

12 Rules for Life Summary

By Jordan Peterson

What simple truths help us navigate life's complexities, and how do we find order in the chaos?

12 Rules for Life provides a firm set of guidelines to help achieve balance in our lives, because life is full of unknowns and can be chaotic. Peterson argues that in order to live with more purpose and find more enjoyment, we need to mediate our behavior, be more disciplined, and pursue what's meaningful.

Jordan Peterson, a clinical psychologist and psychology professor, combines philosophy, mythology, religion, and personal experience, to help us answer this question. What he provides are essentially twelve rules or guidelines that will help us create a more meaningful and ordered life. Peterson found inspiration for this book by answering philosophical questions posted on Quora. One example was, 'What are the most valuable things everyone should know?' Such questions challenged him to distill his broad insights, and combine these with cutting-edge science, to create twelve practical rules, that he believes can help us cope with chaos.

This summary will briefly explore 4 of the 12 rules, and unpack the stories Peterson draws upon to explain them. We'll also find out what Pinocchio can teach us about discovering meaning in chaos, as well as what lobsters know about taking responsibility and standing upright. Finally, we'll learn to understand why we take better care of our pets than ourselves.

Rules Help Us to Navigate the Space Between Order and Chaos

As we move between the known and unknown, we're provided with opportunities to find meaning and growth. In the story of *Pinocchio*, a puppet is granted a wish, and asks to be transformed into a real boy. In so doing, he loses the strings that once controlled his life. He gains boyhood independence but must navigate real life's unfamiliarities, and learn painful lessons about honesty, family, and friendship. *Pinocchio*, like other fables such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Lion King*, focuses on a central task. This task is to find meaning, while moving between order and chaos, the known and unknown, the familiar and the uncharted, and security and adventure.

To find balance, we have to straddle these fundamental dualities. We need to have one foot firmly grounded in order and security, while the other might be standing in a place of chaos, possibility, adventure, and growth. He says that to only be grounded in order, creates an imbalance in our lives, as we can't just be stable, secure, and unchanging—there are still new and crucial things to learn. But neither can we tolerate being overwhelmed, beyond our capacity to cope, as we learn about life. When we feel secure, but able to engage with novelty, is when improvement and mastery happen. Pinocchio needed to evolve from puppet to boy, and regain his balance, but without strings attached.

Peterson says we read these stories, religious texts, and the works of philosophers such as Socrates and Aristotle, because we deeply yearn for universal values and rules that give our lives meaning. He extrapolates twelve universal rules from his research, to assist us in balancing order and chaos.

Let's look at what we can learn from the heroic stance of a lobster.

Stand Up Straight With Your Shoulders Back

Life is tough, especially for lobsters. But it's essential to take it all on, and metaphorically stand tall with our shoulders back.

Lobsters have to fight hard for the places that provide safety. Here's where posture comes in. Winning lobsters are the ones that learn to appear prominent and intimidating, causing the more submissive ones to curl up and concede defeat. And losing poses an even bigger problem for the already tense lobster on the receiving end.

Here's why: scientists found that these competitive lobster conflicts lead to chemical changes in the crustacean's brains. Compared to the losers, the triumphant lobsters had a higher hormone serotonin ratio in their brains. These levels, in turn, affect their postures. The more serotonin present, the more agile and upright lobsters appear. However, the lower the serotonin, the tenser and more curled up the lobster's posture is. This neurochemical feedback loop, means that the losing lobster is at a disadvantage in future conflicts.

As with lobsters, we measure ourselves against one another, and our

perception of our social status affects us for better or worse. We're constantly comparing ourselves to others, primarily via social media. If we feel inadequate, neurochemically we're more prone to depression and anxiety. The more stressed and depressed we feel, the less serotonin our body produces, and the more subordinate we appear physically. In other words, we tense and curl up. And the more subordinate our behavior, the more others treat us accordingly. This makes us feel even more inadequate, and so the cycle continues.

