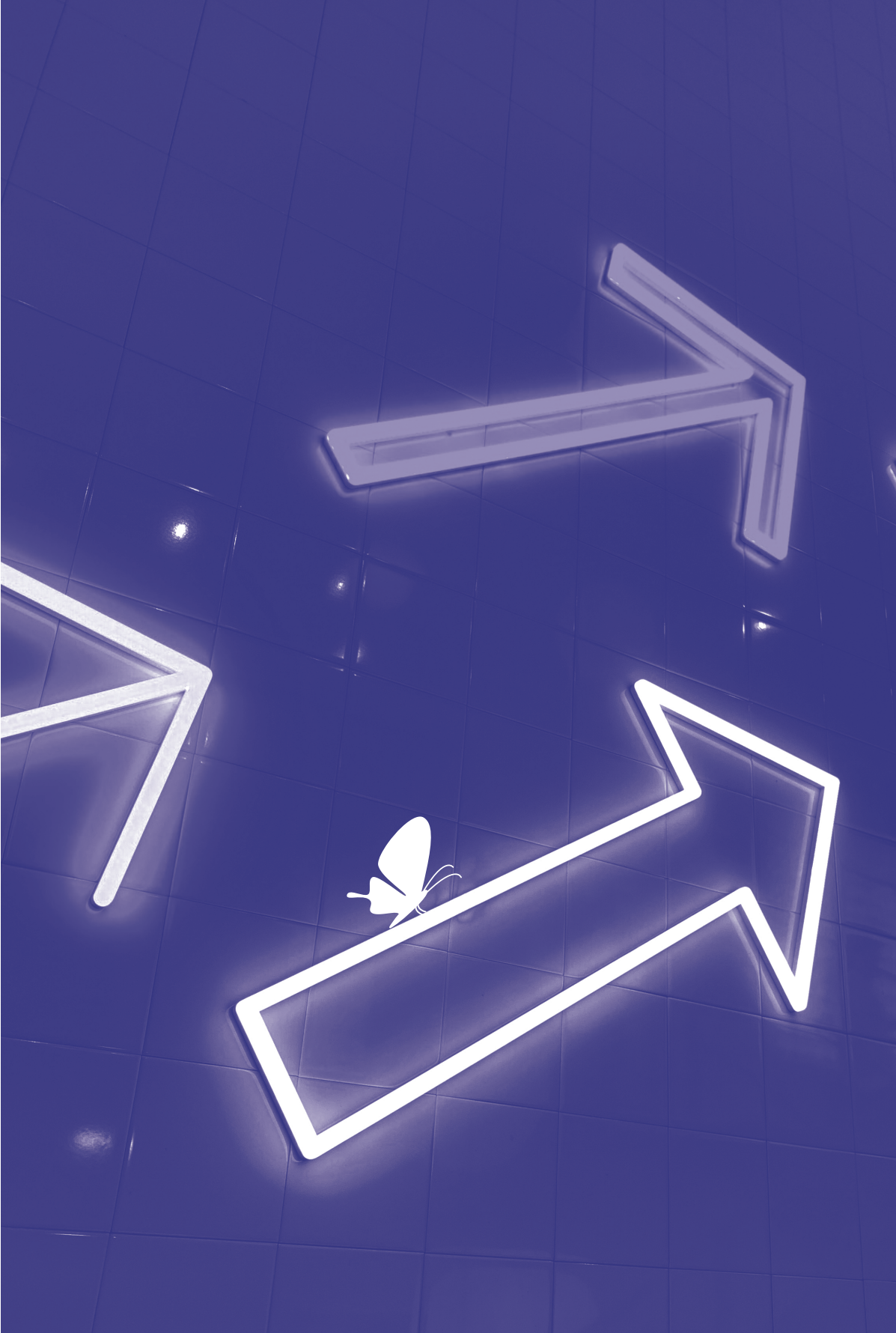






01 INTRO- DUCTION



THE BEST VERSION OF ME



Written by Dr. Nick van Dam

**“I am always doing that which I cannot do,
in order that I may learn how to do it.”**

—PABLO PICASSO

HARNESSING HUMAN GREATNESS

I once attended a unique ballet performance featuring the Spanish dancer Lucía Lacarra in Madrid, in which the fusion of art forms created an extraordinary experience. The highlight of the show was the seamless integration of a background movie with the live dancers, creating a synchronized harmony between the film characters and the dancers, all set to captivating music. This innovative blend of cinema, dance, and music reinforced my belief in the extraordinary capabilities of humans to uplift civilization, showcase the beauty of life, and enrich humanity.



**Scan the QR code for an impression of the ballet
“Lost Letters” featuring Lucía Lacarra.**

► tinyurl.com/5bbzw3en

In a world where the daily news often highlights humanity's darker aspects, it's important to remember the countless historical and contemporary examples of individuals' extraordinary achievements. These achievements span diverse fields, including the arts, literature, music, architecture, entertainment, technology, science, medicine, philosophy, politics, and business, among others. Such instances serve as a reminder of the positive and transformative impact humans can have across various domains.

Hereafter, I will introduce five remarkable individuals who achieved their fullest potential in various fields, each making a significant impact in their respective domains.

The Mexican artist **Frida Kahlo** is, for me, an example of an extraordinary woman who became the best version of herself, in a journey marked by unique resilience and expressive creativity. Despite enduring significant physical suffering, she transformed her pain into iconic art, particularly through her deeply personal self-portraits. Kahlo broke gender norms in a male-dominated art world by boldly portraying women's experiences and Mexican cultural themes. Her distinctive style and commitment to political and social causes further underscored her individuality and engagement with the world. Through her art and life, Kahlo demonstrated a remarkable ability to turn adversity into a source of strength and self-expression.

