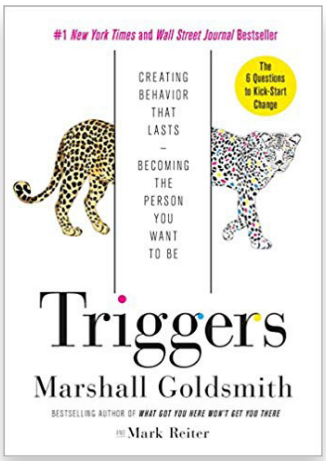

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Triggers

THE SUMMARY

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PART ONE: WHY DON'T WE BECOME THE PERSON WE WANT TO BE?

Chapter 1: The Immutable Truths of Behavioral Change

It's hard to initiate behavioral change, even harder to stay the course, and hardest of all to make the change stick. I'd go so far as to say that adult behavioral change is the most difficult thing for sentient human beings to accomplish. Change has to come from within. It can't be dictated, demanded, or otherwise forced upon people. A man or woman who does not wholeheartedly commit to change will never change.

Imagine how much harder it is when you let other people into the process. People's actions are unpredictable as well as beyond your control—and their responses can affect your success. That's what makes adult behavioral change so hard. If you want to be a better partner at home or a better manager at work, you not only have to change your ways, you have to get some buy-in from your partner or co-workers. Everyone around you has to recognize that you're changing. Relying on other people increases the degree of difficulty exponentially.

What makes positive, lasting behavioral change so challenging—and causes most of us to give up early in the game—is that we have to do it in our imperfect world, full of triggers that may pull and push us off course. The good news is that behavioral change does not have to be complicated. As you absorb the methods in the following pages, do not be lulled into being dismissive because my advice sounds simple. Achieving meaningful and lasting change may be simple, but simple is far from easy.

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Chapter 2: Belief Triggers That Stop Behavioral Change in Its Tracks

Even when the individual and societal benefits for changing a specific behavior are indisputable, we are geniuses at inventing reasons to avoid change. It is much easier, and more fun, to attack the strategy of the person who's trying to help than to try to solve the problem.

That genius becomes more acute when it's our turn to change how we behave. We fall back on a set of beliefs that trigger denial, resistance, and ultimately, self-delusion which give rise to excuses. An excuse is the handy explanation we offer when we disappoint other people. Not merely convenient, it is often made up on the spot. We don't exercise because "it's boring" or we're "too busy." We're late for work because of "traffic" or "an emergency with the kids." We hurt someone because we "didn't have a choice." These excuses, basically variations on "The dog ate my homework," are so abused it's a wonder anyone believes us (even when we're telling the truth).

What should we call the rationalizations we privately harbor when we disappoint ourselves? An excuse explains why we fell short of expectations *after* the fact. Our inner beliefs trigger failure before it happens. They sabotage lasting change by canceling its possibility. We employ these beliefs as articles of faith to justify our inaction and then wish away the result. I call them *belief triggers*. Over confidence. Stubbornness. Magical thinking. Confusion. Resentment. Procrastination. That's a lot of heavy baggage to carry on our journey of change.

Chapter 3: It's the Environment

Most of us go through life unaware of how our environment shapes our behavior. When we experience "road rage" on a crowded freeway, it's not because we're sociopathic monsters. It's because the temporary condition of being behind the wheel in a car, surrounded by rude impatient drivers, triggers a change in our otherwise placid demeanor. We've unwittingly placed ourselves in an environment of impatience, competitiveness, and hostility—and it alters us.

The environment that I'm most concerned with is actually smaller, more particular. It's situational, and it's a hyperactive shape-shifter. Every time we enter a new situation, with its mutating who-what-when-where-and-why specifics, we are surrendering ourselves to a new environment which puts our goals, our plans, and our behavioral integrity at risk. A changing environment changes us.

This situational aspect of our environment is what I've been working on with my one-on-one coaching clients. It's not that these very smart executives don't know that circumstances change from moment to moment as they go through their day. They know. But at the level where nine out of ten times they are the most powerful person in the room, they can easily start believing they're immune to the environment's ill will. In a frenzy of delusion, they actually believe they control their environment, not the other way around. Given all the deference and fawning these C-level executives experience throughout the day, such misguided belief is understandable. Not acceptable, but understandable. If we do not create and control our environment, our environment creates and controls us. The result turns us into someone we do not recognize.

