

How To Overcome Procrastination

Personal Excellence



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I'm the founder of [Personal Excellence](#), community for people passionate about achieving excellence in life. There, you will find hundreds of [top quality articles](#) covering many personal growth topics from Awareness & Growth, Goal Achievement, Relationships & People Skills, Habits, Emotional Mastery, Productivity and Getting Things Done, Purpose & Meaning, and many more.

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Part 1: Why Overcome Procrastination?

This is part-1 of the series on [How to Overcome Procrastination](#).

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Is there something you are procrastinating in your life now? What is it? Is it surrounding your work? Your relationship? Your family? Your health? What is the one thing which you should be working on in your life, but you are putting off for some reason or other?

Why Overcome Procrastination?

Some may not see procrastination as a real problem, because they receive benefits from procrastinating on something. For example, the relief you get when you successfully avoid something you don't want to do. However, while these 'benefits' give you the impression you are in a better place, you aren't. It's just **an illusion**.

Let's say it is Monday now and you have an important report you need to finish by Friday morning. This report is one of the most important tasks on your work list (a [high value 20% task](#)), but you decide to put off on it due to the large amount of research and analysis needed. Rather than work on it, you

spend the next 3 days shuffling between the less important, 80% tasks.

Then, Thursday arrives and you are trapped – you have to work on the report or it's going to jeopardize your job. As you work on it, you find yourself in a hot soup, because there are so many things to be done. After all, that's the very reason you put it off initially! In a last bid attempt to meet the deadline, you pull an all-nighter to do the report. After painfully sloughing through the night, you finally manage to finish it at 4am and meet the Friday deadline.

So net, the task gets done, it's submitted in time, and everything turned out fine.

Did you realize what just happened here? The fact that everything turned out fine led to your subconscious belief that procrastinating on the task didn't bring in any negative effects. In fact, as far as you are aware of, it has a series of supposed **benefits**:

1. Leaving it to the last minute creates a high sense of urgency which appears to boost your productivity, giving you a higher value on time spent working.
2. You experience short-term gratification from not having to deal with the report on Mon-Wed.
3. Procrastinating didn't jeopardize anything in reality.

Yet, if you look at it holistically, procrastination has created **downsides** which may not be immediately noticeable:

1. Your time in Mon-Wed was not effectively spent. Ideally, you would want to spend your time in proportion to how important the task is. The more important a task, the more time you want to allocate to it to maximize the output on the task. Spending more time on less important work doesn't give you significantly increased value, compared to spending more time on more important work. A ratio I use is 80-20 for the high value-low value tasks (aka my 20/80 to-do list).
2. Unnecessary anguish and anxiety experienced (whether subconsciously or consciously) trying to avoid the task. The more you prolong the task, the more unnecessary anxiety you experience, compared to if you dealt with the task head-first. In addition, the continuous avoidance leads you to form a distorted mental image of how intimidating the task is vs. what it actually is. In the end you are left with an exaggerated but baseless fear of what you're supposed to do.

3. More often than not, the final output is short of what you are really capable of, as leaving it to the last minute left you with insufficient time to properly work on it.

The 3 downsides are actually corresponding counterpoints for the 3 illusionary benefits. If you compare the list and take a holistic view, **the downsides far outweigh the supposed benefits of procrastination**. Not only are you being less productive, you experience unnecessary anxiety, and you deliver an output that falls short of what you can really do. Procrastination leaves you in a worse position, compared to if you didn't procrastinate. As I've written before in [What Are You Running Away From?](#), avoidance isn't going to bring you nearer to what you want.

Thus, if you are a procrastinator, whether chronic or not, it's time to start resolving this issue of procrastination and stop deferring your life away. As long as you keep putting off what you should be doing, you are putting off living. That's no better than being a [sleepwalker](#).

Continue reading [part-2](#), where I will share why mainstream ways of dealing with procrastination don't work and share the two root causes of procrastination.

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Part-2: Procrastination – Symptom of An Issue

This is part-2 of the series on [How to Overcome Procrastination](#).

Is it Possible To Overcome Procrastination?

My answer is: **Yes**. While some may think that procrastination is part and parcel of everyday living and it will be experienced in everything we do, this belief comes from not truly understanding what causes procrastination. Life is certainly not about procrastinating and putting off doing things. By fully understanding what causes procrastination and dealing with the problem at the root, it is the first step to overcoming it.

