

Designing Your Life by Bill Burnett & Dave Evans | Book Summary by Paul Minors

INTRODUCTION

Who is this book for?

Designing Your Life is a book for people who want to claim control of their life, instead of living in somebody else's. It's a book for those who seek ways to live a more fulfilling life and squeeze lessons out of their daily grind. Above all, it's a book for those who feel lost and can't find a direction in their lives.

About the authors

Bill Burnett is the Executive Director of the Design Program at Stanford. He has worked professionally on a wide variety of projects ranging from award-winning Apple PowerBooks to the original Star Wars action figures. Dave Evans is a Lecturer at the Product Design Program at Stanford, a Management Consultant, and co-founder of Electronic Arts, having previously worked in the Product Marketing team of Apple.

In this summary

This book is packed with actionable exercises on how to design, calibrate, and reinvent your life. From debunking dysfunctional beliefs we all have to helping you assess where you are in life, and from getting you unstuck to reframing our common failures into valuable lessons, I'm sure you'll find this book's lessons addictive. Let's get started!

BOOK SUMMARY

1. THE APPROACH

Dysfunctional Beliefs

We all have dysfunctional beliefs in our lives. According to the authors, dysfunctional beliefs are “the myths that prevent so many people from designing the life they want.” Examples of dysfunctional beliefs & how they can be reframed:

1. Dysfunctional Belief: Your degree determines your career. Reframe: Three-quarters of all college grads don't end up working in a career related to their majors.
2. Dysfunctional Belief: If you are successful, you will be happy. Reframe: True happiness comes from designing a life that works for you.
3. Dysfunctional Belief: It's too late. Reframe: It's never too late to design a life you love.

The goal of this book is to help you reframe and overcome these dysfunctional beliefs, and live a well-designed life.

A Well-Designed Life

The authors' definition of a well-designed life is:

“A life that is generative - it is constantly creative, productive, changing, evolving, and there is always the possibility of surprise.”

A not-so-well-designed life can lead to misery. Research shows that, for most people, passion comes after they try something, discover they like it, and develop mastery - not before.

“Passion is the result of a good life design, not the cause.”

This book will use design thinking to get you unstuck, have lots of ideas and lots of options. It will help you reframe problems, build prototypes of your life, and test

them out, so you can design your own best life. You will become a life designer:
building your way forward, not thinking about it.

2. GETTING STARTED

Let's be honest: we've all got problems. Most people spend years or their whole life working on the wrong problems. No wonder why they end up living unhappy lives.

Life design starts by understanding where you are - the right problems you need to solve. But first, let's identify the wrong problems to focus on.

Gravity Problems

- "I've been out of work for 5 years. It's going to be much harder for me to get a job and that's not fair." (employment problem)
- "I want to go back to school and become a doctor, but it will take me at least 10 years, and I don't want to invest that much time right now." (education problem)
- "I'm a poet, but the market has changed and it's difficult to make a living nowadays." (market problem)

These are not real problems - it's the reality. They are the facts of life. They are called gravity problems, because, like gravity, they cannot be "solved".

People like "fighting the City Hall": the laws of the market, the laws of nature, how the world thinks.

"If it's not actionable, it's not a problem."

Acceptance is the only response to a gravity problem. Start where you are, not where you wish you were or where the world should be. Only then you'll be free to reframe the situation into an actionable problem and design a way to live your life - and even fight the City Hall!

How To Find Where You Are

- Dysfunctional Belief: I should already know where I'm going. Reframe: You can't know where you are going until you know where you are.

You can't know where you're going, until you know where you are. The following assessment will help you do exactly that.

Work, Play, Love, Health Dashboard

1. Your Health Gauge. Healthy means being well in your body, mind and spirit. Health is at the base of our diagram because, when you're not healthy, nothing else in your life works very well. All the other areas are built on top of it.
2. Your Work Gauge. Assess your work life as a whole. Forms of "work" will include your 9-to-5 job, maybe a second job, any consulting or advising, regular volunteering work, raising children, taking care of aging parents, housework, and so on.
3. Your Play Gauge. "Play" is any activity that brings joy, done for the pure sake of the doing. It can include organised activity or productive endeavors, but only if they are done for fun and not merit. "All lives need some play," highlight the authors.
4. Your Love Gauge. "It is as critical to feel loved by others as it is to love." First come our family and primary relationship, children typically come next, and then it's friends, pets, community, or anything else that brings affection in our lives.

