

# The Laws of Human Nature Summary

By Robert Greene

What if you could define human nature in just 18 laws?

The saying 'knowledge is power,' has become a bit of a cliché. However, we can never have too much information when it comes to understanding ourselves and other people. In *The Laws of Human Nature*, Greene delves into the complexities of being human, and reveals that we'll lead more controlled lives by comprehending our true natures.

Robert Greene is an American author, who has written six international bestsellers on a range of controversial topics. This book shows us that we can control our actions, and make better decisions, by understanding our impulses and desires. To give us a comprehensive look into the human psyche, he draws on a wealth of historical and psychological research.

Greene provides 18 Laws, which cover the conscious and unconscious aspects of our identity and self-image, group behavior, our actions and reactions, and needs and desires. We're invited to openly evaluate and discuss the aspects of our personalities that are deemed to be faults or weaknesses. We need to acknowledge that every single one of us is flawed, and prone to certain destructive behaviors. Greene asserts that owning up to these faults, and being honest and open about them, enables us to lead more authentic and empathetic lives. We can also use these laws to our advantage, because we can learn to read the people around us by genuinely understanding human nature. Let's briefly take a look.

# "Generational" Differences

How do you see yourself, and is this image what you think other people see?

At a basic level, we're determined by gender, and gender is relatively rigid. Gender is often viewed in terms of binaries, leading to a very formulaic way of behaving. However, gender isn't rigid, it's fluid, and all of us have masculine and feminine traits. These traits are genetic, context-specific, and a product of what we learn. We've been led to believe that we need to repress aspects of our gender that don't fit into how we want to present ourselves. Furthermore, stigmas have emerged regarding gender performance, and acting outside the realms of gender normativity.

As individuals, we tend to have a dominant gender, but our author suggests a move towards gender fluidity to become more rounded individuals. Gender isn't a constraint; it's something that should be explored. The argument is that the more gender-fluid we are, the better we'll be at social interactions, and the more we'll develop critical thinking and problem-solving.

Another way that we box ourselves into a specific identity, is by defining ourselves as products of a particular generation. We have no control over which generation we're born into, yet it has a massive influence on our worldviews.

The Zeitgeist has a remarkable impact on our behavior, our ethos, and our values. For example, what core values do your grandparents believe in, and do they act in a manner that's indicative of their generation? How

do your parents differ from your grandparents? How do you differ from your parents? And finally, what have you learned about the younger generation's Zeitgeist?

It's easy to label people according to their generation. Think how often we attribute specific actions and behaviors to Millennials, Snowflakes, Boomers, Hippies, and Generation X's? However, there's a sense of power in the collective. Often it takes a generation to change our views about the world. Generational awareness makes us more acute to understanding the past, the present, and the future.

## **All the World's a Stage**

How do you want others to see you?

Being self-aware isn't an easy process, because our identities are so fractured. Many of us adopt personas, or wear specific masks to appear a certain way. None of us have a single unified identity, and we tend to develop our personalities to make ourselves look as awesome as possible.

So if we're adopting a particular role, this must mean that the people around us are also roleplaying?

Erving Goffman refers to this act of roleplaying as "impression management." Impression management is a form of self-presentation. We consciously and unconsciously present ourselves to the world to influence people's perceptions of us. Ultimately we're actors playing a particular role. Once we understand impression management, and how we continuously negotiate our behavior and actions, we're a step closer

to understanding other people.

The lesson is that we should never take things at face value. We need to hone our ability to read other people's body language and non-verbal cues. Understanding human nature means realizing that everyone is playing different roles at different times.

We need to observe everything from facial expressions to body language, because gestures and body language are as important as verbal cues. There are three categories to decode people's behavior. There are cues around dislikes and likes, cues around dominance and submission, and the art of deception. Our intuition also goes a long way in reading others.

## **Getting Into Character**

How do you judge a person's character? Do you base this on reputation, or from a snap judgment that you've made?

