation, and note how you feel that evening.
4. **Week 4:** Complete the giving audit and decide on one regular form of help, formal or informal, for the year ahead.

For leaders and managers, add one workplace step: recognise a specific contribution by a team member, in front of others where appropriate, and explain why it mattered. Recognition is a form of gratitude, and it costs nothing.

A closing thought

The research on gratitude and kindness is a good example of how science should work. A handful of early, small studies produced exciting findings. Larger studies and replications followed, and the effects turned out to be real but smaller and more conditional than the headlines suggested. None of that makes the old virtues less worthwhile. If anything, it frees them from the burden of being miracle cures. Saying thank you, noticing what is good, and giving some of our time and money to others are worth doing because they make life better for the people around us, and, modestly but measurably, for ourselves.

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Wiser Days | wiserdaysmag.com | sukh@sukhsandhu.com

Masthead

Publisher: Wiser Days

Editor-in-Chief: Sukh Sandhu

Edition: Edition 1 | December 2026

Website: wiserdaysmag.com

Contributions, corrections and enquiries: sukh@sukhsandhu.com

Sister titles: LeadWell, RiskWise, How They Rose, Wiser Days and TeachWise

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