

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Just an Illusion

Here's the reality.

### Laws of Action

Knowing by doing.

### A Model Relationship

Looks like this.

### The Three Disciplines

Forging antifragile confidence.

*"If fate is woven of a series of events, then mental health is the ability to accept our fate with enthusiasm."*

~ Phil Stutz

# Lessons for Living

## What Only Adversity Can Teach You

BY PHIL STUTZ · RANDOM HOUSE © 2023 · 183 PAGES

"Maybe you're here because you read *The Tools* or because you saw me in the Netflix documentary called *Stutz*. I've become known as the 'psychiatrist to the stars,' a description that bothers me as much as it likely bothers you. The best thing I can do to refute that misconception is to tell you what I've learned as a psychiatrist over the last forty years. Along the way, with my partner, Barry Michels, I developed a new kind of psychotherapy. It differs from the old model in one crucial respect: it works. ...

Therapy, without faith in higher forces, is likely to leave you feeling worse than before. Working on yourself doesn't have to be selfish. If you do, you have more energy, not less. That energy will transform the world.

This book shows you how and why."

~ Phil Stutz from *Lessons for Living*

As you know if you've been following along, I love Phil Stutz.

No human being has had a more profound impact on my life than Phil.

I consider him my spiritual father and feel blessed to have had nearly 450 1-on-1 coaching sessions with him over the last seven years—nearly every single week for seven years and twice a week for two of those years.

My collection of notes from those discussions is, *by far*, my most prized and valuable possession. If you told me I could have that stack of 1,500+ pages of notes or the thousands of books in my library, I'd take my notes with Phil in an instant.

As I was reading this book, I was struck by the fact that this might be as close as anyone who hasn't worked with Phil directly will get to working 1-on-1 with him.

[The Tools](#) and [Coming Alive](#) (check out those Notes) are both great books.

But this is something different.

It's pure Phil.

The book is packed with Big Ideas on how to embrace, as per the sub-title of the book, "What Only Adversity Can Teach You."

I'm excited to share a few of my favorites that explore themes he and I have revisited many times in our 1-on-1 work together but weren't discussed in his prior books—from his "philosophy of action" to his "three disciplines."

If you're a fan of Phil, I think you will absolutely LOVE the book. Get a copy [here](#).

P.S. As you may also know if you've been following along, Phil wrote the foreword to my book [Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential](#). You can read or listen to it as part of the [ebook](#) and [audiobook](#) samples!

## JUST AN ILLUSION

*"Life is uncertain, often painful, and most of all an endless process requiring work. Nonetheless, it is human nature to cling to the illusion that we can live in an alternate reality where life is easy."*

~ Phil Stutz

"Our culture denies the nature of reality. It holds out a promise that you can live in an ideal world where things come easily, a world in which unpleasant experiences can be avoided, where there is never a lack of immediate gratification. Worse, it suggests that if you do not live in this world, something is wrong with you. This ideal world is a realm of illusion. No matter how promising this world seems, it does not exist.

Be honest. Your own life experiences have been far from ideal. But what you have experienced is what is reality, not what you would like to experience. In short, the nature of reality is this:

- Life includes pain and adversity.
- The future is uncertain.
- Accomplishment of any kind requires discipline.
- You are not special. No matter what you did, you cannot avoid these aspects of life.
- This will never change.

There is love, joy, surprise, transcendence, and creativity as well, but these never occur separately from the above five points."

Welcome to the very first words of the very first chapter of the book.

The first truth of Phil's work?

It's the first Noble Truth of Buddhism as well.

Here it is...

In short: Life is hard.

Denying this simple fact of existence and telling yourself the story that life *\*shouldn't\** be hard is, arguably, THE greatest obstacle to your enjoyment of life.

When we quit arguing with reality and quit thinking something must be wrong with us because we're experiencing life's inevitable challenges, we can change our relationship to all the pain and uncertainty and hard work inherent to a good, noble life.

When we do that, we can fundamentally and permanently change our lives.

Just to make sure the five points are tattooed on your consciousness, let's repeat them.

First: *"Life includes pain and adversity."*

Second: *"The future is uncertain."*

Third: *"Accomplishment of any kind requires discipline."*

Fourth: *"You are not special. No matter what you did, you cannot avoid these aspects of life."*

Fifth: *"This will never change."*

If you feel so inspired, perhaps you can find a piece of paper and a pen and write those down right now just to make sure they're landing.

P.S. I have some of my favorite heroes on my office wall. They are staring at me as I type this. Every morning during my meditation, I invite them to share some wisdom with me for that day.

Ralph Waldo Emerson tells me: *"Trust thyself. Every heart vibrates to that iron string."*

Abraham Lincoln tells me: *"Win the civil war—within your own mind."*

Marcus Aurelius tells me: *"Play your role well."*

Joseph Campbell tells me: *"We train heroes."*

John Mackey tells me: *"Love life! (And get Heroic EBITDA positive.)"*

And...