Convene

Triggers

Chapter 4: Identifying Our Triggers

The act of giving and receiving feedback is our first step in becoming more mindful about the connection between our environment and our behavior. Feedback teaches us to see our environment as a triggering mechanism. In some cases, the feedback itself is the trigger.

Radar speed displays (RSD)—also called driver feedback systems—work because they harness a well-established concept in behavior theory called a feedback loop. RSDs are simply a speed limit sign posted above a digital readout measuring "Your Speed". The RSDs measure a driver's action (that is, speeding) and relay the information to the driver in real time, inducing the driver to react. It's a loop of action, information, reaction. When the reaction is measured, a new loop begins, and so on and so on. Given the immediate change in a driver's behavior after just one glance at an RSD, it's easy to imagine the immense utility of feedback loops in changing people's behavior.

A feedback loop is comprised of four stages: evidence, relevance, consequence, and action. Drivers get data about their speed in realtime (evidence). The information gets their attention because it's coupled with the posted speed limit, indicating whether they're obeying or breaking the law (relevance). Aware that they're speeding, drivers fear getting a ticket or hurting someone (consequence). So they slow down (action). This is how feedback ultimately triggers desirable behavior.

Once we deconstruct feedback into its four stages, the world never looks the same again. Suddenly we understand that our good behavior is not random. It's logical. It follows a pattern. It makes sense. It's within our control. It's something we can repeat. It's why some obese people finally take charge of their eating habits when they're told that they have diabetes and will die, go blind or lose a limb if they don't make a serious lifestyle change. Death, blindness,and amputation are consequences we understand and can't brush aside.

As a trigger, our environment has the potential to resemble a feedback loop by constantly providing new information that has meaning and consequences for us and alters our behavior. But the resemblance ends there. Where a well-designed feedback loop triggers desirable behavior, our environment often triggers bad behavior against our will and better judgment, and without our awareness. We don't know we've changed. Which brings up the obvious question: What if we could control our environment so it triggered our most desired behavior like an elegantly designed feedback loop? Instead of blocking us from our goals, this environment would propel us. Instead of dulling us to our surroundings, it would sharpen us. Instead of shutting down who we are, it would open us up. This may be the greatest payoff of identifying and defining our triggers: a reminder that, no matter how extreme the circumstances, when it comes to our behavior, we always have a choice.

Chapter 5: How Triggers Work

When I was getting my doctorate at UCLA, the classic sequencing template for analyzing problem behavior in children was known as ABC, an acronym for antecedent, behavior, and consequence. The antecedent is the event that prompts the behavior, and the behavior creates a consequence.

Convene

Triggers

In his engaging book, *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg applied this ABC template to breaking and forming habits. Instead of antecedent, behavior, and consequence, he used the terms cue, routine, and reward to describe the three-part sequence known as a habit loop. Smoking cigarettes is a habit loop consisting of stress (cue), nicotine stimulation (routine), leading to temporary psychic well-being (reward). People often gain weight when they try to quit smoking because they substitute food for nicotine as their routine. In doing so, they are obeying Duhigg's Golden Rule of Habit Change which is to keep the cue and reward but change the routine though eating is a poor substitute. Doing thirty push-ups (or anything physically challenging) might be more effective than eating more.

I don't take issue with the first and third segments of Duhigg's habit loop, whatever terms we use—antecedent and consequence, cue and reward, stimulus and response, cause and effect, or trigger and outcome. It's the middle part or the routine that I want to modify. The habit loop makes it sound as if all we need is an awareness of our cues so we can automatically respond with an appropriate behavior. That's in line with habits, but when we're changing interpersonal behavior, we're adding a layer of complexity in the form of other people. Our triggered response can't always be automatic and unthinking because as caring human beings we have to consider how people will respond to our actions.

In the matter of adult behavioral change, I'd like to propose a modification to the sequence of antecedent, behavior, and consequence, by interrupting it with a sense of awareness and an infinitesimal stoppage of time. My modified sequence looks like this: Trigger—Impulse—Awareness—Choice—Behavior.

I've isolated three eye-blink moments: first the impulse, then the awareness, then the choice. These moments comprise the crucial intervals between the trigger and our eventual behavior. These intervals are so brief we sometimes fail to segregate them from what we regard as our "behavior", but experience and common sense tell us they're real.