Conclusion

Life design is a non-stop process - we are only done designing our lives when we die. Ask yourself:

- Are you happy right now with where are in these 4 areas?
- Are there problems in any of the areas that need action?
- Are there any gravity problems you are stuck with?

This assessment will help you discover where you are, control what you can, and get unstuck. After all:

"Designing something changes the future that is possible."

3. WORKVIEW & LIFEVIEW

- Why am I here?
- Why does it matter?
- What's the point of it all?

We spend countless hours obsessing to figure out life, forgetting to live life. Because there are many powerful models for how life is supposed to be lived, we all run the risk of accidentally living someone else's life. To build your own compass, you need to discover how your ideas about work and life align.

Workview Reflection

Write a short reflection about your Workview - don't do it in your head! Try to shoot for 250 words in about 30 minutes. A Workview may address such questions as:

- Why do we work?
- What does work mean?
- What defines good or worthwhile work?
- What's the relationship between work and money?
- How does work relate to the individual and the society?
- What do experience, growth, and fulfillment have to do with it?

Lifview Reflection

In a similar writing fashion, your Lifview includes your ideas about the world and how it works. Address questions such as:

- Why are we here?
- What is good, and what is evil?

- What is the meaning or purpose of life?
- Where do family, country, and society fit in?
- Is there a higher power and how does it impact my life?
- What is the role of joy, sorrow, justice, injustice, love, peace in life?

Coherency

Our goal for a well-designed life is rather simple: coherency. A coherent life is lived in such a way that these three things all line up together:

- Who you are
- What you believe
- What you do

By having your Workview and your Lifeview in harmony with each other, you increase your own clarity and ability to live a consciously meaningful life.

Write down your thoughts on the following questions:

1. Where do your views on work and life clash?
2. Where do they complement one another?
3. Does one drive the other? How?

Conclusion

Ultimately, Workview and Lifeview coherency give you your True North. They create your compass. When you feel off course, you can assess where you are in relation to your True North. In a major change or once a year, do a compass calibration.

Dysfunctional Belief: I should know where I'm going! Reframe: I won't always know where I'm going - but I can always know whether I'm going in the right direction.

4. Wayfinding

There's no single destination in life.

"Wayfinding is the ancient art of figuring out where you are going, when you don't actually know your destination."

For wayfinding, you need a compass and a direction - but not a map. To find the direction, you can pay attention to the clues in front of you. The first clues are engagement and energy.

Engagement

Write down when you're feeling bored or unhappy, and what exactly you have been doing. Also write down when you are focused and immersed, and your exact activity.

Logging when you are and aren't engaged will help you pay attention to your actions and discover what's working.

Ideally, you'll find out when you're in a state of flow. Flow is the ultimate state of engagement: a state where you're neither bored because the activity is too easy nor anxious because it's too hard.

People in a state of flow experience:

- Complete involvement in the activity
- A sense of ecstasy or euphoria
- Great inner clarity - knowing just what to do and how to do it
- Total calmness and peace
- The feeling as if time were standing still

Flow is what we call 'adult play' or, as the authors put it,

"being fully immersed and joyful in what you're doing, without being constantly distracted by concerns about the outcomes."

Energy

We engage in physical and mental activities daily. Some of them sustain our energy (or, even better, give you more energy!) and some drain it. By tracking those energy flows, you can start redesigning your activities to maximise your vitality and fun. Ideally, you'll be living a life where "work" and "joy" go together.

Dysfunctional Belief: Work is not supposed to be enjoyable; that's why they call it work. Reframe: Enjoyment is a guide to finding the right work for you.

