

Make It So!

A THREE-STEP PROCESS
TO HELP PUT **YOU**
IN THE CAPTAIN'S SEAT



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*We think that through choice we are free,
but choice exists only when the mind is confused.
There is no choice when the mind is clear.
—J. Krishnamurti*

REAL FREEDOM IS FREEDOM FROM CHOICE

Do you subscribe to either or both of these two common beliefs about choice?

- 1) Having more choices or options means having more freedom.*
- 2) Everything we do is the result of conscious choice.*

Counterintuitive as it may seem, neither of these beliefs is correct.

Choice does not equate with freedom. In fact, if your mind is busy weighing the pros and cons of various options trying to decide what to do next, it is not free; it is tangled and confused. When your mind is clear, there is no choice. The path ahead is obvious.

Understanding this has made an enormous difference in my life. I've learned that if my mind is unclear, more thinking (or thinking *harder*) will not induce clarity. It will only generate more *blooming, buzzing confusion* (thank you, William James). If I'm unsure about what to do next, I wait to act until my mind and the path ahead are clear.

If you're clinging to the belief that choice equals freedom, you may find it difficult to question the second assumption, that everything you do is a result of your conscious

choice. Even though it feels like you're making conscious choices all day long, more often than not, what you think of as choice is automatic behavior initiated by the unconscious part of your brain.

Have you ever thought there was something wrong with you because you don't always make the "right" choices or follow through with your intentions?

If you assume you're consciously choosing to make those "wrong" choices or consciously choosing not to follow through, you may have come to the conclusion that the problem is you.

But the part of your brain that runs the show isn't the conscious part, it's the unconscious. And the unconscious is programmed to maintain the *status quo*, which means continuing to do what it's always done before.

It can be difficult to give up our illusions about choice. We want to keep our options open instead of locking ourselves in. We want to be spontaneous. And we prefer to believe we're exercising conscious choice no matter how ineffective or detrimental those choices may be. As a result, we often refuse to make a commitment, even to something we really want or that really matters to us. We repeatedly put far more trust than is warranted in our conscious brain's ability to override our unconscious brain's programming. We're convinced we'll do things differently... next time.

You can have what really matters to you or you can have the freedom to NOT have it, but you can't have both.

Keeping your options open really means leaving the outcome to chance. Yes, there's a slim possibility that when the moment comes you'll act in your own best interest and make a different choice. But the odds are not on your side. Counting on self-control or will power in the face of temptation or when trying to make a change is a reliable road to failure. Your unconscious operates automatically and at a much faster speed than the conscious part of your brain. Self-control and will power are over-rated, easily exhausted, and—in the moment—no match for the unconscious.

That doesn't mean you're entirely at the mercy of the unconscious, however. You do have a say in the matter. You can learn how to use both parts of your brain to your advantage, but that requires changing the way you think about choice.

The alternative to trying to force yourself to do or not do something, and subsequently berating yourself for a lack of self-control, is to make a pre-commitment. The great thing about making a pre-commitment is that, instead of continuing to harbor illusions about choice, you're acknowledging reality.

*Making a change requires that you do something different
AHEAD OF TIME instead of counting on doing something
different IN THE MOMENT.*

Making a pre-commitment eliminates the need to make a choice in the moment because you've already decided what you're going to do. You have a plan in place. It turns out that giving up your so-called freedom of choice greatly increases the likelihood you'll do what you consciously determined beforehand to do.

Pre-commitment involves three steps:

Intention • Attention • Perseverance

IAP is a simple process that can be used to help change or create habits, manage one-time projects, or complete short- or long-term goals. It is based on how the brain actually works rather than how you may be accustomed to thinking it works.

INTENTION IS POWERFUL

Your brain is wired to conserve energy by creating and then following its own path of least resistance. It does so by developing subroutines (in the form of habits) and subsequently running them on autopilot. (Once you learn how to ride a bicycle, riding a bicycle becomes automatic.) This enables you to get by without having to think about a great many of the things you do. In fact, you operate on autopilot most of the time. You have to because conscious attention is a very limited resource. If you had to give conscious thought to every little thing you did, you might use most of it up before making it out the door in the morning.