So maybe we can find inspiration in the victorious lobster, with its 350 million years of practical wisdom. Stand up straight with our shoulders back. Peterson says: 'So attend carefully to your posture. Quit drooping and hunching around. Speak your mind. Put your desires forward, as if you had a right to them—at least the same right as others. Walk tall and gaze forthrightly ahead. Dare to be dangerous. Encourage the serotonin to flow plentifully through the neural pathways, desperate for its calming influence.'

While standing upright, might matter more than we think, we also need to take better care of ourselves.

Treat Yourself Like Someone You're Responsible for Helping

We take better care of our pets, than we do of ourselves. If our dog is sick, we're likely to follow the vet's prescriptions strictly. Yet, one-third of us ignore our own doctor's medical orders. Why is this? Perhaps it's because at the root of this is a sense of self-loathing, and a belief that we're not worth helping.

Where does this negative self-view stem from? Peterson dates it back to the biblical story of Adam and Eve. They listened to the evil serpent, ate the forbidden fruit, and were exiled from the Garden of Eden, leaving them naked and ashamed. It's a story that makes us conscious of our innate capacity for sin, and how easily we can be corrupted. This can reinforce a sense of unworthiness—that we don't deserve good things. History also reveals man's capacity for evil, as evidenced by so many historical atrocities, which Peterson feels further exacerbates a loathing towards mankind itself. In contrast, our pets and children have an innocence to them, making them deserving of our help.

But dualistic good versus bad thinking, doesn't serve us well. In Eastern philosophy, human nature's duality is represented in the two sides of the Yin-Yang symbol. There's a light and a dark side, yet both contain a portion of the other within them. As with Yin and Yang, we all carry both light and dark inside us. Instead of striving for either one, we should seek balance. This is why the second rule is to care for ourselves with the same tenderness we would show a loved one—or, in this case, our pets. Helping ourselves is actually our moral duty. We're important, with a vital mission to serve ourselves and others well.

Another act of self-care is reflected in the argument as to why we shouldn't compare ourselves to others.

Compare Yourself to Who You Were Yesterday, Not to Who Someone Else is Today

We should compare ourselves to our past achievements, and not to those of others. Comparison is the thief of joy, and can turn a healthy dose of

self-criticism, into harsh self-judgment.

When we believe that we're lacking, or that our present reality is falling short somehow, we're motivated to change for the better. Being self-critical is necessary; it motivates us to keep improving. When our ancestors lived in small tribes, it was easier to be noticeably good at something, and get a healthy dose of feel-good serotonin from all the acknowledgment. Today's world is different. The chances of getting positive feedback are slim. We're part of a global community, making us acutely aware that there's always someone out there who's better than us.

When we compare ourselves to others, self-criticism can take a turn for the worse. We focus on other's achievements, and lose sight of our small daily progress. Or we zoom into one aspect of our lives that doesn't seem to shape up to that of our peers, and we lose sight of a bigger picture. Peterson explains, 'We tend to overvalue what we don't have, and undervalue what we do.' When we compare ourselves to others, we often lose perspective of our progress. But if we compare ourselves to who we were yesterday, it's easier to continue to build on small positive changes.

Progress is one thing, but we need to ensure that it's in pursuit of something that's meaningful and will matter in the long run.

Pursue What's Meaningful, Not What's Expedient

Life isn't necessarily supposed to be fair, or always make us happy. However, it is supposed to be meaningful. For our lives to have meaning, there have to be sacrifices. We have to learn how to forgo short term pleasures, in favor of long term pursuits.

There's an old story about how to catch a monkey. An enticing cookie was put inside an open jar. The trap was designed so that the monkey could fit his hand inside the jar, but not pull his hand out while holding the cookie. Refusing to let go of the treat, meant that he remained stuck, leading to his capture. The moral of the story, is that meaningful goals, often require us to sacrifice immediate gratification. Pursuing what's expedient, works only in the moment.

