

THE
ART OF
TURNING
obstacles
INTO **OPPORTUNITIES**



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INTRODUCTION

Do you dread dealing with any type of obstacle? Most of us do. We want life to be easy, but it seems that obstacles continuously thwart our efforts and limit the quality of our lives. The good news is that obstacles don't have to be the vile thing you think they are.

Obstacles can actually be a blessing! **Obstacles are often the path to great success and achievement.** The obstacle isn't really a roadblock. It's an opportunity.

If there's one characteristic found in all successful people, it's the ability to persevere and overcome obstacles. Those that struggle with life invariably give up far too quickly.

Overcoming obstacles requires three things:

1. **It begins with the ability to perceive the situation accurately.** This requires having a true understanding of how the world works. It's important to be free of emotional distress and to maintain your composure. **Excess emotion clouds perception** and can inhibit your ability to take action.

2. **Act intelligently.** With accurate perception, you have the ability to take appropriate action. All of us take actions every day. Even lying on the couch and watching television is a course of action. However, few of us take intelligent action. ***Intelligent action consists of actions that are most likely to lead to success.***
3. **Accept and persevere.** Creating opportunities from obstacles requires will. When placed in a situation with multiple obstacles and little hope, do you continue or do you give up? The ability to accept the situation makes intelligent action easier. Lacking acceptance, you'll face too much emotional struggle to perceive accurately or to act intelligently.

This guide focuses on the details and enhancement of these three important traits. Enjoy!

“Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them - that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.”

- Lao Tzu

ACCURATE PERCEPTION

Perception is how we view and comprehend the events occurring around us. It also consists of the interpretation of what those events mean. ***Your perception can be a strength or a weakness.*** When you're overly emotional and subjective, you create further challenges.

All of our thoughts are clouded by inaccurate perceptions of past experiences, false beliefs, and fear. Filtering out these mental obstacles requires skill. However, with practice, it's possible to keep your emotions under control. ***With a clear mind, only the truth remains.*** When you see the truth, you're starting from the perfect place.

Accuracy and delusional thinking are the opposite of each other. ***An accurate assessment of the situation and the ability to see the possibilities are the key.***

"Life is one big road with lots of signs. So when you riding through the ruts, don't complicate your mind. Flee from hate, mischief and jealousy. Don't bury your thoughts; put your vision to reality. Wake Up and Live!"

- Bob Marley

Maintain Your Composure

Obstacles present themselves each day. We're constantly presented with a choice either to maintain our emotional state or to become rattled. Whether it's a traffic jam on the way to work, an employee that calls in sick, or a child that has broken your front window, two possibilities exist. Which do you routinely choose?

Try these tips for maintaining your composure in the midst of chaos:

1. **Be defiant.** On some level, composure is the result of defiance. It's the refusal to be intimidated or to view a temporary result as a failure.
2. **Take responsibility.** Something powerful happens when you choose to take responsibility for a situation: ***you have the power to change things.*** When you have power, you'll feel less stress and worry.
3. **Stay present.** In times of turmoil, keep your attention on your current task. Keep your mind in the present moment. Keep your mind on your work, rather than on the possible negative outcomes. To stay present when your mind tries to wander, focus on your

breathing and your senses. Make a mental list of the things you see, hear, smell, and feel.

- ▶ **You can only think about one thing at a time. Use that fact to your advantage.** Negative thoughts about the future lead to anxiety.
4. **Focus on solutions.** Unsuccessful people are masters at concentrating on their challenges and making them more intimidating than they really are. Keep your thoughts on the solutions.
- ▶ This requires practice. The more you practice, the more adept you'll become at this skill.
5. **Realize that becoming upset limits your options.** Fear and anxiety limit your ability to see all of your options. The most elegant, and often simple, solutions will elude you. You're at your best when in a state of equanimity.

Chaos is one type of obstacle. **Use chaos as an opportunity to build your emotional resistance.** You can control your thoughts and emotional response in every situation. Focus on maintaining your composure throughout the day.

“Without accepting the fact that everything changes, we cannot find perfect composure. But unfortunately, although it is true, it is difficult for us to accept it. Because we cannot accept the truth of transience, we suffer.”

- Shunryu Suzuki

Objectivity

Objectivity is elusive. **Objectivity is the ability to see the situation accurately, without the influence of emotion, prejudice, or bias.** When you're observing, you see what is actually there. When you're perceiving, you're seeing more than what is actually there.