When a trigger is pulled we have an impulse to behave a certain way. That's why when some of us hear a loud crash, we immediately duck our heads to protect ourselves. The more shrewd and alert among us aren't as quick to run for cover. They hear the sound and look around to see what's behind it in case there's even more to worry about. Same trigger, different responses. One of them is automatic and hasty; the other is intermediated by pausing, reflecting, and sifting among better options. We have brain cells. We can think. We can make any impulse run in place for a brief moment while we choose to obey or ignore it. We make a choice not out of unthinking habit but as evidence of our intelligence and engagement. In other words, we are paying attention.

If we're paying attention, this is how triggers work. The more aware we are, the less likely any trigger, even in the most mundane circumstances, will prompt hasty unthinking behavior that leads to undesirable consequences. Rather than operate on autopilot, we'll slow down time to think it over and make a more considered choice.

The big moments packed with triggers, stress, raw emotions, high stakes, and thus high potential for disaster, are easy to handle. When successful people know it's show time, they prepare to put on a show. It's the little moments that trigger some of our most outsized and unproductive responses: the slow line at the coffee shop, or the second cousin who asks why you're still single. These are life's paper cuts. They happen every day, and they're not going away. They often involve people we'll never see again, yet they can trigger some of our basest impulses.

Some of us suppress the impulse and disarm the moment. If there are no bullets in the gun, the trigger doesn't matter. On the other hand, some of us can't resist our first impulse. We have to speak up. This is how ugly public scenes begin. These tiny annoyances should trigger bemusement over life's rich tapestry instead of turning us into umbrage-taking characters from a *Seinfeld* episode.

Chapter 6: We Are Superior Planners and Inferior Doers

Let's use the term planner for the part of us that intends to change our behavior and doer for the part of us that actually makes change happen. We are superior planners and inferior doers.

It's not just environmental intrusions and unpredicted events that upset our plans. It's also our willful discounting of past experience. We make plans that are wholly contradicted by our previous actions. The planner who intends to make a deadline is also the myopic doer who forgets that he has never made a deadline in his life. The planner believes this time will be different. The doer extends the streak of missed deadlines. The yawning gap between planner and doer persists even when conditions for success are practically ideal.

The boxer-philosopher Mike Tyson said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face." As we wander through life, what punches us in the face repeatedly is our environment.

Chapter 7: Forecasting the Environment

Successful people are not completely oblivious to their environment. In the major moments of our lives, when the outcome really matters and failure is not an option, we are masters of anticipation. When our performance has clear and immediate consequences, we rise to the occasion. We create our environment. We don't let it re-create us.

The problem is that the majority of our day consists of minor moments, when we're not thinking about the environment or our behavior because we don't associate the situation with any consequences. These seemingly benign environments, ironically, are when we need to be most vigilant. When we're not anticipating the environment, anything can happen.

Peter Drucker famously said, "Half the leaders I have met don't need to learn what to do. They need to learn what to stop." It's no different with our environment. Quite often our smartest response is avoiding it.

We are generally shrewd about avoiding environments that present a physical or emotional risk or are otherwise unpleasant. On the other hand, we rarely triumph over an environment that is enjoyable. We'd rather continue enjoying it than abandon or avoid it. Part of the reason is inertia. It takes enormous will power to stop doing something enjoyable.

A bigger part, though, is our fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between our environment and temptation. Temptation is the mocking sidekick who shows up in any enjoyable environment, urging us to relax, try a little of this or that, stay a little longer. Temptation can corrupt our values, health, relationships, and careers. Our

delusional belief that we control our environment makes us choose to flirt with temptation rather than walk away. We are constantly testing ourselves against it and dealing with the shock and distress when we fail.

It's a simple equation: To avoid undesirable behavior, avoid the environment where it is most likely to occur. If you don't want to be lured into a tantrum by a colleague who gets on your nerves, avoid him. If you don't want to indulge in late-night snacking, don't wander into the kitchen looking for leftovers in the fridge. Of course, there are many moments in life when avoidance is impossible. We have to engage, even if doing so terrifies us (public speaking), or enrages us (visiting our in-laws), or turns us into jerks (conducting business with people we don't respect).

Adjustment, if we're lucky, is the end product of forecasting, but only after we anticipate our environment's impact and eliminate avoidance as an option. Adjustment doesn't happen that often. Most of us continue our errant ways unchecked. We succeed despite falling into the same behavioral traps again and again. Adjustment happens when we're desperate to change, or have an unexpected insight, or are shown the way by another person (such as a friend or coach).