Nelson Mandela's journey from prisoner to president is a profound example of change and reconciliation. After enduring twenty-seven years of imprisonment for his stand against apartheid, Mandela chose a path of forgiveness and unity instead of revenge. As the first Black president of South Africa, he dedicated himself to dismantling the legacy of apartheid and promoting racial harmony, and consequently became a global icon through his moral and political leadership.

Through my e-Learning for Kids Foundation, where I strongly advocate for the education of young children, especially girls, I hold deep admiration for the work of **Malala Yousafzai**, a Pakistani activist and the youngest Nobel Prize laureate. Yousafzai has become an international symbol of resilience and advocacy for girls' education. Despite facing a life-threatening attack by the Taliban for her

activism, Yousafzai continued her fight for education rights, showcasing her bravery and commitment to her cause. She exemplifies becoming the best version of oneself through her dedication to empowering others, overcoming adversity, and tirelessly working for equality and education.

As a devoted Beatles fan, I hold a special place in my life for **Paul McCartney**. His journey toward becoming his best self is a testament to his enduring adaptability and growth. Following his Beatles era, he didn't just rest on his laurels; he forged a successful solo career and formed the group Wings, showcasing his ability to constantly evolve musically. His life hasn't been without personal struggles—notably, the loss of his first wife, Linda—yet he used these hardships to foster personal resilience. Beyond music, McCartney is deeply committed to activism and philanthropy, particularly in advocating for animal rights, vegetarianism, and music education. Despite his advancing age, he continues to tour and release new music, a clear sign of his dedication to lifelong creativity and learning. Mindfulness and health are also central to McCartney's life; he practices meditation and maintains a healthy lifestyle, underscoring his belief in the importance of mental and physical well-being. Adaptable as ever, he stays abreast of the latest trends and technologies in the always-evolving music industry.