Activity Log

A day is made up of many moments, some of which are great, some of which suck - most of them lie somewhere in between. Drill down into the particulars and "catch yourself in the act of having a good time."

List your primary 'work' activities and record how engaged & energised you were by those activities. Log daily for 3 weeks to get enough information.

Reflections

This is where you learn by looking over your Activity Log and noticing trends, insights, surprises. Do this once a week to see the big picture.

The best way to deal with the energy-negative activities is to:

1. Surround them with more engaging activities
2. Give yourself small rewards when you complete them
3. Make sure that you are well-rested and have energy reserves

Zooming in

For more specific insights extracted from your daily activities, zoom in by using the AEIOU method.

- Activities. What were you actually doing? Did you have a specific role to play (team leader) or were you just a participant (at the meeting)?
- Environments. Where were you when you were involved in the activity? What kind of a place was it, and how did it make you feel?
- Interactions. Were you interacting with people or machines? Was it a new kind of interaction or a familiar one? Was it formal or informal?
- Objects. Were you interacting with objects or devices? What were the objects that created or supported your feeling engaged?
- Users. Who else was there, and what role did they play in making it either a positive or a negative experience?"

5. GETTING UNSTUCK

- Dysfunctional Belief: I'm stuck. Reframe: I'm never stuck, because I can always generate a lot of ideas.
- Dysfunctional Belief: I have to find the one right idea. Reframe: I need a lot of ideas so that I can explore any number of possibilities for my future.

Many people feel stuck trying to make their first idea work, but designers know that you choose better when you choose from lots of options. Believing there's only one idea out there leads to pressure and indecision. Here's how to generate a lot of ideas and get unstuck.

Ideation

Ideation means "coming up with lots of ideas, wild ideas, crazy ideas." More ideas unveil better ideas, and better ideas lead to a better design. More ideas also equal new insights. Let your wild ideas all out by deferring judgment and silencing the inner critic. The number one enemy of creativity is judgment. The crazy ideas may not be the ones we pick, but they unlock new and innovative possibilities.

And remember: do not fall in love with your first idea. Our first solutions are often average, obvious, and not very creative.

Mind Mapping

The mind-mapping process has three steps:

1. Picking a topic
2. Making the mind map
3. Making secondary connections and creating concepts

"Mind Mapping works by using simple free association of words, one after another, to open up the idea space and come up with new solutions."

The visual nature of the method bypasses your inner logical/verbal censor and allows ideas and their connections to be captured automatically.

To mindmap:

1. Take the original idea and write it in the centre.
2. Write down 5-6 things related to that idea. Write down the first words that come to mind!
3. Repeat this process with the words in the second ring. Free-associate 3-4 new words related to them. The words that come up here do not need to be associated to the original idea in the centre.
4. Repeat until you have at least 3-4 rings of word associations.

This whole process might take 3-5 minutes. Give yourself a time limit and do this fast to bypass your inner censor.

Finally, highlight words or groups of words that look interesting and mash them together into new concepts.

Do You Have An Anchor Problem?

There are certain problems that hold us in one place and prevent motion, like a physical anchor. Probably your real problem is not finding \$15M to fund your startup. Your real question is how to make a lasting impact in the world and provide solutions to real problems today.

Yet, many entrepreneurs fail to provide value with their startup, because they focus too immensely on the funding problem - an anchor problem. When stuck with an anchor problem, reframe the challenge by ideating and mindmapping, and try a series of small, safe experiments (prototypes) of the new approach.

Conclusion

The point of this exercise is to get you unstuck, helping you ideate without judgment and successfully moving you from problem solving (what do I do next?) into design thinking (what can I imagine?).

6. DESIGN YOUR LIVES

"Each of us is many. This life you are living is one of many lives you will live."

The authors have found that people (regardless of their age, education, or career path) are wrong thinking they just need to come up with one right plan for their life.

This adds a terrific amount of pressure and limits the possibilities.

- Dysfunctional Belief: I need to figure out my best possible life, make a plan, and then execute it. Reframe: There are multiple great lives (and plans) within me, and I get to choose which one to build my way forward to next.