Chapter 8: The Wheel of Change

Now that I've outlined our frailties in the face of behavioral change and labeled us abject losers in our ongoing war with the environment, you may rightly ask, *when do we get to the good stuff which includes spelling out something meaningful to do?* Not so fast. To understand a problem, you not only have to admit there is a problem; you also have to appreciate all your options. With behavioral change, we have options.

A graphic tool that I've been using with clients for years illustrates the interchange of two dimensions we need to sort out before we can become the person we want to be. Picture a circle divided by two axes: the Positive to Negative axis tracks the elements that either help us or hold us back. The Change to Keep axis tracks the elements that we determine to change or keep in the future. In pursuing any behavioral change we have four options: change or keep the positive elements, and change or keep the negative.

Between *Positive* and *Change* is *Creating*. It represents the positive elements that we want to create in our future. Between *Positive* and *Keep* is *Preserving*. It represents the positive elements that we want to keep in the future. Between *Change* and *Negative* is *Eliminating*. It represents the negative elements that we want to eliminate in the future. Between *Keep* and *Negative* is *Accepting*. It represents the negative elements that we need to accept in the future. These are the choices. Some are more dynamic, glamorous, and fun than others, but they're equal in importance.

Executing the change we hold as a concrete image in our mind is a process. It requires vigilance and diligent self-monitoring. It demands a devotion to rote repetition that we might initially dismiss as simplistic and undignified, even beneath us. More than anything, the process resuscitates an instinct that's been drilled into us as tiny children but slowly dissipates as we learn to enjoy success and fear failure—the importance of trying.

PART TWO: TRY

Chapter 9: The Power of Active Questions

Active questions are the alternative to passive questions. There's a difference between "Do you have clear goals?" and "Did you do your best to set clear goals for yourself?" The former is trying to determine the employee's state of mind; the latter challenges the employee to describe or defend a course of action.

I initiated a controlled study to test the effectiveness of active questions with employees who undergo training. The theory was the different phrasing of the follow-up questions would have a measurable effect because active questions focus respondents on what they can do to make a positive difference in the world rather than what the world can do to make a positive difference for them.

The results were amazingly consistent. The control group showed little change. The passive questions group reported positive improvement in all four areas. The active questions group doubled that improvement on every item! Active questions were twice as effective at delivering training's desired benefits to employees. While any follow-up was shown to be superior to no follow-up, a simple tweak in the language of follow-up—focusing on what the individual can control—makes a significant difference.

Chapter 10: The Engaging Questions

For years I've followed a nightly follow-up routine that I call Daily Questions, in which I have someone call me wherever I am in the world and listen while I answer a specific set of questions that I have written for myself. For the longest time there were thirteen questions, many focused on my physical well-being. The first question was always "How happy was I today?" Then, how meaningful was my day? How much do I weigh? Did I say or do something nice for Lyda (my wife)? And so on. The nightly specter of honestly answering these questions kept me focused on my goal of being a happier and healthier individual. For more than a decade it was the one discipline in my otherwise chaotic 180-days-a year-on-the-road life.

Studying my list or questions in light of the active/passive distinction, I realized many were phrased poorly, perhaps too passively. They weren't inspiring or motivational. They didn't trigger extraordinary effort out of me. They merely asked me to gauge how I had performed that day on my goals. If I scored poorly on watching TV, there was no self-recrimination or guilt attached to my answer, nothing to make me feel that I was slacking or letting myself down. Like most people who answer passive questions, I considered my mistakes more as a function of my environment than myself.

As an experiment, I tweaked the questions using the "Did I do my best to" formulation. Did I do my best to be happy? Did I do my best to find meaning? Did I do my best to have a healthy diet? Did I do my best to be a good husband?

Adding the words "did I do my best" added the element of trying into the equation. It injected personal ownership and responsibility into my question-and-answer process. After a few weeks using this checklist, I noticed an unintended consequence. Active questions themselves didn't merely elicit an answer. They created a different level of engagement with my goals. To give an accurate accounting of my effort, I couldn't simply answer yes or no or "30 minutes." I had to rethink how I phrased my answers. For one thing, I had to measure my effort on a relative scale, comparing the most

recent day's effort with previous days. I chose to grade myself on a 1-to-10 scale, with 10 being the best score. If I scored low on trying to be happy, I had only myself to blame. We may not hit our goals every time, but there's no excuse for not trying. This "active" process will help anyone get better at almost anything. It only takes a couple of minutes a day. But be warned: it is tough to face the reality of our own behavior—and our own level of effort—every day.

