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THE FOUR-SECOND RULE THAT COULD CHANGE YOUR LIFE

I'm always wary of self-help books. They rarely deliver the life changing habits that they promise. What works for you may not work for me. We're all on a journey, walking each other home with love and forbearance and a lot of grace.

This article though did resonate a while ago. I was in a car, with a Mum, desperately doing her best to deal with her offspring's bad attitude. Things were getting heated and suddenly Mum responded in a flash; an iPad, or a mobile or something was going to be confiscated for at least a week. 'Ouch' I thought, that was all done in a bit of a rush. I went back to the article (I hadn't read it, just the headline) to see whether things could have been done differently.

The article, drawing on a book by Peter Bregman, is all about helping us make considered decisions. Our lives are so busy and increasingly complex we're making too many decisions in a rush. Let's take, he says one breath, lasting four seconds before making any decision, and especially before we put our mouth into gear.

There's nothing more destructive than a knee-jerk reaction, whether it's a trifling disagreement that escalates into a row or a mouthful of cake that becomes a whole slice, decisions made on the hoof can cause us unnecessary anguish.

Thanks to the frenetic pace of our lives and the constant juggling of friends, family and work, it can seem impossible to put real thought into our actions.

The Four-Second Rule can help you regain control your life, make better decisions and even improve your family relationships and love life.

Here's how you can do it ...

STOP SABOTAGING YOURSELF

Our basic needs — fulfilling relationships, success, peace of mind — are surprisingly straightforward to achieve.

But in many cases our best efforts to achieve them are built on habits that don't work. Worse, we don't even realise we're sabotaging ourselves.

For example, when we feel overwhelmed by a to-do list, our reaction is to work longer hours and pack more into them. We multi-task and work late. Our intention is to reduce stress.

But, of course, our actions have exactly the converse effect. Or we say things we think will impress someone, but instead prompt rejection. We try to comfort a friend, but somehow make her more upset.

If we feel overwhelmed by a to-do list often our immediate reaction is to work longer hours and do more, intending to relieve stress, but actually the opposite is achieved

All of these situations could be avoided with just a moment's pause to consider the consequences of our actions and make a better choice. This is where the Four-Second Rule comes in.

WHAT IS THE FOUR SECOND RULE?

The secret to making good decisions that can simplify your life is always to take a single breath — lasting four seconds — before acting.

It may sound incredibly simple, but that pause has been proven to be all the time you need to reign back your impulses and find the presence of mind to make the smartest choice.

It allows you the space to breathe and to realise that sometimes not following through on something you want to do is a problem, such as not hitting a deadline or not having that difficult conversation.

The secret to making good decisions can be a single breath lasting four seconds. The pause this takes may be all the time you need to find the presence of mind to make a good choice

But other times the problem is that you do follow through on something you don't want to do, such as speaking instead of listening, or playing politics instead of rising above them.

A four-second break teaches you old-fashioned self-control. Each time you manage it, you will be proving to yourself that temptation is only a suggestion. The Four-Second Rule gives you a chance to question your actions and get the right outcome.

HOW TO DEAL WITH DISTRACTIONS

If you've ever tried meditation, you may recognise how unwanted thoughts drift into your mind, interrupting that longed-for sense of peace.

If you've tried meditation, you'll know how unwanted thoughts can appear, when you try the Four-Second Rule identify the impulses that want to take a destructive path

rather than ignore them. Bregman estimates that a new idea will spring into your mind every four seconds, but having an awareness of the way the brain tries to distract itself is valuable.

When you try the Four-Second Rule, identify the impulses that want to take a destructive path rather than ignore them. In the four seconds, try to see another way you could respond to the situation at hand.

THE POWER OF BEING SILENT

Even when you know that taking that four-second pause can help prevent you from making poor decisions, you may find bad habits get in the way of good decisions. Here's how to break them:

Stop thinking: Shut down sabotaging conversations that go on in your head before they start. Make a decision about something you want to do during the four seconds and don't question it.

For example, 'I will work out tomorrow at 6am' or 'I will say at least one thing in the next meeting at work'. It's amazing how effective this is.