Your brain is also wired to maintain the *status quo* because that seems the safest thing to do, whether or not it actually is. The result is that you're more likely to continue doing what you've always done than to do something different.

Your brain's autopilot does a fantastic job of keeping you alive, but it is very stubborn and difficult to override. Autopilot behavior could be described as habitual, unconscious, automatic, unmindful, or routine. What it can't be described as is deliberate. Since operating on autopilot maintains the *status quo*, if you want to do something to change the *status quo* you have to figure out how to override autopilot. You have to be *deliberate*.

You do that by creating an intention. Creating an intention requires conscious thought, though, so the best time to do it is ahead of time, not when you're suddenly faced with making a choice. With no intention in place, the path of least resistance will be to do what you've always done before—not because you're weak or stubborn or self-destructive—but because that's what you're wired to do.

An intention is more than wishful thinking or a good idea.

An intention is a pre-commitment you make to yourself to do a specific thing in a specific situation.

An effective intention spells out the **what, when, where,** and **how** of what you intend to do.

Instead of this:

I'm going to start getting to bed earlier.

This:

I'm going to begin getting ready for bed each evening at 10:00 beginning tonight.

Instead of this:

I'm going to stop eating so much fast food.

This:

I'm going to make my own lunch and take it to work every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Instead of this:

I'm going to get more exercise.

This:

I'm going to take my gym bag to work with me on Tuesday and Thursday and go to the gym right after work.

or

I'm going to walk in the morning for half an hour five days a week, Monday through Friday.

Getting specific may take some practice. And once an intention has been created, it may need to be adjusted, which is fine. Specific doesn't mean inflexible.

Intention is powerful not because it magically draws the things you want to you. It's powerful because it commits you to taking action on your own behalf.

All Intentions Are Not Created Equal

Intention is a catch-all word that can cover a wide swath of territory, from the most informal or trivial plans all the way up to major goals. We intend to:

- run a couple of errands on the way home from work
- complete the next chapter of the book you're writing
- stop eating junk food
- get more exercise
- be kinder
- make arrangements for your next vacation
- schedule a dental appointment
- stop after one drink
- look for a new job
- spend more time with family or friends
- check out a new restaurant
- get to bed earlier
- get organized
- get caught up at work
- call someone you haven't spoken to in a while
- be a better person
- take the cat to the vet
- start meditating
- respond to all of your emails
- make a difference in the world or in your community
- speak to your boss about a raise
- evaluate your goals
- do better at managing your money
- learn a new skill
- clean out the garage
- get the taxes done and filed on time
- water the plants
- do the laundry

What are some of the intentions you've had during the past few days?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

An intention to gas up the car on the way home from work, an intention to improve your habits, and an intention to create a meaningful life are not of the same order of magnitude. By not distinguishing minor intentions from major intentions and painting them with the same broad brush, you're likely to treat all of them the same way.

I like to think of our day-to-day intentions as lowercase intentions and our larger, purpose-driven intentions—the ones that require conscious thought and choice—as uppercase intentions.

Identifying and committing to uppercase intentions not only leads to greater clarity and effectiveness in regard to those things, it also makes it easier to follow through on lowercase intentions.

ATTENTION IS ESSENTIAL

Intention is the catalyst for disrupting the *status quo*. It gives you something to aim at, a focus, a goal. But that isn't enough. You also need to stay focused on it and pay attention to what happens: to what you actually do, what you think, and how you feel. Staying focused helps override the brain's autopilot and keeps you from falling back onto the path of least resistance.

Since much of what you do is done on autopilot, you may not even be aware of some of your own thoughts, feelings, words, and behavior. Being on autopilot means you aren't fully present much of the time. You're sitting in the passenger seat instead of behind the wheel. Your unconscious brain, which is doing the driving, has its own agenda and will focus your attention for you unless you make an effort to focus it on what you want to pay attention to.

