

3.10 □ Twelve Rules For Life

A selection of principles for navigating chaos from Jordan Peterson.

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Over the past few decades, the human race has experienced a general movement toward greater freedom, including freedom from restrictive monarchies, from the autocratic rule of tyrants, and from the dictates of religion. According to Jordan Peterson, author of 12 Rules for Life, this overall trend is positive, but in the process, we have lost some of the grounding that previously stabilized our lives.

In a postmodern world, we may find it difficult to identify and hold on to strong moral values. This can be especially true for atheists, who often struggle to find meaning and grapple with nihilism. Without values and principles to anchor us, the world can look excessively chaotic. Adopting some rules can help tip the scales in the other direction, fashioning order from the chaos.

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- These rules can be a shining beacon to those who have lost their way in the world or provide a burst of clarity to anyone.
- Peterson encourages us to confront the truth about our lives, taming the metaphorical dragons that might otherwise grow, fester, and devour us.
- The writing is rich and worthy of reflection. Diving into the content drives the point home and allows the lessons to penetrate deeper layers of the psyche in unexpected ways.

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- The rules are simple, but implementing them is not easy. They require us to step off the path of least resistance and make painful changes to our lives.
- Many of us place a high value on freedom and may resist the very concept of following rules advocated by someone else.
- At times, Peterson's writing style may appear impenetrable. Sticking with it and experiencing the full value requires a lot of patience.

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In 12 Rules for Life, rules that initially appear straightforward and even obvious in their short form reveal surprising depths of meaning when explored in their entirety. The book can be a tough read, but it's worth persevering. Peterson's writing style sometimes appears to meander, taking the reader in unexpected directions as he shares stories, parables, and proverbs that initially seem irrelevant. Stick with him, however, and the payoff is worth the effort.

Fundamentally, Peterson's message is that in order to build a rich and meaningful life, we have an obligation to do good, improving ourselves and the world around us. This is never easy, so we should be prepared to embrace struggle as a core component of human existence. In other words, overcoming challenges is part of what makes living worthwhile and is the only path to a true sense of accomplishment.

There is considerable value in reading the entire book. For the purposes of this tool, however, we will summarize all twelve of the tools and dive into three of the most important in greater detail.

1. Stand up straight with your shoulders back.

This rule is arguably the basis for all the others. By standing up straight with our shoulders back, we indicate to ourselves and others that we are ready to take on the world and show ourselves in the best possible light.

2. Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping.

This tool is about giving yourself the same care, kindness, and attention that you would show to a loved one in need of your support. This means prioritizing self-care and self-respect, acknowledging your needs, and doing your best to support yourself.

3. Make friends with people who want the best for you.

Surrounding ourselves with those who inspire growth and bring positivity into our lives is essential to better relationships, greater happiness, and more well-being. By the same token, it's important not to weave negative people into our lives.

4. Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today.

It's easy to compare ourselves with others. It's far healthier and more productive, however, to concentrate on where we have come from and how much progress we've made.

5. Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them.

Peterson contends that children who don't receive corrective feedback early in life have a much greater chance of developing into poorly socialized adults with issues respecting their own boundaries and those of others. Therefore, teaching your children how to behave is a kindness to them and to everyone they interact with.

6. Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world.

In Peterson's view, while we can rail against society, the government, or God, there is more agency and autonomy in focusing on our sphere of influence and changing the things that are within our power.

7. Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient).

Meaning is usually not found in fleeting pleasure but rather in doing things that match our deeper values. Expediency consists of doing the obvious, easy thing, even when that results in storing up problems for later. Life satisfaction stems from considering the broader impact of our actions on our future selves, our families, and society at large.

8. Tell the truth—or at least don't lie.

In the short term, it may seem as though lies keep us safe from pain, but in the long term, we pay the price by losing our authenticity and inviting chaos into our lives. Peterson says we should strive

to resist this self-deception and find the courage to be who we truly are (see Tool 2.7: Radical Honesty).

9. Assume the person you are listening to might know something you don't.

It helps to remember that, however much we think we know, our conversational partners usually know at least a few things we don't. Therefore, we can certainly learn from them if we have the curiosity and patience to keep our ears open.

10. Be precise in your speech.

Many of us live with undefined problems and use vague language as a way to avoid confronting them directly. When we articulate the precise issues—what Peterson calls “naming the dragon”—we are in a better position to overcome them.

11. Do not bother children while they are skateboarding.

Peterson believes that children learn crucial life lessons when they experiment with chaos and danger in unsupervised environments. Skateboarding is an example of this type of environment—an activity where they can take risks, succeed and fail, and improve their capabilities.

12. Pet a cat when you encounter one in the street.

Life can be extremely hard, even for those of us in prosperous nations. Therefore, we shouldn't pass up the opportunity to appreciate small moments of happiness and levity, such as befriending an animal.

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There's a great deal more to say about all these rules, but hopefully, these brief summaries provide you with food for thought and inspire you to explore the rules that you find most interesting. Now, to give a deeper perspective, let's dive a little more into three of them.

1. Stand up straight with your shoulders back.

In this tool, Peterson discusses the urge to move up social hierarchies. He argues that this drive is fundamental and has existed for hundreds of millions of years, embedded in most animal species, including humans.

Like it or not, we should recognize this core motivation in ourselves. As a species, we naturally create hierarchies and consistently strive to climb the ladder (usually multiple ladders). We do this not necessarily by confronting one another directly but by increasing our fitness, wealth, social status, and even personal awareness, boosting characteristics that denote dominance and attractiveness.

In Peterson's view, while there can be negatives to hierarchical thinking, it's impossible to eliminate it. The drive for self-improvement and advancement can be a powerful motivator, so we should adopt it rather than fight against it.

2. Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient).

When we reflect on the vastness of time, it's easy to feel that our lives are insignificant, made up of just fleeting moments in a timeline that stretches beyond comprehension. This can tempt us to focus on short-term pleasures and avoid life's struggles, believing our choices have little lasting impact. Yet, deep down, we know that not all actions are equal. Helping others, contributing to something greater than ourselves, or even simply growing as individuals resonates more deeply than momentary distractions.

Peterson argues that while expediency—doing what feels good now—offers temporary relief, it doesn't fulfill us in the long run. What truly sustains us is the pursuit of meaning. This might look like sacrificing leisure to invest in your future, standing up for what you believe is right, or offering support to someone in need. Though meaning can be difficult to define, we all feel its presence when our actions align with something larger than ourselves. It's this alignment that brings genuine, lasting satisfaction, making the hard path worthwhile.

3. Assume the person you are listening to might know something you don't.

Conversation is how we organize our minds. It's extremely difficult to both talk and listen to ourselves, so we benefit greatly from sharing our thoughts with people we trust and receiving their honest feedback.

This type of conversation sometimes invites others to listen to us and sometimes requires us to play the role of listener, paying attention to what someone else is sharing with us and, when they're ready, giving them our feedback. Listening well involves developing the capacity to understand what others are saying without leaping to conclusions, judging them, or forcing our point of view upon them.

Another element of becoming a good listener is accepting that others, with their unique perspectives, know things that we don't. Even if they don't have unique subject knowledge, they know what they are thinking and feeling about the conversation, which may hold valuable insights. It's a good practice to approach every conversation with this awareness in mind.

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Whatever your current circumstances, at least a few of these twelve rules probably contain some wisdom you can apply. While the summaries here are no substitute for reading the full book, they may provide a spark of inspiration. If the rules resonate with you, review them occasionally and see whether they can lighten your life a little.

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Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote for Chaos* (Random House, 2018).