Instead, think of 3 different life plans, called Odyssey Plans:

1. That Thing You Do. Our first plan is centred on what we've already got going on - our current life expanded forward or the immediate plan we've started putting together as a priority.
2. That Thing You'd Do If Thing One Were Suddenly Gone. If your life plan 1 was suddenly over, became irrelevant, or no longer an option, what would you do? You can't not make a living. Most people really force their imagination to come up with a new life scenario.
3. The Thing You'd Do or The Life You'd Live If Money or Image Were No Barrier. If you knew you could make a decent living at it and you knew no one would laugh at you or think less of you for doing it, what would you do? Imagine this third alternative life scenario.

Odyssey Planning 101

Time to create 3 alternative life plans of the next 5 years of your life. Each one must include:

1. A visual/graphical timeline. Include personal and non-career events as well (marriage, working out, learning skills, you name it).

2. A six-word headline describing the essence of this alternative life.
3. Questions that this alternative is asking - preferably 2-3. These are assumptions that you can later test.
4. A dashboard to measure:
 - a. Resources (Do you have the objective resources - time, money, skill, contacts - to pull off your plan?)
 - b. Likability (Are you hot or cold or warm about your plan?)
 - c. Confidence (Are you feeling full of confidence, or pretty uncertain about pulling this off?)
 - d. Coherence (Does the plan make sense within itself? And is it consistent with you, your Workview, and your Lifeview?)
5. Optional attributes:
 - a. Geography - where will you live?
 - b. What experience/learning will you gain?
 - c. What particular role, industry, or company do you see yourself in?

Conclusion

Odyssey Plans help us remember dreams we may have forgotten. "That twelve-year-old astronaut you once were is still there", say the authors.

It's not about finding answers, but exploring the questions, and being curious about the possibilities.

"Remember, there are multiple great lives within you. You are legion."

7. PROTOTYPING

Dysfunctional Belief: If I comprehensively research the best data for all aspects of my plan, I'll be fine. Reframe: I should build prototypes to explore questions about my alternatives. To solve a typical problem, you start with what you know about the problem, so that you can understand the causes and effects. To design your life, the traditional cause-and-effect thinking won't work. This is where prototyping comes in. Prototyping an isolated future path that we'd like to try out is all about:

- Asking great questions
- Discovering hidden biases and assumptions
- Failing rapidly
- Building empathy and understanding
- Working collaboratively with others

It's not a thought experiment; it involves a physical experience in the real world. It helps you visualise alternative life paths as if you are already living them.

"You wouldn't buy a car without a test drive, would you? But we do this all the time with jobs and life changes. It's crazy, when you think about it,"

Let's find out the 2 ways of prototyping.

Prototype Conversations

"The simplest and easiest form of prototyping is a conversation." 'Prototype conversations' simply means talking to someone who is living what you're contemplating, and getting to hear how they got to be doing it and what it's really like to do what they do. You want to mine things such as:

- What they love and hate about his job
- What their days look like
- How they got there (career path)

- Whether you can imagine yourself doing that job for months and years

Be careful: it's not a job interview. You must be actively listening, not answering questions or talking about yourself.

Prototype Experiences

Prototype experiences allow us to learn through a direct encounter with a possible future version of us. This experiential version could involve:

- Spending a day shadowing a professional you'd like to be
- A one-week unpaid exploratory project that you create
- A three-month internship

Coming up with hands-on prototype experiences is an even bigger challenge, but it's well worth the effort.

Brainstorming Prototype Experiences

Brainstorming is a method of generating lots of creative and out-of-the-box ideas that relies on two rules:

1. Generating a large quantity of ideas without concern for quality, and
2. Deferring judgment so that participants would not censor ideas.

The most common form is group brainstorming with 4-6 people, who get together, frame a good question, and spend 20-60 mins generating as many ideas/solutions as possible that can be prototyped and tried in the real world.

8. DESIGNING YOUR DREAM JOB

- Dysfunctional Belief: You should focus on your need to find a job. Reframe: You should focus on the hiring manager's need to find the right person.
- Dysfunctional Belief: My dream job is out there waiting. Reframe: You design your dream job through a process of actively seeking and co-creating it.