My first six questions are the Engaging Questions that I suggest for everyone:

• Did I do my best to set clear goals today?

• Did I do my best to make progress toward my goals today?

• Did I do my best to find meaning today?

• Did I do my best to be happy today?

• Did I do my best to build positive relationships today?

• Did I do my best to be fully engaged today?

My next questions revolve around cornerstone concepts in The Wheel of Change, where I'm either creating, preserving, eliminating, or accepting. For example, learning something new or producing new editorial content is creating. Expressing gratitude is preserving. Avoiding angry comments is eliminating, and so is avoiding proving I'm right when it's not worth it. Making peace with what I cannot change and forgiving myself is accepting. And the remaining questions are about my family and my health.

Your Daily Questions should reflect your objectives. They're not meant to be shared in public, meaning they're not designed to be judged. You're not constructing your list to impress anyone. It's your list, your life. I score my "Did I do my best" questions on a simple I to 10 scale. You can use whatever works for you. Your only considerations should be first, are these important in my life? Second, will success on these items help me become the person I want to be?

Chapter 11: Daily Questions in Action

One of the unappreciated benefits of Daily Questions is that they force us to quantify an unfamiliar data point: our level of trying. We rarely do that. We treat effort as a second-class citizen. It's the condolence message we send ourselves when we fail. We say, "I gave it my best shot," or "I get an A for effort." But after a few days, quantifying effort rather than outcome reveals patterns that we'd otherwise miss.

More than anything, Daily Questions neutralize the arch enemy of behavioral change: our impatience. Whether it's flat abs or a new reputation, we want to see results now, not later. We see the gap between the effort required today and the reward we'll reap in an undetermined future, and lose our enthusiasm for change. We crave instant gratification and cheat the prospect of prolonged trying.

Triggers

Daily Questions, by definition, compel us to take things one day at a time. They shrink our objectives into manageable twenty-four hour increments. By focusing on effort, they distract us from our obsession with results (because that's not what we're measuring). In turn, we are free to appreciate the process of change and our role in making it happen. We're no longer frustrated by the languid pace of visible progress—because we're looking in another direction.

Chapter 12: Planner, Doer, and Coach

There's no inherent magic to charting our Daily Questions on a spreadsheet. The only essential element is that the scores are reported somehow—via direct phone contact, email, or a voice message—to someone every day. That someone is the coach.

For some people the "coach" is little more than a scorekeeper; someone we report to each evening without having to endure any judgment or interference. For others the coach is a referee, someone keeping score but also blowing the whistle when we commit an egregious foul. For others the coach is a full-blown adviser, engaging us in a dialogue about what we're doing and why.

At the most basic level, a coach is a follow-up mechanism, like a supervisor who regularly checks in on how we're doing. At a slightly more sophisticated level, a coach instills accountability. In the self-scoring system of Daily Questions, we must answer for our answers. If we're displeased, we face a choice. Do we continue suffering our self-created disappointment, or do we try harder? As a result, reading off our scores every night to a "coach" becomes a daily test of our commitment, which is a good thing given our inclination to bear down when we know we'll be tested.

But a "coach" is more than a surrogate for our guilty conscience. At the highest level, a coach is a source of mediation, bridging the gap between the visionary Planner and short-sighted Doer in us. The Planner in us may say "I'm going to read Anna Karenina over vacation," but during a holiday packed with enticing distractions, it's the Doer who has to find a quiet corner and get through Tolstoy's many pages. A Coach reminds the fragile Doer what he's supposed to do.

Chapter 13: AIWATT

I have a first principle for becoming the person you want to be. Follow it and it will shrink your daily volume of stress, conflict, unpleasant debate, and wasted time. It is phrased in the form of a question you should be asking yourself whenever you must choose to either engage or "let it go."

Am I willing, at this time, to make the investment required to make a positive difference on this topic?

It's a question that pops into my head so often each day that I've turned the first five words into an acronym, AIWATT (it rhymes with "say what"). Like the physician's principle, "first, do no harm", it doesn't require you to do anything except merely avoid doing something foolish.