Pursuing meaning, also involves hardship and can take us through uncharted territory. This territory can feel chaotic, because it contains novel situations that are hard to understand. However, new experiences allow new ideas to take shape. On the other hand, order is explored territory—it's a place of predictability, structure, and stability. It's our plan for the next day and all our little rituals that come with that. While chaos can also displace our sense of order, it can also teach us critical lessons. Peterson says the ideal place for us is to be in the middle, between chaos and order. We need enough order in our lives to feel tethered, but enough chaos to be challenged and learn new things.

To lead a life of meaning, requires us to make sacrifices, endure hardship, and navigate the chaos of the unknown. In the next rule, we find out how the wisdom of others can support us on this journey.

Assume that the Person You're Listening to

Knows Something You Don't

The continual search for knowledge, is the highest form of wisdom. It was why the priestess of the Delphic Oracle in Ancient Greece, spoke most highly of Socrates, who always sought the truth. She described him as the wisest of men. One of the reasons for this, was his belief that the only thing he was certain of was that he knew nothing. His openness to learning was a driving force in his conversations.

Conversation helps us to gain knowledge and wisdom, from the experience of others. Talking aloud also allows us to hear and organize our thoughts. When we don't truly listen, we rob ourselves, and others, the chance to learn something new and valuable.

However, listening isn't easy. We may be absent-minded when someone else is talking. Or we may view a conversation as a competition and a need to validate our viewpoint. This "jockeying for status" means that instead of listening to what others say, we're just thinking about what to say next, to "one-up" them. We might even shut off another's thinking unintentionally, by going into a monologue of our own. Being aware of these tendencies can be helpful, and there are easy tips to become a better conversationalist.

The most effective technique is to summarize, or recap aloud what the other person just said. Say something like, "let me make sure I have this right. What I'm hearing is this." This technique serves multiple purposes: it helps us understand more deeply what's being said, the other person has a chance to correct what we heard, and our understanding of the other person's views deepens.

Furthermore, psychotherapy isn't about giving advice; it's having a genuine conversation. A genuine conversation requires us to be articulate, explorative, and strategic in our thinking. To *really* listen, means to pay careful attention. Peterson says, 'it's incredible what someone might tell us when we truly try to listen'.

So it's important that we listen, with the intent to learn. And amidst the gravitas of some of the more stoic advice, the next rule serves as a lighthearted reminder to stop, and savor the good.

Pet a Cat When You Encounter One on the Street

Life's difficulties can sometimes feel abundant, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't stop to notice and take in all of the joy. It's important to pause, be present, and appreciate the good.

We all know the comic book hero Superman, however, did you know that to begin with, he had infinite powers and could overcome any situation? Eventually, Superman's ability to overcome all odds became boring for readers, because there was nothing for him to struggle against. As a result, he wasn't admirable, he couldn't learn, and he didn't grow. Furthermore, the stories became predictable. In order to make the stories more interesting, the writers had to make him susceptible to kryptonite.

Difficulties often make our own stories *more* meaningful, and can help us become *more* sensitive to the beauty surrounding us.

Peterson shares a personal story, of how his daughter coped with severe arthritis from the age of six. She suffered from constant pain, and had to

undergo multiple surgeries for joint replacements. After years of pain and discomfort, they eventually found a new physiotherapist who helped her to manage her pain, and to become more mobile. Through this experience, Peterson learned that while the situation was seemingly unfair, finding joy and meaning became extremely important to both him and his daughter. It also helped them to navigate challenging times. He thinks an antidote to suffering, is the kind of action that's similar to taking time to stop and pet a cat when you pass one on the sidewalk.

In Conclusion

Peterson's 12 rules, help to broaden our minds and strengthen our spirits. His sage-like, humorous, and informative rules provide us with useful insights, as we navigate through life's complexities. He reminds us to be honest, to take responsibility, to pursue what's meaningful, and to take in the good. Peterson's advice is: 'Orient yourself properly. Then—and only then—concentrate on the day. Set your sights at the Good, the Beautiful, and the True, and then focus pointedly and carefully on the concerns of each moment. Aim continually at Heaven while you work diligently on Earth. Attend fully to the future, in that manner, while attending fully to the present. Then you have the best chance of perfecting both.'

So in the game of life, these might be the 12 rules that all of us need.