I have a tremendous appreciation for architecture. The last individual who exemplifies becoming her best self that I'd like to highlight is Iraqi-British architect and artist **Zaha Hadid**, for her groundbreaking designs and barrier-breaking achievements. As the first woman to win the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize, she challenged industry norms with her innovative, fluid forms and expanded her craft beyond buildings into furniture and fashion. Hadid also contributed significantly to education, teaching at renowned institutions and inspiring future architects. Despite early challenges, with some designs initially deemed unbuildable, her persistence led to a legacy of iconic structures worldwide such as the London Aquatics Centre, the Heydar Aliyev Center, and the Guangzhou Opera House. By embracing new technologies and methods, Hadid and her work were a testament to relentless innovation, resilience, and a lasting impact on the architectural world.



One of Hadid's most renowned works, the Heydar Aliyev Center (Baku, Azerbaijan).
Photo by Mikhail Nilovon on Pexels.

Each individual I highlighted made a substantial impact, yet they remain authentically human, with their share of mistakes and imperfections, just like anyone else. They demonstrate that the journey to becoming the best version of ourselves is continuous and necessitates frequent reflection and constant personal development throughout life.

PHILOSOPHIES: THE BEST VERSION OF ME

The concept of becoming the best version of ourselves has been a central theme in various schools of thought throughout history, each providing unique perspectives on its importance. I will now introduce thoughts from different schools.

Ancient Greek Philosophy and the Best Version of Me

In Ancient Greek philosophy, the concept of eudaemonia is central, especially in the works of Aristotle.¹ More than mere happiness, eudaemonia is about living a life that is fulfilling and meaningful, often translated as “flourishing” or “human flourishing.” Aristotle argued that achieving eudaemonia is the goal of human existence, a state of being that goes beyond temporary pleasure or material success.

For Aristotle, the path to eudaemonia lies in the cultivation of virtues such as courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom. He posited that these virtues are not innate but are developed through practice and habit. Living virtuously, according to Aristotle, means performing the right actions for the right reasons, aligning one’s life with reason and rationality. He viewed reason as the unique function of human beings; thus, living rationally is essential for achieving eudaemonia.

Moreover, Aristotle emphasized the importance of moderation, a concept known as the golden mean, where virtue is a balance between two extremes. For instance, courage is the mean between recklessness and cowardice. This balance is achieved through practical wisdom or “phronesis,” the ability to make judicious decisions in various situations in life.

Aristotle also believed that though external factors such as wealth, health, and social status could influence one’s ability to achieve eudaemonia, they are not its essence. True eudaemonia is found in the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, which constitutes a life worth living. He saw human life as part of a larger social and political context, meaning that one can also achieve eudaemonia through active participation in community and public life, fulfilling one’s role as a citizen.

What resonates with me about Aristotle’s philosophy is his holistic approach to well-being. He moves beyond the often-overemphasized concepts of personal happiness and success, focusing instead on a life characterized by virtue, reason, and balance. This comprehensive view not only highlights the importance of individual fulfillment but also underscores the significance of contributing to society and achieving one’s highest potential. This concept is further discussed in the purpose section of this book.

Stoicism and the Best Version of Me

Stoicism, practiced and taught by philosophers such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, advocates for a life aligned with virtue and in harmony with nature.² This ancient school of thought teaches that the essence of being the best version of oneself lies in attaining tranquility and liberation from suffering. This state is not reached through external possessions or status but through the cultivation of personal virtues such as wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance.

For Stoics, the concept of virtue is more than moral righteousness; it's about living in a manner that is consistent with the natural order of the world. They believe that by understanding the nature of the universe, one can understand the role and purpose of humanity within it. This understanding leads to a life lived in accordance with reason and virtue, which is seen as the highest good.

A central tenet of Stoicism is the differentiation between what is within our control and what is not. Epictetus famously stated that our opinions, impulses, desires, and aversions are within our power, whereas our body, property, reputation, and command are not. By focusing on and accepting this distinction, Stoics maintain a sense of inner peace and resilience in the face of adversity. They emphasize the importance of self-control and the development of inner strength to manage one's reactions and emotions.