AIWATT is the delaying mechanism we should be deploying at the interval between trigger and behavior, after a trigger creates an impulse and before behavior we may regret. AIWATT creates a split-second delay in our prideful, cynical,

judgmental, argumentative, and selfish responses to our triggering environment. The delay gives us time to consider a more positive response. The nineteen-word text deserves close parsing:

Am I willing implies that we are exercising volition—taking responsibility—rather than surfing along the waves of inertia that otherwise rule our day. We are asking, "Do I really want to do this?"

At this time reminds us that we're operating in the present. Circumstances will differ later on, demanding a different response. The only issue is what we're facing now.

To make the investment required reminds us that responding to others is work, an expenditure of time, energy, and opportunity. Like any investment, our resources are finite. We are asking, "Is this really the best use of my time?"

To make a positive difference places the emphasis on the kinder, gentler side of our nature. It's a reminder that we can help create a better us or a better world. If we're not accomplishing one or the other, why are we getting involved?

On this topic focuses us on the matter at hand. We can't solve every problem. The time we spend on topics where we can't make a positive difference is stolen from topics where we can.

The circumstances for deploying AIWATT are not limited to those moments when we must choose to be nice or not (although I can't overestimate the importance of being nice). The question matters in the seemingly small moments that can shape our reputation and make or break our relationships.

PART THREE: MORE STRUCTURE, PLEASE

Chapter 14: We Do Not Get Better Without Structure

In my years of coaching and research on change, I have learned one key lesson, which has near-universal applicability: We do not get better without structure. Structure's major contribution to any change process is that it limits our options so that we're not thrown off course by externalities. If we're only allowed five minutes to speak, we find a way to make our case with a newfound concision—and it's usually a better speech because of the structural limitations. Imposing structure on parts of our day is how we seize control of our otherwise unruly environment.

Successful people know all this intuitively. Yet we discount structure when it comes to honing our interpersonal behavior. Structure is fine for organizing our calendar, or learning a technically difficult task, or managing other people, or improving a quantifiable skill. But for the simple tasks of interacting with other people we prefer to wing it, for reasons that sound like misguided variations on "I shouldn't need to do that." Asking ourselves, "Did I do my best…" is another way of admitting, "In this area I need help." Answering the questions every day without fail is how we instill the rigor and discipline that have been missing from our lives. The net result is a clarity that makes us confront the question we try so hard to avoid: are we getting better?

Chapter 15: But It Has to Be the Right Structure

We do not get better without structure, whether we're targeting an organizational goal or a personal one. But it has to be structure that fits the situation and the personalities involved. Different people respond to different structure. Every person, every situation, needs to customize structure to fit their needs. There is no one size fits all. Customizing structure not only increases our chance of success, it makes us more efficient at it.

Chapter 16: Behaving Under the Influence of Depletion

Like fuel in a gas tank, our self-control is finite and runs down with steady use. By the end of the day, we're worn down and vulnerable to foolish choices. Depletion most obviously affects our decision making. The more decisions we're obliged to make, whether it's choosing among the dozens of options when buying a new car or reducing the list of attendees at an off-site meeting, the more fatigued we get in handling subsequent decisions.

Researchers call this decision fatigue, a state that leaves us with two courses of action: 1) we make careless choices or 2) we surrender to the status quo and do nothing. Decision fatigue is why the head-scratching purchases we make on Tuesday get returned on Wednesday. It's also why we put off decisions.

Unlike being physically tired, however, we're usually unaware of depletion. It's not like engaging in strenuous physical activity where we feel the weariness in our muscles and take time out to rest. Depletion, like stress, is an invisible enemy. We can't measure it, so we don't appreciate how it's grinding us down, affecting our behavioral discipline, and exposing us to bad judgment and undesirable actions. It's one thing to engage in depleting activities, but there's another dimension and that's how we behave under the influence of depletion. Doing things that deplete us is not the same as doing things when we're depleted. The former is cause, the latter effect.

The effect isn't pretty. Under depletion's influence we are more prone to inappropriate social interactions, such as talking too much, sharing intimate personal information, and being arrogant. We are less likely to follow social norms. We can also be more aggressive because the effort of curbing our normal aggression depletes our self-control over that impulse. Conversely, we can also be more passive because when our intellectual resources are sapped, we are more easily persuaded by others and less adept at coming up with counter arguments.

Basically, all the natural urges we try to rein in during the day have the potential to rush toward center stage as the day progresses and our depletion increases. It doesn't mean they will materialize, but they're lurking within us, waiting for the right trigger.