Do nothing: When you need to regain your balance - in a contentious conversation or a difficult situation - rather than build your momentum, do nothing for a minute. Resetting yourself has the power to help you change your perspective on a situation.

Stop thinking: Shut down any sabotaging conversations in your head before they start. Make a decision during the four seconds and don't question it later

Ditch perfection: To get the most important things done without losing your mind, stop trying so hard and aiming for ultra-perfection. Instead, make a pact in your four seconds to race through the next phase of work.

Trust yourself: The next time that you feel insecure about a task or project and are about to reach out for feedback and approval, ask yourself what you think first. Take four seconds to listen to yourself.

Change the view: If you can't change reality — then look carefully to see it for what it is. Once your perspective changes, so does your ability to respond strategically and productively to the world around you.

Don't jump: Beware of jumping into things without thinking them through. Each morning make the time to ask yourself this question: 'Am I really prepared for this day?' You may still be ambushed by circumstances or other people, but you'll even be more prepared for that, just by asking the question.

YOU'LL NEVER ARGUE AGAIN

Once you've learnt the Four-Second Rule, you can start creating more meaningful relationships with others. Here's how:

In the heat of a row with a partner, don't respond based on how you feel in the moment (use the Four-Second Rule!), but rather based on what the other person needs to resolve the situation. Once they've calmed down, you can move forward.

Don't give into your instinct to find flaws in others. Tame your knee-jerk reactions and instead find something about them that impresses you.

Resist the impulse to write off someone who has hurt or disappointed you. Most of the time, they aren't betraying you; they're just struggling with their own issues. Accept the person and their limitations, and move on.

Contrary to our natural urge to defend ourselves and excuse our mistakes, taking the blame is the power move — strengthening your position, not weakening it.

ACCOMPLISH YOUR GOALS

You've mastered the Four-Second Rule, how do you make the most of it? If we want to sustain a good habit, it's not enough just to do it when we remember. We have to improve our lifestyle, too.

Many of us start the day with great intentions. But then people start calling and emailing, and soon we can't remember what we wanted to focus on in the first place. By the end of a week, we've forgotten what it was we were hoping to accomplish. And by the end of the year, we're frustrated that we haven't moved forwards.

MASTER YOUR EMAIL

If you get involved in a heated email exchange, apply the Four-Second Rule before replying. That will let any anger diffuse. To improve productivity, check your e-mail only a few times a day - and resist the temptation to check during off e-mail hours.

If you happen to become involved in a tense email conversation, be sure to apply the Four-Second Rule before replying, giving yourself time to let any anger diffuse

Ask yourself: What's going on for you? What are you feeling?
Take a deep breath and relax into an undistracted moment.

STEAMLINE YOUR LIFESTYLE

Identify up to five things that you want to focus on for the year: it could be your work, your relationship or just saving £10 a week. These priorities are where you should spend 95 per cent of your time.

Take anything that doesn't fit into one of those areas of annual focus and get it off your to-do list.

Create a to-do list that's made up of six boxes — one for each of your five areas of focus and the sixth labelled 'the other 5 per cent', and pin it to the wall next to a calendar.

Find five things you want to focus on and create a to-do list. You should share this with someone else because saying it out loud creates a deeper level of commitment and accountability (picture posed by model)

That other 5 per cent box is like sugar — a little might be OK, but your day should never contain more than 5 per cent of the activities that don't fit into your five main priority areas.

Each morning, take a look at your six-box to-do list and transfer the most important items to accomplish for the day into time slots on your calendar.

That way, you'll make strategic choices about fitting the most important items into your day.

Sit down with someone else — your manager, a colleague, your partner — and show them your six-box to-do list and your calendar for the day. Tell them what you plan to accomplish and how it fits in with what you want to focus on for the year. Saying it out loud and having another person hear you creates a deeper level of commitment and accountability.

Adapted by Victoria Lambert For The Daily Mail from '4 Seconds: All the Time You Need to Stop Counter-Productive Habits And Get The Results You Want' by Peter Bregman (HarperOne, £15.99). (Published in March 2013)

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