We often create turmoil with the belief that a situation should be a particular way. For example:

- ▶ My boss is supposed to be supportive of me.
- ▶ My ex-girlfriend should still be with me.
- ▶ I should have more money than Bob.
- ▶ I should have more free time.

Accept the situation and make up your mind to move forward.

Become more objective and see the truth with these techniques:

1. **Avoid quick reactions.** Have you ever noticed that deer run when frightened? It's not a thoughtful process. A deer either freezes or runs. The instinct to flee is strong. In fact, it's so strong that deer often flee from one problem only to be struck by a car.
 - ▶ Reacting quickly is the result of instinct. Your boss infuriates you, so you quit. Your spouse makes a mistake, and you verbally unload on them. But reacting quickly is rarely the best option.
 - ▶ Take a moment to assess the situation before choosing a course of action.
2. **Consider your sensitive spots.** Which topics cause you to routinely overreact? Are you easily slighted? Are you impatient? Do you hold strong political beliefs that you defend vigorously?

- ▶ When you're in situations that result in strong emotions, you're much less likely to be objective.

Notice when you're involved in one of these situations and tread carefully.

3. **Strip away your perceptions.** Take the situation at face value. Suppose you're waiting for your friend to arrive at the movie theater. Depending on your past experiences and your personality, you might conclude:

- ▶ She had a car accident.
- ▶ She's stuck in traffic.
- ▶ She doesn't respect my time.
- ▶ She's late again. I'm really going to let her have it when she gets here.
- ▶ However, you can't know any of these things until you actually speak to her. Why upset yourself when there might not be a reason to be upset? All you know is that she's late. More helpful questions might include:

- ➔ Should I call her?
- ➔ Should I wait for her or go inside and buy the popcorn?
- ➔ Will there still be seats available if I wait much longer?
- ➔ If I continue waiting, how long should I wait?

4. **Make a list of what you know regarding the situation.** You might know that your company's earnings are down this quarter. However, you might not know that you're going to lose your job as a result.

- ▶ Before making decisions, make a list of what you know for a fact.
- ▶ Then make a list of logical conclusions.
- ▶ Do you feel more confident about what to do?

- ▶ Finally, note your thoughts that are unsupported and tainted by your emotions and negative thought patterns.
5. **De-personalize the situation. *Imagine you were giving advice to a friend or a stranger.*** Objectivity is easier to find when you take your ego out of the equation. Obstacles and setbacks seem smaller when they're occurring to someone else.

Few people can rightly consider themselves to be objective. We're all victims of our past and our erroneous thinking. It takes tremendous effort to maintain objectivity. ***The ability to see the truth lays the groundwork for overcoming obstacles.***

"A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles."

- Christopher Reeve

Control What You Can

Everything that happens in your life can be divided into two groups: Those things you can control and those you

cannot. **Worrying about things beyond your control is simply counterproductive.** Focus on those things under your influence.

What can you control?

1. **Your decisions.** At the end of the day, you make up your own mind. You decide what to eat, to whom you'll speak, and the direction of your life. If you fail to make decisions, you're deciding to let the world determine your fate.
2. **Your emotions.** You can choose whether you'll stay calm or become upset. Life is harder if you can't control your emotions.
3. **Your attitude.** Do you choose to be optimistic or pessimistic? Your attitude influences your thoughts and emotions – and ultimately your actions.
4. **Your perspective.** Are you a failure stuck in an unwinnable situation? Or are you a winner in a tough, but manageable situation? Do you believe there are golden opportunities to be found in the midst of your challenges? ***Which perspective would be more likely to support you in your endeavors?***

5. **Your creativity.** Are you going to repeat the same patterns that have resulted in the current situation? Or are you taking full advantage of your ability to overcome challenges and create new, exciting results?

Make a list of everything in your life that's disagreeable to you. Make note of all the things out of your control and decide not to let them intrude on your thoughts. **Put your time and focus on the things within your sphere of control.** Ignore those things you can't influence.

“Every day we have plenty of opportunities to get angry, stressed or offended. But what you're doing when you indulge these negative emotions is giving something outside yourself power over your happiness. You can choose to not let little things upset you.”