Structure is how we overcome depletion. In an almost magical way, structure slows down how fast our discipline and self-control disappear. When we have structure, we don't have to make as many choices; we just follow the plan. The net result is we're not being depleted as quickly. If we provide ourselves with enough structure, we don't need discipline. The structure provides it for us.

Triggers

We're probably not aware of how much depletion-lightening structure we've injected into our lives. When we follow an unshakable wake-up routine, or write down an agenda for our meetings, or stop at the same coffee shop before work, or clear our messy desk before opening up the laptop to write, we're surrendering to our routine, and burning up less energy trying to be disciplined. Our routine has taken care of that.

Chapter 17: We Need Help When We're Least Likely to Get It

Our environment is loaded with surprises that trigger odd, unfamiliar responses from us. We lack the structural tools to handle bewildering interpersonal challenges. What kind of structure are we talking about?

It should be a simple structure that (a) anticipates that our environment will take a shot at us and (b) triggers a smart, productive response rather than foolish behavior. I suggest that simple structure is a variation on the Daily Questions, a process that requires us to score our effort and reminds us to be self-vigilant. For example, imagine that you have to go to a one-hour meeting that will be pointless and boring, a time-suck better spent catching up on your "real" work. Now imagine at meeting's end you will be tested with four simple questions about how you spent that hour: 1) Did I do my best to be happy? 2) Did I do my best to find meaning? 3) Did I do my best to build positive relationships? 4) Did I do my best to be fully engaged? If you knew that you were going to be tested, what would you do differently to raise your score on any of these four items?

Here's my radical suggestion. From now on, pretend that you are going to be tested at every meeting! Your heart and mind will thank you for it. The hour that you spend in the meeting is one hour of your life that you never get back. If you are miserable, it is your misery, not the companys' or your co-workers'. Why waste that hour being disengaged and cynical? By taking personal responsibility for your own engagement, you make a positive contribution to your company—and begin creating a better you.

Think of this idea as a small mental gyration for altering your behavior. Testing is usually a post hoc event after the performance, then the scoring. This pretend-you'll-be-tested concept flips it around. It's not cheating. It's not a gimmick. It's structure, the kind that successful people already rely on. Like trial lawyers never asking a question they don't know the answer to, you're taking a test with the correct answers provided in advance—by you. For the one hour you find yourself in that dreaded meeting, you're giving yourself help when you need it most.

Chapter 18: Hourly Questions

Adapting Daily Questions into Hourly Questions creates powerful structure for locating ourselves in the moment. Hourly Questions have a specific short-term utility. It would be impractical and exhausting to rely on them for long-term behavioral challenges such as rebranding yourself as a nicer person. When you answer your Daily Questions each night, you gradually reap the benefit many months later. You're playing a long game. Hourly Questions are for the short game, when we require a burst of discipline to restrain our behavioral impulses for a defined period of time. Two universal situations come to mind.

Triggers

There's the dreaded event which includes any environment where our inherent pessimism going in can trigger our careless unappealing behavior during the event. It could be the contrived camaraderie of a company retreat, or a tense Thanksgiving with the extended family, or a disappointing parent-teacher conference at a child's school. If we participate in these moments without a structure to discipline what we say and do, our pessimism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy because we're crafting the unpleasantness we anticipated. Hourly Questions are one kind of structure to defuse pessimism. It's our choice.

Then there are people: the ones who throw us off our game because of their personalities and actions. It could be the colleague with the high chirping voice, or the customer service representative repeating the same non-helpful response in six different ways, or the pompous know-it-all on the local school board, or the supermarket shopper in front of you with twenty items in the ten-item express line. We've seen these people before, yet we still allow them to unhinge us. In those brief moments when we are vulnerable to the obtuseness and intransigence of another human being, Hourly Questions can bring out a newfound restraint in us.

Chapter 19: The Trouble with "Good Enough"

There are no absolutes in behavioral change. We never achieve perfect patience or generosity or empathy or humility. The best we can hope for is a consistency in our effort—a persistence of striving—that makes other people more charitable about our shortcomings. What's worrisome is when the striving stops, our lapses become more frequent, and we begin to coast on our reputation. That's the perilous moment when we start to settle for good enough.