In order to give yourself a fighting chance to follow through on your **intention**, you need to come up with a way to keep your **attention** on it. Here are some suggestions:

Theme Word or Phrase

Find a word or phrase to remind you of what you're trying to accomplish. Write it on Post-Its® or index cards and put them where you're most likely to see them. You don't have to limit yourself to a word or phrase. You can use a theme song, an image, a string around your finger, or anything else that works as a reminder.

Questions

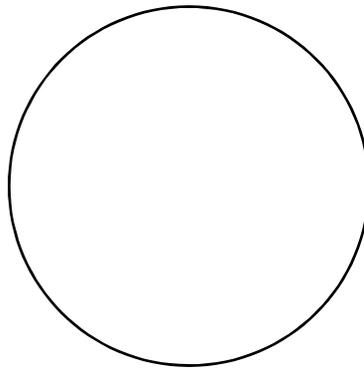
Create a series of questions you can ask yourself each day, such as:

- What is my intention?
- Why do I want to do [whatever it is]?
- Am I committed to doing [whatever it is] today?

You can ask and answer the questions on paper or in your head, invite a friend to ask them, or send them to yourself in an email.

Self-Awareness Pie Chart

Draw a circle and divide it into three slices to represent how much of your attention in that moment is focused on your feelings (F), your thoughts (T), and your body (P). Put the letter designations inside the appropriate pie slices. Then write your answers to the questions below:



Date/Time: _____

Physically, I notice _____

Mentally, I notice _____

Emotionally, I notice _____

Write as much or as little as you like. If you use this exercise to help with an intention, the best time to do it is when you have done—or not done—something you intended to do.

Calendar

Either designate a special calendar to keep track of your intentions or incorporate keeping track of them into your existing calendar. Make an entry—a check mark, a star, a sticker, a notation in a different colored ink—whenever you follow through on your intention. Just having the calendar in a visible location can help keep your attention focused.

It doesn't really matter *what* you do, as long as you set something up to keep your **attention** focused on your **intention**. Your brain has been programming itself all of your life. Overriding that programming requires a lot of repetition in order to convince it to take you seriously and to follow this new lead.

PERSEVERANCE IS MAGIC

Let's say you've created an intention and found a way to stay focused on it. What happens when things don't go according to the plan? How will you respond when you drop the ball or when external circumstances keep you from doing what you intended to do? You need to figure that out ahead of time because at some point—or maybe many points—you will encounter obstacles or setbacks. If you don't plan for that eventuality, you might be tempted to use the experience as a reason to slack off or give up. If at first you don't succeed, you could decide it's just not worth the effort or that you just don't have what it takes.

Changing the brain's programming isn't easy. Acting deliberately and staying focused requires conscious attention, which is in short supply. You're not going to be perfect right out of the gate—or ever. Perfection isn't a worthy goal. It's better to aim for doing better next time. Persistent effort and repetition will eventually persuade the brain that you really mean what you say.

Persevering doesn't mean doggedly persisting, however. Sometimes there's a good reason to stop attempting to do something. One of the benefits of paying attention is that you're quicker to recognize when an intention needs to be adjusted or scrapped altogether. Maybe you just need to pare it down and start with a baby step rather than trying to make a giant leap.

Persevering means steadily moving toward your desired outcome regardless of setbacks or obstacles, adjusting course as you go.

Setbacks and obstacles are part of life. There's no point chastising yourself over them or making excuses. Just pick up where you left off and keep going. It isn't a competition or a race. Behavior change is a long game, not a short one. It doesn't matter when you get there. All that matters is that you arrive.

Perseverance isn't flashy or catchy or stylish. It's often linked with discipline and endurance and sounds like something that's good for you or that builds character. But perseverance is **key** to reprogramming your brain's autopilot. It really is magic!