- Joel Osteen

INTELLIGENT ACTION

Most of us take action. However, do we choose the wisest action for the situation? Intelligent action can only result from accurate perception. ***It's only through taking consistent, intelligent actions that obstacles are dismantled.*** Intelligent action often requires courage, because the most effective actions are rarely the easiest.

Get Started

Theodore Roosevelt said that we either wear out or rust out. Getting busy is important. You can't think an obstacle away. You have to start somewhere, so get started. ***Often, the best solutions won't present themselves until you make a few efforts.***

You can only make progress if you're doing something:

1. **Realize that getting started is often the hardest part.** Whether it's cleaning out the shed, doing your income taxes, or solving world hunger, ***nothing happens until you take action.*** In most cases, sooner is better than later.

2. **Keep moving.** How many times have you started with great enthusiasm, only to quit after a short period? A little progress can be a dangerous thing. It's easy to become excited after taking those first few steps, but overcoming obstacles requires ongoing effort.

- ▶ ***Do something each day to move beyond your challenge.*** Once you have a small amount of momentum, avoid allowing it to slip away. Keep pressing.
- ▶ Keep thinking while you're moving. You can walk and chew gum at the same time. You can think and plan while you're taking action.

3. **Increase your effort.** It's easy to be busy and get little accomplished. Look around your workplace. Most employees have the routine down to a science. Keep your head down, shuffle some papers, check email while no one is watching, and wait for 5 o'clock.

- ▶ When did you last put your best effort into anything? We're so used to operating at 10%,

we've forgotten what 100%, or even 50%, feels like anymore.

- ▶ ***Providing you're taking intelligent action, an increase in effort will increase your results proportionately.***

4. **Understand that the circumstances will never be perfect.** There will always be some aspect of the current situation that's less than ideal. The fact that you're not 100% ready isn't a viable excuse for failing to take action.

Momentum is self-created. Get started so you can get finished.

“Fear stifles our thinking and actions. It creates indecisiveness that results in stagnation. I have known talented people who procrastinate indefinitely rather than risk failure. Lost opportunities cause erosion of confidence, and the downward spiral begins.”

- Charles Stanley

It's Intelligent Action if It's Effective

Deal with reality. There's no value in getting caught up in what should work. **Intelligent action is effective action.** If your action isn't creating results, it's not intelligent action. Preoccupy yourself with what's working, not what should be working. Be practical.

These strategies will help you to determine what action is intelligent action and move forward accordingly:

1. **Measure your results.** *The best way to determine if an action is intelligent is to measure your results regularly.* You might be on the "perfect" weight-loss diet according to experts, but if you're gaining weight, it's not an intelligent diet for you.
 - ▶ Would you follow a diet without weighing yourself? Avoid taking actions and ignoring the outcomes.
2. **Enhance your actions.** Your first action might be effective, but is it as effective as it could be? It almost certainly isn't. Continue testing and refining as you go along. Keep in mind that conditions change. Even if

you were fortunate enough to find the perfect process, it won't be perfect for long.

- ▶ **Seek regular improvement along the way.** This is the only way to guarantee overcoming any obstacle.
3. **Be flexible.** Focus on being pragmatic instead of clinging to a particular course of action. A straight line might be the shortest path, but sometimes it's easier to go around the mountain than through it. Be committed to your objective, but flexible in your approach.
- ▶ Hold to your principles and ideals, but be creative and flexible in the method you follow. **Progress is more important than perfection.**
4. **Look for clues.** Has anyone else successfully overcome the same obstacle? How did they accomplish it? Examine your own past. We often repeat our mistakes. Imagine the change you'd experience in your life if you never made the same mistake twice. Look for clues that will enhance your approach.

Intelligent action is action that creates results. It's that simple. **No obstacle can stand up to persistent and intelligent action.**

"Don't wait for extraordinary opportunities. Seize common occasions and make them great. Weak men wait for opportunities; strong men make them."

- Orison Swett Marden

Focus

Time, attention, money, and willpower are limited resources. **Overcoming obstacles requires focusing your resources intelligently.** Building focus is like building a muscle. It requires intention and effort to encourage growth.