So if that's the case, how can you address procrastination?

Procrastination: Symptom of the Issue

To overcome procrastination, you must first realize that procrastination isn't the real issue.

Procrastination is just the symptom of the issue. The same goes for laziness, poor time management, or [lack of self-discipline](#). Most people are quick to pinpoint these as the root causes of problems because these are the most accessible answers. The real reason is something underneath that.

A useful analogy to reference this to is mosquito bites. What happens when you get a mosquito bite? Most people will scratch at it. Some will take special care to put ointment or apply antiseptic cream. The itch from the bite gets alleviated, and soon it heals.

However, is the problem really resolved? It's not – the mosquito bite came from the mosquito. Until the mosquito is out of the picture, you will continue to get new mosquito bites. Repeatedly putting ointment or cream is just a temporary fix. Putting a mosquito net might be a more effective solution, but it still doesn't deal with the issue at a root.

And even if you are to get rid of the mosquito, it's still not addressing the real problem. Getting rid of one mosquito doesn't mean more mosquitoes won't be coming your way. After all, the mosquitoes must be coming from somewhere, aren't they? Where are they coming from? If you trace their origins, you might find mosquito breeding grounds around the potted plants in your house.

But wait, it doesn't end here. How did these breeding ground even come about to begin with? If you look deeper, you will find the real problem is really negligence and poor house maintenance. Trying to tackle the issue through any of the intermediate steps (ointment, killing the mosquito, removing the breeding ground) will only lead to a temporary relief but not long-term resolution. Only by practicing due diligence in upkeeping the house will this problem be permanently resolved.

So coming back to procrastination. Think of laziness, lack of discipline and procrastination as mosquito bites – the symptom of the problems. Time management and self-discipline are your ointment or cream that patches the symptoms. They are the lower-tier solutions. The same applies for life hack tools or tips from article lists such as XX ways to overcome procrastination. While they do alleviate the problem in a certain manner, they are not holistic solutions. You can keep integrating them every day but it never solves your problem of procrastination. I could have easily written a post on “20 ways to deal with procrastination” which would take less time and thinking, but that's not going to move anyone forward with their problem of procrastination.

On the other hand, if you get to the root of the issue – drilling down to the mosquito, and even to the breeding ground, you are a quantum step toward overcoming procrastination. This is what the remaining part of the series will be about – uncovering exactly what causes procrastination, then resolving them at the fundamental level.

One important thing you want to note is the magnitude of one's issue can be gauged by how chronic one's procrastination is. Using the mosquito example again, the more bites you have and the more severe each bite is, the bigger the root problem (e.g., large breeding ground, multiple breeding grounds, deadliness of mosquito). Similarly, the **more severe your procrastination, the bigger the underlying issue**.

What Causes Procrastination Then?

What's the definition of procrastination again? It means to put off doing something; to avoid. So, what leads people to avoid something? It can be drilled down to two things – Desire and Fear. More specifically, **(1) a lack of desire** or **(2) a fear of something**.

Two Drivers: Desire and Fear

Desire and fear are the two main forces involved when it comes to action or inaction. **Desire** is like the fuel to move forward. Without desire, you have no driving force for action. **Fear** is like the fog that surrounds you which paralyzes you from moving forward. **Where desire < fear, procrastination will take over.** Consequently, **where desire > fear, action will take place.**

If there is a lack of desire combined with fear(s), procrastination is almost definite. The most common example is students and academia. Most are studying for the sake of studying – they feel empty for what they are studying for. In addition, the high competition and intensity of the coursework leads to an inner fear toward studies. In the end, you get widespread cases of procrastination of students and studies.

In part-3, I'll elaborate on the [driver of desire](#).

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Part-3: 1st Root Cause – Lack of Desire

This is part-3 of the series on [How to Overcome Procrastination](#).

Lack of Desire, 1st Root Cause of Procrastination

Procrastination happens because there is a lack of desire. For example, someone who procrastinates on his work because he lacks the passion for it. Someone who procrastinates going to a networking event because he is not interested in networking.