Character guides human nature, and it's based on genetics, upbringing, and experiences. Our character is ingrained in us, and makes us act in specific ways. We judge character based on how we deal with certain situations, how we deal with others, and how adaptable we are. We need to be aware of our character traits so that we can continuously work on ourselves. Once we've recognized our own characteristics, we can then develop the skills to read the people around us.

A person's character is revealed over time, and often comes out most apparently when dealing with high-pressure situations. High-pressure situations can be handling increased responsibility, or dealing with new

people. People with a strong character are adaptable and open to criticism. If we want a superior character, we have to scrutinize ourselves, and look at how we cope with stress, other people, social situations, relationships, mistakes, etc.

We need to be aware that toxic characters are part of life, but we should disengage from them as quickly as possible. You may have met someone who attracts a lot of drama, or someone who has impossibly high standards? Toxic characters can also be people who repeatedly talk about their big ideas, with no track record of any kind of success. Once we can identify toxic people, we can learn to avoid or outwit them.

## **Acknowledging the Dark Side of the Force**

What are some of the shadows lurking below the surface of your personality?

One of the secrets of becoming an authentic and well-rounded individual, is realizing that every single one of us has a dark side.

Many of us repress feelings of darkness, and hide aspects of ourselves that don't fit in with the persona we like to present to the world. Presenting the dark side is often at odds with the impression that we want to create

However, our dark side and our shadowy areas are where we're often most creative. The trick is to understand as many facets of our character as possible, so that we can channel both our light and dark sides, in order to strike a balance.

And speaking of balance, we're often told that we need to love ourselves before we can love those around us. Narcissism is a character trait that we need to keep in check because it can stand in the way of empathy. All of us have some level of self-absorption; however, some exhibit higher levels of narcissism. Narcissistic behavior is on a spectrum, and we need to evaluate ourselves in order to learn how to be more empathetic and giving.

## **Group Work**

How do you behave in a group situation?

Most people are naturally competitive. Furthermore, when backed into a corner, challenged, or criticized, we tend to become defensive. The first step towards understanding group dynamics is to realize that resistance and defensiveness are a big part of human nature. Hence, we need to explore our defense mechanisms and learn to deal with defensive people.

Once we've done this, we can take a step towards influencing those around us. Being influential isn't about being charming, or exercising our best form of impression management. The best way to influence, is to focus on the people around us. By deflecting attention away from ourselves and honing in on others, we gain a lot more respect.

People need to feel secure and validated. Many people might say that they don't care about what people think about them, but this is usually not the case. Part of belonging to a group is receiving validation and support from a network of people.

Most of us want to feel intelligent and skilled, that we have a strong and likable character, and that we have agency. Once we've decided on our characters, we want other people to confirm these beliefs about ourselves. It's human nature to want other people to verify and validate our positive character traits.

Group interactions can be challenging, especially if we're not feeling validated or supported. And there are ways to become better at understanding and interacting with others. We all need to learn to listen more. In group situations, it's also essential to realize that our moods have a significant impact on others. While laughter and happiness are infectious, so too are stress, anxiety, and irritability.

The saying goes that we're often quick to judge but slow to praise, so remember to validate group members. You want to be someone who listens to insecurities while focusing on achievements and talents. Finally, group work often brings out people's stubborn nature. You can't fight these intense emotions, so try to understand where these feelings are coming from. This is important because if stubborn people feel that they aren't being heard, they often turn towards rebellion and go in their own direction.

## **Where Ego Goes, Envy Goes**

This leads us to the ego.

How often are we told not to compare ourselves to others? We're told this so often that it's hardly surprising that this behavior forms such an essential part of human nature.

Sometimes comparisons are useful because they make us competitive. This competition motivates us to work harder to achieve our goals. However, comparisons can also make us feel inferior, and this has a demotivating aspect.

