

WISE UP! 7 SELF-HELP MYTHS TO LET GO OF NOW

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People turn to self-help—or to coaches, counselors, or therapists—because they want to effect some kind of change. But although ***change is possible, it really isn't probable***. That's because change is a stability-rattling dynamic, and our brain craves stability. So our brain is determined to maintain the status quo, and it will keep “correcting” us back to the path we were on instead of making it easy for us to switch to a different path.

If we want to make changes in our own lives or help our clients make changes, it's important to understand both *that* change is not easy and *why* change is not easy. Change is difficult not because there's something wrong with us, but because of the way our brain is wired. It isn't that we lack willpower or self-control, or that we don't want it enough, or because of some event from our past, or because we're sabotaging ourselves.

That's important because what we believe about the way things work in the world helps determine the strategies we use to solve our problems or change the status quo. So the more our beliefs about the way things work coincide with reality, the more likely we'll be to come up with effective strategies.

This applies to everything from operating machinery to raising kids to planning an outing to learning a new skill to sending a rocket to the moon to running a business to living a satisfying and meaningful life—which is what I'm interested in and what ***Farther to Go!*** is all about.

However, beliefs don't necessarily have anything to do with reality.

Before moving to New Mexico, I spent 30 years in Northern California, where I was exposed to and explored all kinds of self-help ideas and practices on my own behalf and on behalf of various groups of clients. What set me on the path to creating ***Farther to Go!*** was the recognition that many of those tools were not particularly effective. They may have worked for some people, some of the time, but they didn't lead to consistent results for a majority of people.

Four years ago, I set out to determine how to create a *consistently* meaningful and satisfying life independent of whatever my circumstances happened to be. As I was pursuing that goal, I discovered how much new information had become available about how the brain actually works. This research, primarily in neuroscience and psychology, that has been going on for the past 20-30 years revealed why so many self-help beliefs are misguided or just plain wrong.

In the forward to David DiSalvo's book, *What Makes Your Brain Happy and Why You Should Do the Opposite*, science writer Wray Herbert says:

The typical psychology section of most bookstores—often called the self-help section—is full of books pontificating on the human condition. Some of the authors have academic credentials and some do not—but that really doesn't seem to matter. All offer prescriptions for living better, but few of these prescriptions are rooted in science—or any kind of rigorous intellectual inquiry.

The self-help world is brimming with advice that is meant to be motivational. But because much of this advice is based on beliefs that aren't true, trying to follow it can have unintended negative consequences. It's more likely to harm than to help—to make us feel worse about ourselves rather than better, disempowered instead of empowered.

According to psychologist Richard Wiseman, *people have a remarkable ability to explain away evidence rather than change their cherished beliefs.* How this plays out when it comes to solving personal problems or changing our own status quo is that we often respond to our failed attempts not by questioning our beliefs or our strategies, but by blaming ourselves and then either doubling down on our strategy OR giving up altogether. We end up gathering “evidence” to prove there's something wrong with us. This is not effective.

So here are seven popular beliefs that are simply not true, which is why I call them myths.

1. You always have a choice.

The myth: No matter what your circumstances are, you always have a choice about how to think, feel, and react. If you want to change something, simply make a different choice.

If this were true, there would be no self-help industry because there would be no need for it. After all, it isn't as if we lack information or tools—or aren't aware of better alternatives—or don't know what it is we would prefer to do. It isn't as if we haven't had profound moments of insight—sometimes the same moments of insight—over and over again. It isn't as if we haven't been nearly beaten into submission by a frenzy of motivational quotations and exhortations.

It's a myth because: the reality is that you rarely have a choice. The majority of your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are the result of automatic brain processes. You operate on autopilot most of the time because that's how your brain is wired.

The conscious part of your brain—the part that thinks logically, sets long-term goals, and can imagine things being different—processes about **40 bits of information at a time**. But the unconscious part of your brain—the part that runs you most of the time, isn't

uninterested in your long-term goals, and is intent on maintaining the status quo—processes around **11 million bits of information at a time**.

You should let go of this myth because: believing you always have a choice just sets you up with numerous opportunities to fail and then beat yourself up afterward. Plus you're depriving yourself of the opportunity to learn and utilize strategies that are proven to help you succeed precisely *by taking choice out of the equation*.