Additionally, Stoicism teaches the importance of living in the present moment and dealing with life's challenges as they come, without excessive worry about the future or regret over the past. Marcus Aurelius, in his meditations, often reflects on the impermanence of life and the importance of living a virtuous life here and now.

Moreover, Stoicism advocates for the idea of a universal brotherhood, where each person is part of a larger whole and should live in cooperation and kindness toward others. This sense of interconnectedness and community responsibility is also key to achieving personal fulfillment and becoming the best version of oneself.

I greatly value the Stoic philosophy and have integrated several of its practices into my leadership development programs. This philosophy advocates for resilience, emotional intelligence, and ethical living as essential elements for achieving genuine fulfillment and tranquility. These principles are also explored in the mind and purpose sections of this book, highlighting their relevance and applicability to various aspects of life, including leadership.

Eastern Philosophies and the Best Version of Me

Eastern philosophies illuminate pathways toward self-betterment in remarkable ways.³ Buddhism, for instance, advocates for mindfulness to attain deeper self-understanding.⁴ Embracing compassion and kindness toward every being, recognizing and releasing attachments that bring pain, and regular meditation for mental clarity are essential. Adhering to the Noble Eightfold Path, which endorses ethical and mindful living, along with shedding ego-driven perspectives, greatly contributes to self-improvement. This path highlights the significance of ethical behavior, introspection, and mental discipline.

Both Buddhism and Hinduism introduce the crucial concept of non-attachment. They teach that our struggles often arise from clinging to material possessions, relationships, or specific outcomes. Learning to relinquish these attachments paves the way for enhanced inner peace and adaptability to life's changes.

Taoism, another insightful philosophy, underscores the necessity of living in harmony with the natural world.⁵ Aligning ourselves with nature's rhythms can lead to a life that is both harmonious and fulfilling.

Personally, I find these philosophies' emphasis on balance and harmony in life invaluable. Finding internal and external harmony in various aspects of life, such as balancing professional duties with rest, juggling social commitments with personal time, and regulating emotional responses, is vital for personal growth. Furthermore, cultivating compassion toward oneself and others is a fundamental aspect of many Eastern philosophies. This encompasses both empathy and forgiveness, which are indispensable for personal development and building significant relationships.

Finally, practices such as meditation and yoga, prevalent in Eastern traditions, are powerful tools for self-discovery and enhancement. They assist in calming the mind, enhancing concentration, and deepening one's connection with the self and the cosmos. These practices have been instrumental in my journey toward personal growth and inner peace and will be discussed later in this book.

Existentialism and the Best Version of Me

Existentialism, a philosophical movement epitomized by thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Friedrich Nietzsche, delves into the notion that life, at its core, is devoid of any predetermined meaning or purpose.⁶ This school of thought posits that it is not within the fabric of the universe to provide us with ready-made answers or a set path; rather, it is incumbent upon all people to forge their own meaning and purpose in life. This process is what existentialists refer to as the essence of being, which follows existence, a reversal of the traditional philosophical stance that essence precedes existence.

Sartre, one of the most prominent figures in existentialist philosophy, famously declared that “existence precedes essence.”⁷ By this, he meant that individuals first exist, encounter themselves, and emerge in the world to define their essence or nature through their actions, decisions, and the way they shape their lives. This perspective underscores the freedom of individuals to choose and create their own paths, but with this freedom comes the immense responsibility of shaping one's own destiny.

Nietzsche challenged traditional moral and philosophical structures, advocating instead for the creation of personal values and the questioning of established norms. He suggests individuals to transcend conventional boundaries and create a life of self-overcoming and constant evolution toward one's highest potential.⁸

De Beauvoir offered a profound perspective on becoming the best version of oneself. Grounded in existentialist philosophy, she believed that one's existence is not predefined, and that it is the individual's responsibility to define their essence through choices and actions. For de Beauvoir, becoming the best version of oneself involves an authentic pursuit of freedom, where an individual

consciously chooses to transcend the given aspects of their existence such as societal roles and expectations, especially those imposed on women. She emphasized the importance of personal autonomy and ethical responsibility in this pursuit. In her seminal work, *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir explored how women have been historically “othered” and argued that becoming one’s true self involves challenging and transcending these imposed limitations.⁹ For de Beauvoir, the best version of oneself is realized through an active engagement in one’s own life, continuously striving for personal growth, and making choices that reflect one’s true desires and beliefs, free from societal constraints.