Good enough isn't necessarily a bad thing. In many areas of life, chasing perfection is a fool's errand, or at least a poor use of our time. We don't need to spend hours taste-testing every mustard on the gourmet shelf to find the absolute best; a good enough brand will suffice for our sandwich. For most things we suspend our hypercritical faculties and find satisfaction with the merely good. The economist Herbert Simon called this "satisficing;" our tendency to modify everyday choices because chasing that last bit of improvement is not worth the time or effort. It will not significantly increase our happiness or satisfaction. We do this with our choice of toothpaste, or detergent, or romance novels, or Japanese takeout.

The problem begins when this good enough attitude spills beyond our marketplace choices and into the things we say and do. In the interpersonal realm—we're talking about how a husband treats his wife, or a son deals with an aging parent or a trusted friend responds when people are counting on him—good enough is setting the bar too low. Satisficing is not an option. It neither satisfies nor suffices. It disappoints people, creates distress where there should be harmony, and, taken to extremes, ends up destroying relationships.

Chapter 20: Becoming the Trigger

There is an ultimate blessing of not settling for good enough. When we dive all the way into adult behavioral change, with 100 percent focus and energy, we become an irresistible force rather than the proverbial immovable object. We begin to change our environment rather than be changed by it. The people around us sense this. We have become the trigger.

PART FOUR: NO REGRETS

Chapter 21: The Circle of Engagement

My main goal in writing this book has been relatively modest: to help you achieve lasting positive change in the behavior that is most important to you. It's not my job to tell you what to change. With time to reflect, most of us know what we should be doing. My job is to help you do it. The change doesn't have to be enormous, the kind where people don't recognize you anymore. Any positive change is better than none at all. If as a result of some insight gained here, you're a little happier as you go through your day, or you have a slightly better relationship with the people you love, or you reach one of your goals, that's enough for me.

But I've also tried to highlight the value of two other objectives. They don't quite fit into the mold of the classic traditional virtues that our parents taught us. They're more like positive states of being. The first objective is awareness—being awake to what's going on around us. Few of us go through our day being more than fractionally aware. We turn off our brains when we travel or commute to work. Our minds wander in meetings. Even among the people we love, we distract ourselves in front of a TV or computer screen. Who knows what we're missing when we're not paying attention?

The second is engagement. We're not only awake in our environment, we're actively participating in it—and the people who matter to us recognize our engagement. In most contexts, engagement is the most admirable state of being. It's both noble and pleasant, something we can be proud of and enjoy. Is there higher praise coming from a partner or child than to hear them tell us, "You are always there for me"? Or anything more painful than to be told, "You were never there for me"? That's how much engagement matters to us. It is the finest end product of adult behavioral change.

When we embrace a desire for awareness and engagement, we are in the best position to appreciate all the triggers the environment throws at us. We might not know what to expect—the triggering power of our environment is a constant surprise—but we know what others expect of us. We also know what we expect of ourselves. The results can be astonishing. We no longer have to treat our environment as if it's a train rushing toward us while we stand helplessly on the track waiting for impact. The interplay between us and our environment becomes reciprocal, a give-and-take arrangement where we are creating it as much as it creates us. We achieve an equilibrium I like to describe as the Circle of Engagement.

When we lack awareness (in many cases because we are lost in what we're doing or feeling), we are easily triggered. The gap from trigger to impulse to behavior is instantaneous. That's the sequence. A trigger leads to an impulse, which leads directly to a behavior, which creates another trigger, and so on. Sometimes it works out for us; we're lucky and make the right "choice" without actually choosing. But it's an unnecessary risk that can produce chaos. Awareness is a difference maker. It stretches that triggering sequence, providing us with a little breathing space (not much, just enough) to consider our options and make a better behavioral choice.

Chapter 22: The Hazard of Leading a Changeless Life

When we prolong negative behavior, we are leading a changeless life in the most hazardous manner. We are willfully choosing to be miserable and making others miserable, too. The time we are miserable is time we can never get back.

Triggers

Even more painful, it was all our doing. It was our choice. In this book's opening pages, I promised that if I did my job properly, you would have a little less regret in your life.

Now it's your turn. As you close this book, think about one change, one triggering gesture that you won't regret later on. That's the only criterion: you won't feel sorry you did it. Maybe it's calling your mother to tell her you love her, or thanking a customer for his loyalty or saying nothing instead of something cynical in a meeting. It could be anything, as long as it represents a departure, however modest, from what you've always done and would continue doing forever.

It will be good for your friends. It will be good for your company. It will be good for your customers. It will be good for your family, and even better for you. So much better, you will want to do it again.