Where there are comparisons, there's usually jealousy. All of us experience envy at some point, but the tricky part is analyzing how we behave when we're jealous. Some people tend to overcompensate, while others might cloak jealousy with subtle digs. Some use humor as a way to deflect, and some resort to sulking or blaming others.

Jealousy manifests in numerous ways. Learning to read microexpressions helps to pick up the subtle cues that people give off. For example, if you tell someone that you've got a fantastic new job, or just met a great new love interest, you may notice a flicker of disappointment in their eyes? Conversely, it's a good idea to look out for schadenfreude, which is the feeling of experiencing joy at another's pain.

Other indicators include gossip, rumor-mongering, criticism, and unwarranted attacks. People who are feeling jealous battle with empathy, and often feel entitled to better outcomes and results. Being aware of the range of insecurities felt by jealous people, will help you pick up on this behavior type.



The aim is to compete with yourself, and focus on objectives that don't have anything to do with those around you. If you feel envious, it's good to shift the focus to those with less than you, because empathy counteracts envy. Feeling joy for others is another form of empathy. So create a sense of purpose, and admire human greatness, beauty, and achievement.

## **Adapt and Conquer**

We generally adapt our personalities when we're in groups, and being aware of how we do this, adds insight into our own nature.

Are there certain people who influence how we think and behave? Our need to cultivate groups and communities of belonging is an integral part of the human condition. However, groups can be hugely influential.

We need to be critical of group decisions, as well as our desire to fit in and belong. Groups cultivate and enhance our emotions, and they put pressure on us to perform at our best. If we think about culture, rules and codes, factionalization, and so on, we can see how influential groups are.

Being the leader of a group means that we need to be critical of our leadership styles. People are usually ambivalent or cynical about leaders, and therefore gaining loyalty is challenging. Authority comes from creating a powerful exterior, and getting people to buy into your status as a leader. However, you also need to come across as legitimate, fair, and someone who serves. Focus on cultivating trust, vision, unity, and empathy, and you'll come across as an authentic leader. If you're genuine, you'll exude an aura of authority that inspires those around you.

It all comes down to having a sense of collective purpose. If you want to lead an effective group, you have to create and inspire the right team. Be mindful of strengths and weaknesses, encourage diversity, and make sure there are many open communication channels.

## **I Think Therefore I Act**

"Think before you act" isn't a natural instinct for most of us.

Humans can be emotional and irrational. Understanding our emotions means that we can counteract our need to act impulsively. Although we can't be rational all of the time, we can learn to cultivate more rational behavior.

To act more rationally, we need to be aware of bias. Bias comes in a range of forms, is either innate or learned, and makes us believe certain things about the world. There are cognitive biases such as confirmation bias, which is when we cherry-pick facts that support our worldview. We can be biased towards specific groups and individuals, and we can also have a bias about our superiority over others. Once we've identified our biases, we can learn to deal with how they influence us.

We can also improve rationality by examining things that aggravate or trigger particular behaviors. How do you behave under pressure? Are there people that make you especially angry or annoyed?

Gaining perspective is vital. We're often caught up in the news, trends, opinions, and so on. We're naturally drawn to drama, and all of this noise drowns out what's really important. If we want to achieve our goals, we

need perspective and insight to look at the bigger picture.

## **Attitude Is Everything**

Attitude involves how we interpret the world around us.

How would you define your attitude towards life?

Our attitude determines how we perceive things, and having a bad attitude is the best way to sabotage our lives. To change our lives, we need to adjust our attitudes. It can be challenging to get out of the victimhood mindset, or the mindset where we blame others, but these attitudes are detrimental to our progress. There's no denying that the most successful people are those with a positive mental attitude. The good thing is that attitude is a lot easier to change than character.

What are the things that have positive and negative effects on you?

Once you know what kinds of things affect you positively and negatively, you'll be able to adjust how you react to these things. The best way to start is by adapting our world view, to see potential instead of failure. We also need to cultivate a hunger for knowledge and new ideas. By adopting the attitude that each day is a new adventure, we can shift our perceptions of obstacles and hardships. Always maintain a sense of purpose and remember that attitude affects health, relationships, and all other aspects of life.

