

THE INTERNATIONAL  
BESTSELLING SERIES

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# THE RULES OF LIVING WELL

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THE  
RULES  
OF  
LIVING WELL

# Find the humour

You know those situations where you are on the phone to some jobsworth who is making you so angry you want to scream? Or you're trying to get from A to B and the traffic is terrible, and now the weather is terrible too, and you're late and sweaty and bedraggled and just want to cry? Or you're cooking dinner for the children and two of them are having simultaneous tantrums and the food is burning and then you discover you're out of pasta?

How do you cope without screaming or bursting into tears – or do you give in to the understandable outburst of emotion? The best way I've ever found to deal with it is by laughing. Of course, that isn't always easy at the time, so I imagine myself relating the experience to someone else later and making it as funny as possible: 'And you're not going to believe what happened next, on top of all that ...!' If you think about it, anecdotes about things going horribly wrong are a great source of humour after the event. The trick is not to wait until afterwards, but use the prospect of dining out on the anecdote to help you now.

I used to volunteer many years ago for an organisation that answered the phone to people in distress and listened to them talk.<sup>9</sup> And one of the things I noticed was that even people going through the most dreadful traumas seemed to cope better when they laughed at themselves. And the reason, so far as I could tell, was that in order to do it they had to take a mental step back and view themselves from someone else's perspective. It was that distance, that almost objective self-observation, that seemed to be giving them the detachment they needed to cope with their situation. I've since discovered that psychologists call this 'reframing', by which they mean looking at something in a different way, and the science does indeed back up the idea that laughing at your situation helps you to cope with it.

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<sup>9</sup> Yes, that one.

We all know that laughter is great medicine – the act of laughing genuinely makes you feel better. Laughing at yourself is a more specific subset of humour in general, and it's the reframing element of it that's so valuable. It can also help you to deal with difficult people. For example, if your boss is prone to making patronising comments that infuriate you, try turning it into a game. See how many you can count in a day, or mentally allocate a 'most patronising remark of the week' award. This brings humour – and reframing – into the situation so that, although you hate the comments, some part of you is sort of hoping your boss will beat their record or say something outrageously patronising. This becomes even more entertaining if you can compete with a work colleague in the same position.

This also works well for partners, friends or siblings who have to spend time with a critical relative or self-obsessed friend. Knowing you can go home later and compare notes – 'You'll never guess what he said when we were in the kitchen ...!' – gives you the detachment that makes it much easier to cope, as well as storing up the fun of swapping stories later.

**USE THE PROSPECT OF DINING  
OUT ON THE ANECDOTE TO  
HELP YOU NOW**

# EXERCISE

No matter how busy your life is, finding room in it for exercise will help you cope and make you feel better. That doesn't mean you have to find the money to join a gym and be down there crunching and pressing and running and squatting every day. Nothing wrong with that if it works for you, but nothing wrong with you if it doesn't work. Or just doesn't happen.

It's easy to fall prey to the feeling that large chunks of your life must be devoted to formal exercise of some kind. But while that's certainly one option, there are lots of other ways to make exercise work for you, and not the other way around. And there are Rules worth bearing in mind even if you do run every morning before breakfast and then go to the gym for an hour after work.

Some of us just don't enjoy running or aerobics or lifting weights, and some of us would love to do it but can't find time between kids and work and running the house and looking after our ageing parents or whatever. And that's all fine. It's perfectly possible to get the exercise you need regardless of your life and your enjoyment – or otherwise – of taking exercise. You just need to approach it in the way that works for you, which is what these next few Rules are all about.

# Think yourself exercised

Suppose you're part of a group of friends and family who hate anything that looks like exercise. Plenty of them are a healthy weight with enough energy, but they never put on a tracksuit or go to a gym or an exercise class. You feel differently though, because you love running. So you run for about an hour a day. Consequently you feel your exercise levels are really good and you're positive about your fitness.

Now suppose you take a job elsewhere, and make new friends and spend time with new colleagues. You continue to spend an hour a day running, of course, because you enjoy that. It turns out, however, that your new friends and colleagues all run too – which is great – but most of them also go to fitness classes or spinning sessions or spend time at the gym. You don't do any of that. All you do is run. So now how do you feel about your fitness level? Which hasn't changed at all since you used to think it was really good?

Most people measure their levels of fitness against the people around them, which is understandable but – as you can see – not actually a very accurate measure. You can go from thinking you're doing loads of exercise to thinking you're not doing enough, without changing your activity level at all. And what's more – and this is the important bit – studies have shown that the less active you believe that you are, the less healthy you are, regardless of your real activity level.

So your attitude to exercise counts for as much as the exercise itself. That doesn't mean you can spend all day slouching on the sofa telling yourself you're really fit – most of us would struggle to convince ourselves anyway – but it does mean that it's important to be positive about how you exercise. Focus on what you've achieved, and not on targets you've set yourself and then not met. Ignore what the people around you are doing. Acknowledge the

exercise you get as you go about your normal day, as well as trips to gyms and classes and swimming pools. Recognise that if you're healthy and flexible enough for your age and have the energy you need, you're doing fine.

So the first Rule of exercise is don't sweat it. Don't stress and worry about whether you're doing enough, or whether it's the right kind of exercise. That's not only counter-productive but also unnecessary, because there are so many different ways of measuring exercise that it's almost impossible to say what counts as 'enough'. Lots of people out there are doing far more exercise than is necessary to keep them healthy, which is great if they're enjoying it, but you don't have to keep up with them. It's not a competition. And some of them have developed great aerobic fitness but aren't very flexible, or have excellent muscle tone but their stamina is nothing special, or need to run 10 miles a day only because they eat too many pies.

So ignore them. Do what feels right and is enjoyable, and focus on the positive. And that attitude alone will make a bigger difference than a few extra push-ups.

**YOUR ATTITUDE TO EXERCISE  
COUNTS FOR AS MUCH AS THE  
EXERCISE ITSELF**