Large companies typically post their most interesting jobs internally only, invisible to most job seekers. The great jobs are hidden from the Internet. The hidden job market is an insider's game. It's almost impossible to get inside it as a job seeker, but it's possible to get your foot in the door as a someone just looking for the story (not the job). That's the prototype conversations we discussed earlier!

When the prototype conversation results in an offer, usually they initiate it - you don't have to. If they don't start it for you, you can ask one question that will make them start thinking critically about you as a candidate:

"The more I learn about your company and the more people I meet here, the more fascinating it becomes. I wonder, what steps would be involved in exploring how someone like me might become a part of this organization?"

How do you, then, get to have a prototype conversation?

The most common way for people to be introduced across professional networks is by referrals from personal networks. Research your network and ask for introductions. Also, use the Internet not to get online job listings, but to find and reach out to the people whose stories you want to hear.

Dysfunctional Belief: Networking is just hustling people - it's slimy. Reframe: Networking is just asking for directions.

Finally, switch your goal from getting one job (and faking enthusiasm to convince the people in charge that you and the job description are the perfect fit) to getting as many job offers as possible (and being more authentic, energetic, and playful while exploring your next opportunities).

Dysfunctional Belief: I am looking for a job. Reframe: I am pursuing a number of offers.

Ironically, this will make you more likely to get the offer, because, as the authors stress:

"People don't hire résumés; they hire people. People they like. People who are interesting and authentic."

9. CHOOSING HAPPINESS

"The secret to happiness in life design isn't making the right choice; it's learning to choose well."

All of your hard work can be undone by poor choosing - not by making the wrong choice, as by thinking wrongly about your choosing.

Dysfunctional Belief: To be happy, I have to make the right choice. Reframe: There is no right choice—only good choosing.

In life design, the choosing process has four steps.

1. Gather & Create Options. Collecting data about yourself and the world, mind mapping options, and prototyping experiences are the best ways to begin with life design.
2. Narrow Down The List. Our modern culture almost idolises options for their own sake. ("Get lots of options! Keep your options open! Don't get locked in!") However, most of us are suffering from analysis paralysis with too many options. So what do you do? Get rid of some. How? Just cross your non-top alternatives off your list.
3. Choose Discerningly. Discernment is decision-making that employs more than one way of knowing. Except for information & knowledge, our own wisdom is also made available to us emotionally (as feelings) and intestinally (as a bodily, gut response). Therefore, in order to make a good decision, we also need assess the options with our feelings and gut reactions.
4. Agonise Let Go & Move On. You can't make "the best choice", because you can't know what that best choice was until all the consequences have played out. This inability to know whether or not we did the right thing causes agonising.

In life design, the key to being happy with your choices is to let go, fully embrace your decision, and move on. It really is that simple.

Dysfunctional Belief: Happiness is having it all. Reframe: Happiness is letting go of what you don't need.

10. FAILURE IMMUNITY

Who doesn't want to be immune to failure? Unfortunately, it's impossible to never fail. But it is possible to be immune from failure. By being clear about the learning value of a failure during life design, the associated pain gradually disappears. After all, life is a process, not an outcome.

"Once you become a life-designing person, living in the ongoing creative process of life design, you can't fail; you can only make progress and learn from the different kinds of experiences that failure and success both have to offer."

- Dysfunctional Belief: We judge our life by the outcome. Reframe: Life is a process, not an outcome.
- Dysfunctional Belief: Life is a finite game, with winners and losers. Reframe: Life is an infinite game, with no winners or losers.

Failure is just the raw material for success. We all screw up; the smart thing to do next is to reframe the failure, change our perspective, and see how a failure turns out to be the best thing that ever happened.

Failure Reframe Exercise

1. Log your failures. Just write down when you've messed up. Looking back over the last week, the last month, the last year, or make it your All-Time Failure Hits List.
2. Categorise your failures. Screwups are simple mistakes that you normally get right. You normally do these things right, so you don't really need to learn anything from this. The best response here is to acknowledge you screwed up, apologise as needed, and move on.