What should you do then to get a never-ending flow of desire? **By living in alignment with your higher self.** There are two key ways to do this:

1. **Follow your inner desires.** What is it you love to do? What excites you the most? These are the things you should be doing – not things you don't enjoy doing. The more you follow your desires, the more connected you become with your inner self, and the more aligned you become in your thoughts and actions. This results in an ongoing force that springs you forward endlessly and grows larger and larger every day.
2. **Live in alignment with your values.** What are your values in life? What are the most important qualities or attributes? Use them as the navigational compass in the decisions and steps you make. Again, living in line with your values lets you become more connected with your inner self.

My Example with School and Work

Secondary school years of late 1990s

My life growing up was a journey in the alignment of my desires. When I was in secondary school, I was largely disinterested toward studies. I was much

more interested in developing my interest in web and graphic designing. This led to procrastination for the most part on anything related to studies. To be honest, I barely ever paid attention, touched my school books nor did much preparation for the tests/exams. There was a point where I hated school and would avoid going to school by feigning illnesses or making up some reason! Needless to say, I underperformed in my academics compared to what I could have done.

My underperformance in academia led me to experience what it meant to be labeled and discriminated against in a meritocratic society, where students, teachers and society alike would make conclusions on one's ability and worth based on just grades alone. Being a social misfit was an eye-opening experience, to say the least. Not only that, it was disjuncting to be disregarded for what I considered to be one of my core values – excellence. At that particular point I was living in alignment with this value through web/graphic designing, but not academia.

Junior college years – 2001-2002

When I was in junior college, I realized my procrastination toward studies had to be addressed. My strategy for addressing it was via **channeling into my value of excellence** – by striving for academia excellence. Even if I wasn't fully interested in what I was studying, I was definitely passionate about achieving excellence. This worked out well. While I would still feel some inertia toward studies, it wasn't to the same extent as before as in secondary school.

University years – 2003-2006

In University, I entered the course of my choice – Business. In addition to my inherent desire to excel, I was now studying something I was interested in. This naturally led to a marked increase in my interest toward studies. 😊 The interest level led me to be more proactive, vocal and energized through the coursework. Every step along the way, I was met with positive results and these results would simply reinforce my interest level. All-in-all, procrastination became hardly an issue, with the exception of certain modules which I was not interested in (Finance being one of them). There was hardly a moment I could remember where I wanted to avoid school work. I honestly enjoyed my whole varsity life.

In my corporate job – 2006-2008

When I entered my ex-company in brand management, the **alignment with my desires became even stronger**. It being one of my two choice employers (the other being consulting) made me very ecstatic – I was eager to work there develop myself as an individual.

As such, my passion was strong – I never dreaded work, I loved everything I was doing and I always put my 110% in everything I did. While people would talk about Monday Blues and the like, I never saw work as work. Honestly, if you truly enjoy what you're doing, you won't even think of it as work at all. In fact, I associated 'work' with fun and joy 😊 . I often worked late every day and even over the weekends because I wanted to. Nothing ever came across as an obligation.

However, things changed toward the end of the 2 years. As I grew more and more as a person, my passion to help others grow consciously became stronger and stronger. Since my work wasn't the best channel to express this passion, I experienced signs of procrastination toward my job. The internal alarms inside me went off. In my years of experience from dealing with dread/procrastination to living in a state of flow, I knew enough to know that if I were to ever feel dread toward something, it was a clear signal to reevaluate my situation.

Personal development work – 2009 to Present

Eventually, I quit my day job in '08 to pursue my passion in full force. With this one act, I have become more aligned with my inner self than ever before. From there on, every step I take – whether it's starting the blog, doing coaching, speaking or most recently, setting up my personal excellence school – is a **conscious move** toward increasing that alignment even further.

For the same reason, procrastination has become a distant memory of my past. In the instances where I do experience procrastination, it's primarily due to fear which is the 2nd underlying cause of procrastination. Read on more about fear in [part 4](#) of the series.

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Part-4: 2nd Root Cause – Fear

This is part-4 of the series on [How to Overcome Procrastination](#).

Fear, 2nd Root Cause of Procrastination

Fear is the second underlying cause of procrastination. While you can have a desire to do something, if you have a fear stronger than your desire, you will face procrastination. This fear can be any fear – fear of pain, fear of uncertainty, fear of hardship, fear of not having control, fear of being incapable, fear of rejection, fear of being alone.