Having the right attitude is essential, but we also need to know our limits. We often lose touch with reality when we achieve our goals. Once we've achieved success, we can lose sight of reality and act irrationally. Having

delusions of grandeur is part of human nature, and we need to know how to keep this in check.

Cultivating a strong sense of reality means understanding that success has many factors. Success isn't something that we achieve independently; it involves outside influences such as luck, timing, mentors, and so on. Being aware of all the factors that lead to success will keep us grounded and rational.

Success is also determined by having a clear sense of purpose. By nature, we can be aimless and tend towards procrastination. Having a clear understanding of who we are, allows us to have a more defined purpose. Clarity isn't something we experience all the time. On the contrary, it comes to us very rarely. Lack of clarity and defined goals can make us prone to addictions and pleasure-seeking behavior. If we're aimless, we feel useless, which makes us seek out instant gratification. There are times when plans don't work out, and sometimes we'll lose our sense of purpose.

How often have you changed jobs, or needed to rethink your life?

Feeling lost and confused is part of life because change and chaos happen all around us. We need to adapt and trust our instincts. Critically evaluate your strengths, find your true calling, and continuously learn new skills. Be energetic and passionate about your life, and keep momentum by creating a set of clearly defined and manageable goals.

## **Desire and Denial**

We're deeply affected by absence and presence. If we have too much, or

too little of something, we react in specific ways. Hence, we need to find a balance between absence and presence, to keep interest going. It's human nature to want what we can't have, and we should use this to our advantage. The suggestion is always to keep people guessing by shrouding ourselves in mystery. We should keep aspects of our personalities hidden, and leave things up to the imagination. If we give too much of ourselves away, then people will lose interest in us.

Things tempt us, so we project what we desire in the form of fantasies. However, often these fantasies don't measure up to our expectations. Make the most of what you have, and keep your desires and fantasies in check. Desire is one of the most powerful driving forces, and it can lead us to poor decision making.

Another factor that impacts our decisions, or lack thereof, is death. We feel the need to control death, but yet most of the time, we're in denial about our mortality.

Have you ever thought about how you're going to die, or how the end will look?

Greene suggests that this is something that all of us need to do a lot more frequently. He recommends imagining everything down to the smallest details, and focusing on sounds, sights, and feelings. If we adjust the lens to hone in on these details, we'll keep this image with us, and become more familiar and comfortable with our mortality.

Having a clear sense of death means that we're more aware of the finite time that we have on Earth. This clarity of time forces us to act with a greater sense of urgency and purpose, and makes us more likely to fulfill our goals.

Furthermore, if we willingly accept the inevitability of death, we can act with a common purpose, because no one is immune. It also means that we can adjust our attitudes towards the importance of material objects, and how we feel about pain and suffering. The realization that life has an expiry date makes us more acute to the fact that pain and suffering are temporary, and material objects don't matter in the grand scheme of things.

## **In Conclusion**

The purpose of these laws is to unravel some of the reasons why we behave in particular ways. Human nature and behavior isn't mysterious; it just needs more careful observation.

We need to observe the clues and cues that people reveal about themselves to decipher what type of person they are. Once we know this, we can act accordingly. This knowledge also allows us to actively avoid, or outmaneuver people who are toxic or problematic.

Furthermore, by understanding our character, nature, and attitudes, we have more insight into ourselves. Human nature is complex, and we have a range of identities from which to draw. The 18 laws help us to behave more calmly and rationally. By honing in on our strengths, and providing tips on how to be more rounded, empathetic, and focused, we're a lot better equipped to become good leaders who can motivate others.

Finally, knowing that our time is limited helps us focus on what's important, achieve our goals, and pay attention to those sublime moments that fill us with joy and wonder.