Weaknesses are the mistakes that you make over and over. You know the source of these failures well. You've probably worked at correcting them already, but they keep happening. Keep trying to improve. Some failures, however, are just a part of your makeup, and your best strategy is

acceptance and avoidance of the situations that prompt them, instead of improvement.

Growth opportunities are the failures that don't have to happen the next time. The cause of these failures is identifiable, and a fix is available. Let's direct our attention here, because they are high-return opportunities to grow.

3. Identify growth insights. Ask yourself:

- What went wrong?
- What could be done differently next time?
- What is there to learn here?
- Which failure offers the best opportunity for growth?

Jot the answers down and put them to work. That's it - a simple reframe!

Conclusion

Failure immunity means knowing that a prototype that did not work still leaves you with valuable information. When obstacles happen, life design helps you incorporate these insights into a new, better version of you, personally and professionally.

11. BUILDING A TEAM

Co-creation is a key reason why design thinking works. Your life design isn't in you; it's in the world, where you will co-create it with others.

"If you find yourself standing alone in front of the mirror trying to solve or figure out your life, waiting to make a move until you are clear about the correct answers, you're going to be waiting a long time. Look away from the mirror, and look at the people around you."

A few particularly important people will become your core collaborators and play a crucial and ongoing part in your life design, but everyone matters.

Dysfunctional Belief: It's my life, I have to design it myself. Reframe: You live and design your life in collaboration with others.

- Supporters. Supporters are those go-to people you can count on to care about your life - people close enough to you that their encouragement helps keep you going and their feedback is of real use.
- Players. Players are the active participants in your life design projects. They are the people you do things with, your co-workers in the classic sense.
- Intimates. Intimates include your immediate and close extended family members and closest friends. These are the people most directly affected by your life design, and they are the most influential people in it, so don't leave them out.
- Mentors. Mentors spend most of their time listening, then help you reframe your situation to allow you to have new ideas and come up with the answers. A good mentor will resist telling you what to do, or will at least be explicitly cautious about the risks of over-influencing you.
- Community. A community is a group of people that has a kindred purpose, meets regularly, has a shared ground, and people know each other by name & face. The goal of a community is mainly support, but also social interactions and fun.

CONCLUSION

Key takeaways

- A well-designed life is experiences, adventures, achievements and satisfactions, as well as failures that taught you important lessons and hardships that made you stronger and helped you know yourself better.
- 5 mindsets for life design are: curiosity, bias to action, reframe problems, awareness of the process, and radical collaboration.
- You never finish designing your life - life is a joyous and never-ending design project of building your way forward.

Further reading

Minimalism. You don't have to be actively living a Minimalist life to enjoy this book. This book is for anyone who's not completely content with their current life. Josh & Ryan's book questions what it means to be happy and explores how to live a meaningful life. If you can read this book with an open mind you may be able to take a step back and take inventory of your current life, you may discover that certain things you are doing or things that you own are getting in the way of your own happiness or freedom.

The 4-Hour Work Week teaches techniques to increase your time and financial freedom giving you more lifestyle options. By automating a passive income and liberating yourself from unproductive tasks you can live the lifestyle of the 'new rich' - one defined by having, doing and being what you want. Even for those people who have no interest in starting their own business, the principles in The 4-Hour Work Week can be applied to almost any situation or any environment you find yourself in. The ideas behind the 80/20 principle, outsourcing, elimination, and liberation will help you develop a much more productive mindset.

Guidelines is my eBook that summarises the main lessons from 33 of the best-selling self-help books in one place. It is the ultimate book summary; Available as a 80-page ebook and 115-minute audio book. Guidelines lists 31 rules (or guidelines) that you should follow to improve your productivity, become a better leader, do better in business, improve your health, succeed in life and become a happier person.

Action steps

1. Go to <http://designingyour.life> and download the worksheets accompanying the book.
2. Complete the exercises and design your own life.
3. Purchase the workbook for daily progress on your life design.