Perseverance Trumps Will Power

Will Power:

- the ability to **control** oneself and determine one's actions
- **control** of one's impulses and actions; determination; **self-control**
- **self-control**: the trait of resolutely **controlling** your own behavior
- the ability to **control** yourself : strong determination that allows you to do something difficult (such as to lose weight or quit smoking)

Willpower is trying very hard not to do something you want to do very much. —John Ortberg

Perseverance:

- **steadfastness** in doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success
- continued **steady** belief or efforts, withstanding discouragement or difficulty; persistence
- **steady** persistence in a course of action, a purpose, a state, etc., especially in spite of difficulties, obstacles, or discouragement
- the act of persisting; continuing or repeating behavior

*If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.
—William E. Hickson*

Will power doesn't last because it requires—and uses up—conscious attention, which is a limited resource.

If you develop the habit of persevering, you won't need to rely on will power to push yourself. Your brain will be working for you, rather than against you.

Reward Yourself for Good Behavior

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that is involved in your brain's reward system; its release fills you with a feeling of pleasure. Dopamine is part of a brain circuit called the mesolimbic pathway, which connects behaviors to feelings of pleasure. A pleasurable experience acts as a stimulus to wake up the mesolimbic pathway.

One thing that triggers the release of dopamine is the *expectation* of a reward.

When dopamine is released, emotional and learning circuits are activated to increase the likelihood that you'll remember what you did. A reward is positive reinforcement that motivates you to repeat the behavior. Small hits of dopamine encourage you to keep moving forward, even when the end isn't yet in sight.

Rewarding yourself for good behavior by acknowledging each small accomplishment trains your brain to help you keep doing what you want to do.

THREE THINGS TO AVOID

The IAP process is pretty straightforward, but there are three easy mistakes to make that could derail you before you get started.

#1: Doing What You Think You Should Do

We have many concepts about the way things *should* be, but even more about *how we should be* and *what we should be able to do*. In the context of creating intentions, banish the word *should*. It isn't helpful, and it sets up unrealistic expectations. It makes no sense to start out by pitting your actual self against an idealized self who can easily do whatever it is you're currently struggling with.

If you have created an intention to do something because you think you *should* do it or you *should* be able to do it, let it go. You won't be able to fully **commit** to something you *should* do, and you're probably not **willing** to do whatever it takes to accomplish it since you think you should already be doing it. The fact that you aren't doing it means you're just not trying or you're lazy or incapable or have no will power. You've prejudged yourself as somehow lacking, so you've lost before you've even begun.

#2: Biting Off More than You Can Chew

Maybe there's an entire area of your life you want to revamp, such as your health, so you create an intention to do just that. You're going to give up sugar, start eating salads instead of burgers and fries, get to bed earlier, and start an exercise program with a personal trainer. No baby steps; you're going for the gold! But trying to tackle too much all at once is another recipe for failure because your chance of succeeding in making multiple changes is miniscule. Taking baby steps is much more effective because it allows you to build on your initial success. Aiming to do it all at once and missing the mark just reinforces feelings of ineffectiveness or inadequacy.

Also, trying to do too much all at once diffuses your focus instead of sharpening it. You're actually giving yourself many opportunities to fail. So if you want to develop a habit that involves doing something multiple times a day, begin by creating an intention to do it once a day or even every other day. After you've succeeded with

that, expand on it. Trying to do too much is an easy mistake to make when starting an exercise program, for example. Add to that the belief that you *should* be exercising for a certain number of minutes every day and you might as well just pick up the remote and head for the couch.

#3: Being Vague Instead of Specific

You might not be trying to give yourself wiggle room, but that's what vagueness does to intentions: it paves the way for you to wiggle right out of them. There are a lot of reasons for this vagueness. Maybe you think just creating the intention should be sufficient. (If there's a voice in your head that says if you really want to do something, you'll do it, tell it to be quiet.) Maybe you have such a variable schedule you don't think you can be specific. Or maybe you want to maintain your flexibility. Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle.

Creating a vague intention is a waste of time. If you want to do something twice a week, decide on the days of the week and the time of day you will do it. If your schedule varies, make appointments with yourself and write them on your calendar or in your planner. Treat your appointments with yourself the same way you would treat an appointment with someone else. Give yourself the same level of respect you would give another person.

If you know the result you want, think through the steps you'll need to take to achieve it. Make the steps your intentions and the result will follow.