Scattering your attention and resources limits your ability to overcome obstacles:

1. **Determine what success looks like.** Focus is easier to maintain if you have a clear objective. You might need to find a better job in order to purchase the

home of your dreams. But what does a “better job” really mean? If you feel that it means:

- ▶ A salary of \$75,000+
- ▶ No more than 50 hours per week
- ▶ A boss that I respect
- ▶ In the pharmaceutical field
- ▶ Within 10 miles of my home
- ▶ Then you can direct your energy and resources wisely because you know exactly what to strive for.

2. **Make a list of what you won't do.** The great investor, Warren Buffett, suggests the following exercise: Make a list of everything you really want to accomplish and put the list in order. Circle the top three items. His advice is to avoid everything else on the list as if your life depended on it.

- ▶ Avoid all the distractions in life that don't matter. Handle your current obstacle. There will be time in the future to accomplish other goals.
3. **Create a list of your accomplishments at the end of each day. *Success can increase focus.*** A little progress can fuel your attention. Spend a few minutes at the end of each day listing your successes, no matter how small.
 4. **Control your thoughts.** Keep your thoughts on the actions that will bring about positive results.

Can anything impressive be accomplished without focus?

Use your time and other resources to the best of your ability. Distractions may be enjoyable, but they won't help you conquer your obstacles.

"If you're trying to achieve, there will be roadblocks. I've had them; everybody has had them. But obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it."

- Michael Jordan

Expect Failure

Be prepared for things not to work out. **While there are many things we can control about ourselves, it's not possible to control the rest of the world.** Even with intelligent action, the results aren't always positive in the short-term. Keep in mind that some obstacles can be too great to overcome. For example, it wasn't possible for Aristotle to walk on the moon.

1. **Failures can provide valuable information.** Each failed attempt provides information that can be used to improve your approach or your objective. **It has been said that the surest road to success is to fail quickly and often.**
2. **Failures can result in new opportunities.** A failure can provide the chance to learn something new or to perfect a skill. At the very least, failure is an opportunity to learn how to control your emotions.
3. **Understand that failure isn't final.** Abraham Lincoln had many failed business and political endeavors before finally becoming president.

Failure is a common outcome. No one can avoid it. **How you deal with failure is under your control.** While there

will be a few obstacles that can't be overcome, 99% of the obstacles we face on a daily basis don't fall into that category.

Your best results come from taking consistent, intelligent action. Give your best effort and be prepared to deal with failure.

“All the adversity I've had in my life, all my troubles and obstacles, have strengthened me... You may not realize it when it happens, but a kick in the teeth may be the best thing in the world for you.”

- Walt Disney

DETERMINATION AND PERSEVERANCE

The ability to persevere is admired in all societies.

Perseverance is necessary to overcome obstacles. Some obstacles require a tremendous amount of time and effort to conquer. Without perseverance, you won't last long enough to taste success.

If you have a habit of giving up too quickly, it will benefit you to increase your willpower and discipline.

“Permanence, perseverance and persistence in spite of all obstacles, discouragements, and impossibilities: It is this, that in all things distinguishes the strong soul from the weak.”

- Thomas Carlyle

Build Your Willpower

Willpower is often in short supply, but easy to build. **The easiest way to build willpower is to challenge it each day.** Whenever you feel like stopping an activity, force yourself to continue for a few more minutes. Make two

more phone calls or pay two more bills. Read five more pages. You'll be surprised by how quickly your willpower grows.

1. **Use your willpower to accomplish smaller tasks successfully.** If you want the capacity to stay strong in the midst of great obstacles, practice on smaller obstacles. Do what needs to be done in your everyday life.
 - ▶ Pay your bills on time
 - ▶ Clean out the garage when necessary
 - ▶ Exercise regularly
 - ▶ Empty the dishwasher
 - ▶ File your taxes early
 - ▶ Your will strengthens gradually over time. Big obstacles can be overwhelming. ***But if you're good at controlling yourself and overcoming smaller obstacles, you'll find that you can overcome big obstacles as well.***

2. **Learn to like being uncomfortable.** Asking out a beautiful woman, running 10 miles, making 100 cold calls, or moving across the country are uncomfortable activities. They also have the potential to change your life. Comfortable activities are unlikely to overcome a significant obstacle. ***Your success is limited by your willingness to deal with discomfort.***
 - ▶ Get excited when you experience discomfort. Something wonderful might be about to happen!
3. **Stay focused on the result.** It's easy to become overwhelmed if you focus on the obstacle. Spend some time visualizing how great it will be once that obstacle has been defeated. Allow yourself to feel good.
4. **Stay present.** Staying grounded in the moment is helpful in multiple areas of your life. Writing a big report for your boss is simply sitting down and moving your hands. In many ways, that's no different from sitting down and playing cards with your friends. Much of the grief you experience is the result of your thoughts. When you think:

- ▶ This stinks.
 - ▶ I should've gone to medical school.
 - ▶ I'll never get this done.
 - ▶ I hate writing reports.
 - ▶ You're guaranteed to be miserable and struggle to finish. Simply take a deep breath and do what is necessary without emotional content.
5. **Give something up.** A great way to build your willpower is to give up a bad habit. It might be smoking, eating sweets, or biting your nails. Take it one day at a time and resist your urges. It can be just as challenging to avoid an action as it is to take one.

Willpower is the ability to do something you don't feel like doing. It's a valuable commodity. ***With enough willpower, it's easy to save money, stop procrastinating, and overcome obstacles.*** Time spent building your willpower is time well spent.

“I have a motto on my bedroom wall: 'Obstacles are what you see when you take your eye off the goal.' Giving up is not my style. I just want to do something that's worthwhile.”

- Chris Burke

Recognize Your Mortality

Some argue that death renders everything irrelevant. After all, what's the point in doing anything if you're destined to become fertilizer for daffodils? However, the truth is that appreciating your mortality can create focus and lessen worry.

There are advantages to pondering your eventual demise:

1. **You'll stop worrying about silly things.** The fact that your football team lost the Super Bowl or the fact that your great idea failed become much less burdensome. Many of the obstacles in your life will also take on new meanings and seem less scary.
2. **You'll focus your attention.** Imagine you only had a month to live. You'd spend your remaining time

wisely! We're all dying a little each day. It's just happening too slowly to breach our consciousness. Think about how quickly the last ten years have passed. How many more decades do you have left? Who knows?

- 3. Make a list of the things you'd like to accomplish before you die.** Now imagine that your assumed life expectancy is cut in half. What would still be on the list? Fewer things are important as you run out of time. Fewer obstacles are important, too.

Contemplating your death has the power to release worries, enhance focus, and increase the meaning you feel in your life. Remember that of the 7 billion people on Earth, very few will be alive in 100 years. None of them will be alive in 150 years. Are you really worried about a little obstacle?

“Fear can be good when you're walking past an alley at night or when you need to check the locks on your doors before you go to bed, but it's not good when you have a goal and you're fearful of obstacles. We often get trapped by our fears, but anyone who has had success has failed before.”

- Queen Latifah

Accept Everything

It is what it is. Is losing your job unpleasant? Perhaps. But is crying, pouting, getting angry, or throwing yourself off a bridge going to rectify the situation? No. ***There's a tremendous power in fully accepting the current situation.*** It's very liberating.

Accept your circumstances and grow your capacity to deal with obstacles:

1. **Acceptance isn't the same as agreement.** You might refuse to accept the current situation because you believe that it's equivalent to approval. Acceptance is about not fighting reality. You don't have to approve of the fact that someone else took your dream job, but that's reality. Failing to accept the truth only prolongs your pain.
2. **Acceptance allows you to work on the solution.** ***While you're emotionally tied up in the circumstances, you're stuck.*** Let it go and begin working on the solution to the obstacle that's in your way.
3. **Let go of the need for justice and the need to be right.** Would you rather be right or be happy? You can think of at least one person in your life that insists on

being right 100% of the time. How happy are they?
Remember that life is short. Move on.

Deal with the things under your control and accept the rest. Do you have a viable alternative? Dialectic therapy includes a concept referred to as “radical acceptance.”

Embrace every experience, even those you don't enjoy.

The sooner you accept the situation, the sooner you can move beyond it.

“Acceptance doesn't mean resignation; it means understanding that something is what it is and that there's got to be a way through it.”

- Michael J. Fox

CONCLUSION

Obstacles are a common part of life. The most successful people are able to overcome bigger obstacles than those that struggle with life. ***Obstacles can be viewed as stepping stones to greater levels of success.***

Obstacles are also the best learning opportunities. Obstacles stretch our ability to contain our emotions, build focus and acceptance, and develop new skills.

Without obstacles, life would become stale and boring. Instead of avoiding obstacles, embrace them. Any obstacle can become the path to your success.