Existentialism places great emphasis on authenticity, urging individuals to live in accordance with their true selves rather than conforming to societal expectations or external pressures. This philosophy encourages embracing the absurdity of life, facing the void, and finding personal meaning despite the inherent meaninglessness of the universe. Moreover, existentialism recognizes the anxiety and despair that can arise when confronting the freedom and responsibility of creating one’s life narrative. Despite these challenges, existentialism advocates for a courageous approach to life, where individuals actively engage in defining their purpose, values, and beliefs and, in doing so, realize their true potential and authenticity.

I find that certain principles of existentialism are incredibly valuable, particularly those that stress the importance of crafting one’s own meaningful existence through personal choices, living authentically, and continually redefining oneself. However, adhering to these principles can be challenging. This difficulty is echoed in the insights of Bronnie Ware, an Australian nurse who worked with terminally ill patients. In her interactions, she discovered that the most common regret among the dying was: “I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.”¹⁰ This finding shows a fundamental human conflict: our desire to belong to various social groups often brings with it the pressure to conform to societal norms, which can lead us away from living a life that truly reflects our individual essence and desires.

Positive Psychology and the Best Version of Me

Positive psychology, developed and popularized by Martin Seligman and others, represents a shift in the focus of psychology on pathology and mental illness to the factors that contribute to a fulfilling and meaningful life.¹¹ This approach posits that becoming the best version of oneself is not merely about alleviating suffering but actively building positive qualities. It involves cultivating positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, and hope, which Seligman and others have found to be key to enhancing one's overall life satisfaction and resilience.

In addition to emotional well-being, positive psychology emphasizes the importance of engagement in activities that absorb and fulfill us, often referred to as “flow” activities.¹² These are tasks that challenge and engage us deeply, aligning with our personal strengths and passions. The idea is that the best version of ourselves emerges when we are deeply immersed in and fulfilled by what we do.

Building and maintaining healthy relationships is another crucial component of this approach. Positive psychology research suggests that strong, supportive social connections are a cornerstone of happiness and well-being. The quality of our relationships greatly influences our mental and emotional health.

Finding meaning in life is also a key aspect of positive psychology.¹³ This could involve being part of something bigger than oneself such as contributing to social causes, pursuing spiritual or religious beliefs, or engaging in work that aligns with one's values. This search for meaning provides a sense of purpose and direction. Achieving accomplishments, setting and working toward goals—whether personal or professional—is also seen as integral to becoming our best selves. These achievements provide a sense of mastery and efficacy, boosting our confidence and sense of self-worth.

Underpinning all these aspects is the belief in positive psychology that we can cultivate and grow our character strengths and virtues such as kindness, bravery, wisdom, and leadership. This personal growth is not seen as a fixed endpoint but a continual process of development and adaptation, contributing to our ongoing journey toward becoming the best version of ourselves.

My experience has shown me that positive psychology is an emerging science with tremendous potential for impact. In my book *YOU! The Positive Force in Change*, co-authored with my friend Eileen Rogers, I have incorporated numerous leadership practices derived from positive psychology insights.¹⁴ One of the key insights from this field that resonates with me is the idea that personal growth is not a destination but a continuous journey of development and adaptation. This perspective aligns with the concept of constantly evolving toward the best version of ourselves.

In conclusion, each of these philosophies contributes to the understanding of why striving to become the best version of oneself is important. They collectively highlight themes of virtue, purpose, self-actualization, resilience, and the pursuit of fulfillment as central to the human experience.