What you can do instead is: reprogram your automatic behavior so it reflects what's important to you and helps you get what you really want. 1) Create an intention. 2) Determine how you're going to pay attention to your intention. 3) Figure out ahead of time what you're going to do when things go awry. 4) Reward yourself when you follow through. Find out more: <http://farthertogo.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Make-It-So1.pdf>

2. You need to find your life purpose (or passion/mission/calling/legend/bliss, etc.).

The myth: In order to live a meaningful life, you must discover the particular thing you're meant to be doing—and then do it. Otherwise, you're wasting your life.

It's a myth because: the idea that there's one particular thing you're supposed to do in your life rests on several erroneous assumptions, one being that *you* are a single self. Neuroscientists, philosophers, and psychologists are all coming to a conclusion that aligns with Buddhism: there isn't actually a "you" who is *having* all of your experiences. Instead "you" are the collection of all the experiences you have in your life.

Another assumption is that meaning exists "out there" and it's up to you to find it. But humans are compulsive meaning-makers. That means meaning is determined by you—or rather, by your brain, which is constantly interpreting and determining the meaning of every situation, event, and circumstance you encounter.

You should let go of this myth because: looking for the life-purpose cheese, as I call it, often leads not to clarity and fulfillment but to a paralyzing seizure of anxiety. If you're intent on finding the One Thing, you're likely to miss out on all the other things you could be doing to create a satisfying and meaningful life. And you're much less likely to know when to stop pursuing something that isn't giving you what you really want.

What you can do instead is: rather than trying to discover your life purpose, *live with purpose*. Rather than trying to find your passion, *live with passion*. Instead of searching for meaning, recognize that you're making meaning every single minute you're awake. You determine the meaning of life—and of your life, in particular.

3. You should always trust your gut.

The myth: Intuition is a superior form of inner knowing that you can develop and learn to rely on unilaterally.

It's a myth because: intuition is the processing of the unconscious part of the brain, which uses associative thinking. It functions by jumping to conclusions on the basis of limited evidence.

The unconscious processes 11 million bits of information at a time. In order to make sense of all that information, it takes mental shortcuts known as cognitive biases. Sometimes your unconscious knows what it's talking about, but quite often it doesn't. The same process (jumping to conclusions on the basis of limited evidence) that can give rise to a brilliant flash of insight in one instance can just as easily give rise to unjust stereotyping in another. And since your brain is addicted to *feeling* right, whether or not it *is* right, the confidence you feel when intuition kicks in often can't be trusted.

You should let go of this myth because: intuition is domain-specific. That means if you have experience, knowledge, and practice in a particular area, your intuition is likely to be good in that area. If you have nothing to base it on, however, your intuition is no better than a wild guess and trusting it in those cases is not wise.

What you can do instead is: recognize when to trust your intuition and when not to trust it. It's just as important to know when you *can* rely on your intuition as it is to know when you shouldn't rely on it. If you want to develop your intuition in a particular area, develop your knowledge and experience in that area. And remember that the amount of confidence you *feel* about your intuition doesn't necessarily correlate with how accurate it is.

4. To be more creative, you need to think outside the box

The myth: By thinking "outside the box," you can transcend your mental limitations and be more creative and original.

It's a myth because: the "box" is actually the mental model created, maintained, and updated by the unconscious part of your brain. It represents what's normal for *you*. You are always inside the box, in one compartment or another.

Since your mental model is the lens through which you view and interpret the world around you—and even yourself—you can't think outside it. The box determines and constrains what you see and even what you are capable of seeing, both literally and figuratively, as well as how you see yourself.

You should let go of this myth because: creativity involves synthesizing, remixing, and re-envisioning what's already *inside* the box. No matter how mind-blowing they may be, your insights still depend on what's already in your particular box. This seems obvious when you think about it. Someone whose mental model includes a vast amount of experience and knowledge in a particular area is likely to have more and bigger creative insights than someone else who only dabbles in the field.

What you can do instead is: stop trying to get out of the box and focus on remodeling it. You can stretch and expand the box via physical activity (movement), learning, and exposing yourself to new situations and different viewpoints—in short, by challenging yourself. Those activities cause your brain to grow new neurons at any age and increase the number of connections between neurons. The more neurons and the more neuronal connections your brain has, the more complex thoughts you can think, the more complex problems you can solve, and the more you are capable of seeing and understanding. You can alter, literally, what and how you perceive the world.