While this may sound bizarre, if you examine areas in your life you are procrastinating on today (even though you do want to do them), your answer is likely related to a certain fear you face. This is especially common among [perfectionists](#), whereby procrastination is a common resultant behavior as they fear doing something in a ‘less perfect’ manner than they envisioned, and thereby impacting their idealized images of themselves.

Take the example of Tim, a driven and competent individual who enjoys his job. He has a job-related deadline in a week he is procrastinating on.

If we ask Tim why he is avoiding the deadline, his first answer may be ‘because I don’t want to do it’. Probing deeper, we find Tim’s avoidance is caused by the discomfort his work gives him. Why? After a minute or two of probing, he may reveal the work is too much for him to handle.

While the answer is rearing its head, it’s still not the real reason. After all, many people face an overload of work, but not everyone reacts via avoidance. Why is it that Tim procrastinates in the face of too much work?

If we look deeper, we may find that this procrastination is due to the **loss of control** from overwhelming work. He fears a loss of control because not being able to control **makes him feel a lower self-worth**. It becomes clear then that procrastinating on his work is an attempt to avoid feeling low in his self-worth.

Similarly, many cases of procrastination are driven by a fear or several fears.

My example with public speaking

Sometime this year, I began to get invited by institutions to give talks. I was always excited every time that happened, because it meant reaching out to a larger audience base.

However, I noticed I always delayed the preparation work (slides/content/delivery) one day before the talk or even the day itself, even though I wanted to start preparation at least few days, ideally a week, before.

Even though I would always find some way or other to finish the material and deliver the speech accordingly, the procrastination was a big issue for several reasons:

1. While the speeches turned out fine, it could have been better if I invested more time preparing as originally intended.
2. The contact point with the audience is the one moment to share my message with them. Not putting my best foot forward meant I might be missing out on a chance to move someone forward on the path of growth.
3. The whole process of procrastinating, rushing through work, delivering work less than my expectations and troubleshooting the same aftermath was wearisome. It would be much better to get things done on a timely manner with the level of readiness I wanted.

The first time the procrastination happened, I thought it was poor self-management. When it happened again, I suspected a separate reason. Then it occurred a 3rd time, 4th time, and nth time. By then, it was clear there was a pattern forming and I had to get to the root of it.

I probed within myself on why this was happening. Was the avoidance due to a lack of desire? Certainly not. I'm always enthusiastic about new speaking opportunities. It signifies new growth opportunities, more exposure and enabling more people in their path of conscious growth. It is one of the necessary milestones toward achieving my long-term vision.

So I asked myself: “Why am I trying to avoid preparing for the speeches?”

The immediate answer that came up was *“I don’t feel like doing it”*. A natural first level response with every self-questioning exercise.

I asked again: “Why don’t I feel like doing it?”

New answers emerged. *“So much work needs to be done”, “It’s such a dread”, “This is going to take a lot of time”*. In my mind, I had subconsciously painted an elaborate preparation process. I envisioned being as good as top speakers like Les Brown and Obama one day, but I was nowhere near that standard. Thus, I saw lots of preparation needed.

My next question was: “Why do these matter?”

A voice in my head spoke. *“Because it makes me feel I’m out of control”*.

This was interesting. I was surprised and pressed on further: “Why is being in control important?”

“Because if I’m not in control, it means I’m not good enough. I’m incapable.”

It hit me there and then what was going on. Because a) a part of me had linked my worth with my skill in public speaking b) I wasn’t as good in public speaking compared to my ideal vision, I had lowered my own self-worth. Thus, any situation which reminded me of **my lack of expertise in public speaking would make me feel lousy**. This led me to procrastinate on my speech preparation process.

In conclusion: My procrastination was due to my fear of not having worth.

This answer caught me offguard because I don’t measure one’s worth by one’s skill level in something. A person who is a beginner in something doesn’t mean he/she is of low worth. Likewise, an expert doesn’t mean he/she is of high worth. Everyone’s level of worth is the same, regardless of who/what he/she is and the circumstance.