HOW TO BECOME THE BEST VERSION OF YOURSELF

Drawing upon a wide range of scientific disciplines including, but not limited to, the ones I have discussed in the previous paragraph, we have crafted an all-encompassing well-being model that serves as the cornerstone of this book. This model integrates various theories and practical methodologies designed to guide you on your journey to becoming the best version of yourself.

The best version of me well-being model is structured into four key sections:

- 1. Body**
- 2. Mind**
- 3. Purpose**
- 4. Environment**

Each section comprises four or five dimensions, represented as chapters of this book. At the beginning of each section, a brief introduction to its chapters will be provided.

Figure 1.1: The best version of me well-being model

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The chapters are uniquely crafted to be both independent and interconnected, allowing you the flexibility to engage with the content according to your preferences. You can either read them sequentially for a comprehensive understanding or select chapters that align with your personal interests and needs, with each offering insightful and actionable advice.

To truly embody the best version of yourself, it's crucial to consider all dimensions of the model. We view the best version of ourselves as an integrated whole rather than isolated dimensions. This means considering the synergy of body, mind, purpose, and environment.

Each dimension discussed in individual chapters also influences other aspects of the well-being model. For instance, insufficient sleep (body) can affect energy levels, eating habits, learning and memory, emotional regulation, decision-making, and the quality of relationships, potentially leading to burnout. Similarly, a lack of clarity in purpose may affect decision-making in other areas such as prioritizing physical well-being or investing in personal development and growth. Consequently, we encourage you to navigate back and forth between chapters, exploring the various dimensions and learning how they can be integrated for holistic well-being.

To facilitate an engaging and convenient reading experience, each chapter in this book follows a consistent structure. Beginning with an introduction, the chapters include a personal story related to each theme. This is followed by an exploration of how the topic supports your well-being and practical advice on enhancing your well-being based on the chapter's insights. Each chapter also features questions for self-reflection to encourage deeper thinking as well as resources for further exploration and learning. These resources include the authors' top three suggestions for articles, books, assessments and tests, videos, and podcasts.

Finally, the book is complemented by a website:

► thebestversionofmebook.com.

Here, you can find additional, continuously updated resources, including comprehensive assessments, an extensive knowledge center, and recommended courses. This integrated approach ensures a rich learning journey, enabling you to deeply engage with the book's content and apply its lessons in your journey toward personal well-being and becoming the best version of yourself.

THE SKY IS THE LIMIT

Humans possess an innate and remarkable potential to evolve into the best versions of themselves, similar to how a caterpillar is destined to transform into a butterfly. This potential is rooted deeply in various aspects of our being. For instance, our brainpower is colossal, with billions of neurons offering vast, untapped cognitive capabilities. Much like the unexplored depths of the ocean, the extent of our brain's potential is yet to be fully understood, suggesting immense possibilities for intellectual and creative growth. Physically, our bodies are powerhouses of strength and resilience, capable of extraordinary feats of endurance, adaptability, and transformation. In addition, our mental fortitude is profound. The human spirit has shown time and again that it can overcome tremendous challenges, endure hardship, and emerge stronger. This capacity for mental and emotional resilience allows us to navigate life's complexities and grow from our experiences. Collectively, these facets of human potential embody our capacity for flourishing, offering endless possibilities for personal development and self-actualization.

Becoming the best version of ourselves is a journey that extends beyond individual effort. It necessitates introspection, engaging in self-questioning, adopting new behaviors, and continuous personal development. Moreover, this transformation often relies on the support and input from others.

The creation of this book perfectly illustrates this collaborative process: it is the result of a team of experts working together, where the combined efforts and expertise of each contributor were essential. Individually, none of us could have crafted this book, which further highlights the importance of collective endeavor in personal growth and achievement.

I hope this book brings you a wealth of inspiration as you read it.