5. Visualizing your desired outcome will help you attain it.

The myth: If you visualize (focus your attention on) the result you want, you will be more likely to achieve it.

It's a myth because: visualizing the end result or outcome you want actually decreases the likelihood you will get it. In fact, a considerable body of research suggests that the more you visualize an outcome, the more likely you'll be to convince your brain you already have it, so there's no need for you to take any action to go after it.

When done correctly, visualization is a powerful technique that can alter your brain and even the physical strength and ability of your body in significant positive ways. But visualizing yourself at the finish line is counterproductive.

You should let go of this myth because: focusing on the end result keeps you from putting your attention where it should be, which is on the process or the steps you need to take to in order to achieve your desired outcome.

What you can do instead is: first determine the outcome you're aiming for; then turn your attention to identifying the individual steps or actions you'll need to take to get there. Visualize yourself taking the steps. That means imagining yourself actually following through with them. Visualizing the process—instead of the outcome—is the type of visualization used by successful people in all walks of life to improve their performance on the way to achieving their goals. It works because it changes your brain and your body so that following through becomes the default response.

6. You need more will power.

The myth: Changing your habits or accomplishing anything significant requires will power and self-control.

It's a myth because: will power is an unreliable resource that is easily exhausted. You know the story of the hare and the tortoise? Which one wins the race? (There's a book titled *Hare Brain Tortoise Mind* by cognitive scientist Guy Claxton you might be interested in.)

Remember that the conscious part of your brain—which is responsible for exerting will power and self-control, among other things—processes only 40 bits of information at a time. The reason you have less will power and self-control later in the day than at the beginning is that you've used a lot of it up and you can't just push a button to get more of it when you want it.

You may be able to employ will power to propel yourself through the starting gate, but if that's all you've got, after the initial burst of energy is gone you'll find yourself right back where you started from—or worse. Multiple failed attempts actually train your brain not to take you seriously, so your next attempt will be even harder.

You should let go of this myth because: if you're relying on will power, when you run out of it—which you will—you'll revert to doing what you've always done before. And you're likely to beat yourself up over it. In addition, you're less likely to develop the habits of perseverance and repetition, which you need in order to succeed.

What you can do instead is: remember that repetition and perseverance, not will power and self-control, are the keys to changing your behavior and accomplishing your goals. Repetition means doing the same thing over and over again until it becomes your brain's default response. Perseverance means steadily moving in your desired direction regardless of setbacks or obstacles, allowing for contingencies, and adjusting course as you go. Repetition and perseverance are like the tortoise that just keeps moving at a steady pace until it crosses the finish line.

7. You're probably sabotaging yourself.

The myth: If your behavior is inconsistent with your conscious intentions or goals, it's because some part of your unconscious is intentionally trying to undermine you.

It's a myth because: your unconscious cares about two things: survival and maintaining the status quo. So when you decide to change something, you can expect your unconscious

to balk and to keep “correcting” you back to your original path. The unconscious is both doggedly persistent and extremely fast.

But it doesn’t have it in for you. It doesn’t plot and scheme to try to keep you down or “protect” you from success. It has no agenda or vested interest in what you consider good behavior or bad, positive outcomes or negative. It cares not for your dreams and goals and your big ideas. It just wants you to keep doing whatever it is you’ve been doing—because that conserves energy—and, hey, you’re still here, so it’s been working fine up to now. It also wants to pacify you so that you feel good *in the moment*, whether or not what you’re doing in the moment is in your long-term best interest.

You should let go of this myth because: belief in self-sabotage often results in a major diversion of your attention. You end up looking in all the wrong places for the *explanation* for your problem instead of taking steps to solve it.

What you can do instead is: stop searching for hidden reasons to explain why you don’t always follow through with what you set out to do. The problem lies with the conscious part of your brain, not with the unconscious part. If you want to change the status quo, you need to be clear about what you want (have a *direction*), and you need to have a sense of *urgency* about getting there. Then you need to apply repetition and persistence—lots of repetition and lots of persistence.



The secret—if you could call it that—to real, positive, sustained change is understanding how your brain works and learning how to use it instead of letting it use you. Otherwise, you’re just spinning your hamster wheel.