Furthermore, I'm passionate about being a powerful speaker. I knew in order to reach the expertise I'm looking for, I have to start somewhere, as all experts today have. I certainly wasn't expecting to become better by avoiding the activity. These are all things my conscious mind understood.

Yet, a part of my subconscious had a flawed notion, probably conditioned from the younger years. Because it wasn't addressed when I was younger, I grew up holding that thought subconsciously and probably having my other actions subconsciously affected by it.

Realizing this was liberating, to say the least. Just by uncovering the subconscious fears, I was able to immediately see how silly and baseless those thoughts were. In fact, when you starting uncovering the real reasons leading to your procrastination in part-4, you will find it is usually the most fundamental beliefs (and misconceived ones) which cause your procrastination.

After uncovering the hidden fear, I was able to immediately rectify the misconception in my subconsciousness and resolve the internal misalignment. It was a matter of reinforcing what I already knew consciously, since awareness of the fears was enough to realize they were baseless.

In the last part, I'll share how to overcome procrastination through an introspection exercise

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Last Part: How To Overcome Procrastination

This is last part of the series on [How to Overcome Procrastination](#).

If you have read this far, I assume procrastination is a problem you face and want to address. In this part, you'll learn how to overcome your procrastination through an introspective exercise. Time to stop procrastinating and get the problem nipped in the bud! 😊

Exercise To Uncover Why You Procrastinate

As with all our exercises, grab a notebook and pen or open up your processing document. Set aside about 20 minutes or so for this. We will be doing a fair bit of writing for this exercise.

Think of your mind as containing thousands of layers of information. At the bottom of this lies your subconsciousness. Every day, more layers get piled on as you face new contexts. In order to get down to your subconsciousness, we need to clear off the layers (done through steps 2-4) and get down to the depths of the mind.

Ready? Here we go 😊

1) Start off by identifying something you are procrastinating on, even though you want to work on it.

This should be an area where you have displayed a continuous pattern of putting off in. For illustration purpose, I'll take the example of exercising to keep fit.

2) Ask yourself: “Why am I putting this off?”

Write everything that comes up. You may have 1 answer, 2 answers, or even 5 different answers – it doesn't matter. Even if your mind responds with “I don't know”, write that in anyway, then ask the same question again. Chances are, you're going to get a different answer this time. Just keep on writing until nothing else comes up. For a reference, this process might take anywhere from 5 minutes to even over 30 minutes if there's a lot of stuff you have to write. Everything you write in step 2 are your **1st level answers**.

Possible 1st level answers for procrastinating on exercise may be:

- I don't want to exercise
- I'm too lazy
- I have no discipline
- Exercising is boring
- The gym is too far away
- I don't know
- I hate exercising
- I don't have enough time

3) Pick out hotspot answers for probing.

If you remember in part-2, I shared laziness and lack of discipline are rarely ever the real issues. Approaches involving discipline and time management are the ointments and creams to mosquito bites. They usually patch up the symptoms without dealing with the root of the issue. Thus, ignore answers like “I'm too lazy”, “I have no discipline”, “I don't have enough time”. Chances are, probing in those areas will get you nowhere.

From the remaining answers, pick out the **hot spots answers** for probing. Hot spot answers are answers that are more than meets the eye. When probed, they explode to reveal the other layers underneath. Hot spot answers are usually tied to:

- **Feelings** (desire, fear, feeling of discomfort, etc) . Examples are “I don’t feel like doing it”, “I’m scared”, “I feel tired” or “I hate doing this”.
- **One’s ability**. Examples are “I don’t know how to”, “It takes so much time and effort”, “There’s so much to do”.

In the exercise example, some hot spot answers are “I don’t want to exercise” and “I hate exercising”.

4) Probe into the hotspot answers from #3.

Dig into the answers to uncover what lies beneath. There are many ways to do this depending on the original answer. The simplest way is to question why that’s the case or why it matters. Below are some examples of how to dig into hotspot answers:

- “I don’t want to [exercise]” -> “Why don’t I want to exercise?”
- “I hate [exercising]” -> “Why do I hate exercising?”
- “I don’t know how to do this” -> “So what if I don’t know how to do this?”, “What does it mean to me if I don’t know how to do this?”, “Why is this stopping me from doing the task?”

5) Keep repeating #4 until you reach an “a-ha” moment that cracks the whole issue wide open.