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION

- Reflecting on Stoicism's emphasis on controlling what is within our power, how can you apply this approach to your current challenges or goals?
- Considering the existentialist perspective on creating personal meaning, how do you currently define and pursue your own life's purpose and authenticity?
- How do you see the principles of positive psychology contributing to your journey toward becoming the best version of yourself, particularly in terms of personal growth and happiness?

RESOURCES FOR EXPLORATION AND LEARNING



TOP 3: BOOKS

Clear, J. (2018). **Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones.** New York: Avery.

Description of the book from Amazon: “*Atomic Habits* will reshape the way you think about progress and success and give you the tools and strategies you need to transform your habits—whether you are a team looking to win a championship, an organization hoping to redefine an industry, or simply an individual who wishes to quit smoking, lose weight, reduce stress, or achieve any other goal.”

Goldsmith, M. (2022). **The Earned Life. Lose Regret, Choose Fulfillment.** Sydney: Currency.

Description of the book from Marshall Goldsmith's website: “Marshall Goldsmith—world-renowned Executive Coach and New York Times bestselling author—offers a potent but simple approach that accommodates both our persistent need for achievement and the inescapable ‘stuff happens’ unfairness of life.”

Maté, G. (2019). **When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress.** London: Vermilion.

Description of the book from Gabor Maté's website: “When the Body Says No promotes learning and healing, providing transformative insights into how disease can be the body's way of saying no to what the mind cannot or will not acknowledge.”



TOP 3: ARTICLES



Christensen, C. M. (2010, July-August). **How will you measure your life?** *Harvard Business Review*.

► tinyurl.com/2jddatwd

In this article, Clayton Christensen explores questions everyone needs to ask: How can I be happy in my career? How can I be sure that my relationship with my family is an enduring source of happiness? And how can I live my life with integrity?



Harvard Health Publishing. (n.d.). **Positive psychology**. Harvard Medical School.

► tinyurl.com/mrsx8b7s

This article explores the fundamentals of positive psychology, a field focused on what makes life most fulfilling. It addresses key pillars, including positive thinking, self-compassion, and mindfulness, and examines the concept of mindfulness in detail.



Perrigao, B. (2020, May 22). **“Acts of kindness are really contagious.”**

Historian Rutger Bregman argues for a new way of thinking about humanity. *Time*

► tinyurl.com/4ybeykv5

Interview with Rutger Bregman about his book *Humankind*, in which the unconventional historian tries to unravel even more of the conventional wisdom that, he says, actually stands on empirically shaky ground.



TOP 3: VIDEOS



The Game that Can Give You 10 Extra Years of Life. TED Talk. Jane McGonigal.

► tinyurl.com/5n8hwdne

From the description of the video: “When game designer Jane McGonigal found herself bedridden and suicidal following a severe concussion, she had a fascinating idea for how to get better. She dove into the scientific research and created the healing game, SuperBetter. In this moving talk, McGonigal explains how a game can boost resilience—and promises to add 7.5 minutes to your life.”



How to Make Stress Your Friend. TED Talk. Kelly McGonigal.

► tinyurl.com/2ny4tupn

From the description of the video: “Stress. It makes your heart pound, your breathing quicken and your forehead sweat. But while stress has been made into a public health enemy, new research suggests that stress may only be bad for you if you believe that to be the case. Psychologist Kelly McGonigal urges us to see stress as a positive, and introduces us to an unsung mechanism for stress reduction: reaching out to others.”



Want to Be Happy? Be Grateful. TED Talk. David Steindl-Rast.

► tinyurl.com/4ymsemcx

From the description of the video: “The one thing all humans have in common is that each of us wants to be happy, says Brother David Steindl-Rast, a monk and interfaith scholar. And happiness, he suggests, is born from gratitude. An inspiring lesson in slowing down, looking where you’re going, and above all, being grateful.”

ENDNOTES

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- 11 C. R. Snyder, S. J. Lopez, L. M. Edwards, and S. C. Marques, eds. (2021). *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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