CREATE AN INTENTION

Pages 17-19 consist of Intention Logs where you can record the details of your intentions. Make as many copies of them as you wish. If you have questions or comments about the I.A.P. process, please email me at joycelyn@farthertogo.com.

My intention is to (be specific):

Write down exactly **what** you intend to do, as well as **when, where,** and **how** you intend to do it. It's ineffective and a waste of your time to create a vague intention, so aim to be as specific as possible. (See page 7 for examples.) You may need to adjust all or part of your intention after you try it out. If so, just write out a new intention. You want to find something that works, not be rigid and inflexible.

I'm going to pay attention by:

Identify how you will keep your **attention** focused on your **intention**. (See pages 8-10 for examples.) It's easy for intentions to fall through the cracks, so assume that's what will happen to yours unless you plan ahead. Don't count on remembering. Write it on your calendar. Ask someone else to remind you. Stick notes on your mirror or refrigerator. If the first thing you try doesn't work, try something else.

I'm going to stay on track by:

Decide now what you're going to do when you can't or don't follow through on your intention because that *will* happen. How do you plan to reaffirm your commitment and **get back on track**? You could enlist someone's support and call that person for encouragement. You could write about why you are committed to your intention. You could restart your intention by creating a new one (writing it out again).

I'm going to reward myself by (when/how):

Rewarding yourself when you follow through with an intention activates memory and learning circuits in the brain, which makes it more likely you will follow through the next time. Don't use things you're trying to avoid (sugar, for example, if you're trying to avoid that) as a reward. Make a list of things you enjoy or would like to try and choose from the list. This is a critical step; don't skip it or give it short shrift.

Intention • Attention • Perseverance

Date: _____

My Intention is to (**be specific**): _____

I'm going to pay attention by: _____

I'm going to stay on track by: _____

I'm going to reward myself by (**when/how**): _____

Date: _____

My Intention is to (**be specific**): _____

I'm going to pay attention by: _____

I'm going to stay on track by: _____

I'm going to reward myself by (**when/how**): _____

Intention • Attention • Perseverance

Date: _____

My Intention is to (**be specific**): _____

I'm going to pay attention by: _____

I'm going to stay on track by: _____

I'm going to reward myself by (**when/how**): _____

Date: _____

My Intention is to (**be specific**): _____

I'm going to pay attention by: _____

I'm going to stay on track by: _____

I'm going to reward myself by (**when/how**): _____

Intention • Attention • Perseverance

Date: _____

My Intention is to (**be specific**): _____

I'm going to pay attention by: _____

I'm going to stay on track by: _____

I'm going to reward myself by (**when/how**): _____

Date: _____

My Intention is to (**be specific**): _____

I'm going to pay attention by: _____

I'm going to stay on track by: _____

I'm going to reward myself by (**when/how**): _____

LAST PAGE

Inescapable

In his book ***Stumbling on Happiness***, Daniel Gilbert describes a fascinating study involving photography students who were put into two groups, the escapable group and the inescapable group. After developing their two best prints, all students were told they could keep one print, but the other print would be kept on file. The students in the escapable group were told they had several days to change their minds about which print they kept. The students in the inescapable group were not allowed to change their minds. Afterwards all of the students were asked to describe how much they liked the photograph they kept.

The results showed that students in the escapable group liked their photographs less than did students in the inescapable group.... Apparently, inescapable circumstances trigger the psychological defenses that enable us to achieve positive views of those circumstances, but we do not anticipate that this will happen.

No, we don't anticipate that this will happen. We're sure that not having options or choices (inescapable circumstances) will make us unhappy and that having options or choices will make us happy. Sure enough, when a new group of photography students was asked whether they would prefer being able to change their minds about which photograph they kept, the majority preferred to keep their options open, which meant **opting to be less satisfied**. But, of course, they didn't realize that.

Books about the Brain

There are many great books available about how the brain works. (See the Reading List at farthertogo.com.) One of these three would be a good place to begin:

- ***Incognito*** by David Eagleman
- ***Thinking, Fast and Slow*** by Daniel Kahneman
- ***Subliminal*** by Leonard Mlodinow