Keep probing and probing until you get the “a-ha” moment. Some people will ask “How do I know if I’ve reached an a-ha moment or not?” The short answer is this – you’ll know when it comes. There will be an inner sense of resonance when you arrive at the answer, because then everything suddenly clicks and makes complete sense. You finally realize why you’ve been trying to avoid the activity all this while – not because of laziness, but because of something else.

The more connected you are with your higher self, the more effective this exercise. If you often take time to self-reflect and have a high level of

self-awareness, this exercise will be relatively easy. Chances are, the answers will affirm what you already know about yourself.

On the other hand, if you frequently repress your thoughts/feelings and have a low level of self-awareness, this exercise might take a longer time. More often than not, you'll end up in a block during your questioning where the same answers keep surfacing. This may also happen for highly self-aware people when probing into a new territory. Some of my clients experience this when we dig into a deeply set pattern in their life, where the only answer that comes up is "I don't know" or "I'm really not sure".

When that happens, don't give up. Just because you don't reach an 'a-ha!' the first round doesn't mean you're not going to get the answer! Every time you try to communicate with your subconsciousness, you are building a stronger connection. **As long as you keep pressing on (whether it's by trying the exercise at a different time), the answer will eventually surface.** Other things you can try are:

- Ask the questions with stronger intention to find the answer
- Use different angles to ask your questions. For example, if you reached a dead end, backtrack to the previous answer. Then, ask a different question or ask the same question in a different way. A question like "Why am I not doing this task?" can also be phrased as "What is making me avoid this task?" or "What is it about this task that's making me avoid it?" or "Why am I not working?".

Using this exercise, many unintuitive, unexpected revelations can be uncovered. For example (procrastinated activity -> real reason):

- Someone who procrastinates **losing weight** (to become more attractive) -> Because he/she **hates himself/herself** and wants to remain unattractive so no one will like him/her
- Someone who procrastinates **getting close to his/her parents** -> Because he/she is **afraid of being alone** when they pass away one day
- Someone who procrastinates **finding a partner** -> Because he/she has **low self-worth** and is afraid of putting himself/herself out there
- Someone who procrastinates **rehearsing for a performance** -> Because he/she is **afraid that he/she is incapable** and wants to use the excuse of 'last minute work' to explain away deficiencies in performance
- Someone who procrastinates **going to work** -> Because he/she has **lost the passion for the job**

While some of these underlying beliefs may seem crazy to your conscious mind, they are very real and common underpinnings to why people procrastinate. If you're wondering why they are so counter-intuitive, it's because they are usually based on misconceived beliefs formed when we are younger. Since your discerning ability is lower at a younger age, you form many beliefs based just from what you hear or observe around you. Over the years, these beliefs become embedded into your subconsciousness and subsequently guides your actions.

6. Create an action plan to resolve the root issue.

Now that you have uncovered the root issue, it's now time to create your action plan to address that. For this, you can refer to the [ESPER framework](#), a 7-part goal achievement series I have written.

Realization of the issue is usually enough to trigger one into action. That's because it becomes immediately apparent how procrastination is the wrong solution to move forward. For example, if you have lost the passion for your job, your immediate move should be to identify a work you're passionate in and start pursuing that. Procrastinating your current work only prolongs the issue – it's not going to help you in any way. Another example is procrastinating on finding a partner because of low self-worth. The logical step forward should be build up your self-worth, not avoid relationships your whole life.

Wrapping Up

I hope this 5-part series has given you a deep level understanding of what exactly causes procrastination and how you can overcome it. Procrastination is always a sign of an issue in your framework of thinking. Rather than using XX tips, life hacks or time management tools to try to resolve procrastination which ultimately gets you nowhere, you should dig into what exactly is leading to your behavior of procrastination. Only true doing that, can you then finally overcome procrastination for good.

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- [How To Create Real Change In Life: Address Root Cause vs. Effects](#)
- [What Are You Running Away From?](#)
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Afterword

The series in this book is just the icing on the cake. If you have enjoyed this book and found it useful, you will surely love all the other articles at Personal Excellence. Many readers continually feedback on how they have benefited tremendously from reading the site and how it's a staple for their personal growth. Here is a list of top articles to get you started:

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