*"He was trapped by the illusion that he could live without demands or commitments, that it was possible to live a life that was stress-free. Paradoxically, nothing creates more stress than the desire to avoid stress."*

~ Phil Stutz

Phil tells me: *“Your infinite potential exists outside your comfort zone. We love pain, uncertainty and hard work. Bring it on!”*

*“When you have an instinct, you must train yourself to act on it immediately. This activates the cycle and puts you in touch with the creative forces of the universe. These forces will change your state at the very moment you take the action. Whether you succeed or fail is irrelevant.”*

~ Phil Stutz

## LAWS OF ACTION

“If wisdom is out there, then the only way we can gain it is by taking action. The will is more intelligent than the process of thinking. Let’s say we’re planning to open a doughnut shop. We could spend hundreds of hours debating what percentage of the doughnuts should be chocolate and what percentage should be vanilla. If we take the action of opening the shop, we will learn more about how many of each flavor to make in one day than we could in a year of abstract thinking. The world of doughnut eaters will give us the information we need.

To act in the face of the unknown brings up a primal fear in most of us. You can overcome this fear if you learn to look at action in a new way.”

That’s from a chapter called “Knowing by Doing.”

Phil and I have talked about that doughnut shop many times.

As I read that passage, I thought of my VERY first session with Phil on Friday, January 13, 2017. In fact, I just reached over to the left corner of my desk where I keep my stack of most recent notes from my sessions with Phil. On the top of the stack I have a photocopy of the first page from that first session. (Want to see my notes from that first session? Check them out [here](#).)

At the very top of the page, in huge, bold font, I wrote **“ACTION.”**

Below that I wrote **“RULES OF ACTION.”**

Then I wrote down Rule #1: **“SPEED”**—which just so happens to be tied for first as THE most important thing Phil has ever taught me AND the first principle he teaches us in this chapter.

In the book, he tells us: *“Once you determine to do something, the less time you allow to elapse until you act, the better. A failed action, done quickly, will improve your confidence more than one done after great procrastination, even if it succeeds.”*

In my notes, I wrote: **“SPEED = Conceive → Action.”** **“DO IT NOW!”** *“Confidence erodes the longer you wait to take action!”* *“It’s possible to make an impact right now.”* *“Bias is to always make the call.”*

(I got goosebumps typing that out feeling into the life-changing power of that wisdom.)

Below that section on **“SPEED”** I wrote a few other things, including the next principle Phil teaches in the book: **“DENSITY.”**

In the book, he says: *“Dynamic people take more actions in one morning than most people take in a month. The goal is to take many more actions in a given time period than you normally do. Start slowly, try to take even just two actions in a day and increase from there.”*

In my notes, at the bottom of the first page, I wrote: **“DENSITY = Attitude toward time.”** *“Utmost, indescribably valuable. Gulp. Pack it in. Courage = Overflow of life.”*

The final principle in Phil’s “philosophy of action” is a Nightly Review.

He tells us: *“Reserve ten minutes before bed to review, in writing, the actions taken during the day and the ones you want to commit to for tomorrow. Anything written down becomes more serious, and you are less likely to lie to yourself about how much you’ve done.”*

That reminds me of [Pythagoras’s PM Review](#). I love that practice.

AND... We architected the entire Heroic app to help you START your day with a clear set of targets and celebrate all your micro WINS all day every day.

*“Real success is the aliveness you feel when you create something new. It has nothing to do with external results. Success occurs when you inhabit a space in the universe where you connect with flow.”*

~ Phil Stutz

*"To put it simply, love is a process. All processes require endless work because perfection is never achieved. Accepting this fact is not thrilling, but it is the first step to happiness. You can work on finding satisfaction in your relationship the same way you'd work on your piano playing or your garden."*

~ Phil Stutz

## A MODEL RELATIONSHIP

"Once you make the higher bond the foundation for your relationships, you have a realistic model for evaluating your partner or potential partner. You must make the commitment to work with a partner on this bond, and in turn, the key question becomes 'Are they a person who will work with me on creating this bond?' If they are not, then it doesn't matter how fast they make your heart flutter. Eventually you will be miserable. There are three basic qualities a partner must have in order to build the bond: initiative, sacrifice, and empathy. They need not score an A in all three (nor do you), but they must at least make a consistent effort in each area. Once you learn to focus on these qualities, you have an objective and constant set of parameters with which to judge your spouse or lover. You need no longer be blinded by your emotions."

That's from a chapter called "A Model Relationship" in which Phil walks us through his perspective on how to create an enduring, mature relationship.

Phil and I have had many great chats about these ideas as well—all of which have helped me strengthen my relationship with Alexandra. As I read that passage, I thought of some parallel wisdom from Leo Buscaglia and David Brooks.

First, Buscaglia.

In his great book, *Love*, he tells us about the fact that it's easy to *fall* in love and that it's \*much\* more challenging to *STAND* in love.

Echoing Phil's wisdom on the importance of creating a higher bond that moves beyond your "heart fluttering" with emotion, he also tells us: *"As soon as the love relationship does not lead me to me, as soon as I in a love relationship do not lead another person to himself, this love, even if it seems to be the most secure and ecstatic attachment I have ever experienced, is not true love. For real love is dedicated to continual becoming."*

Then we have David Brooks.

In his great book, *The Second Mountain*, he tells us about the fact that a good life is a COMMITTED LIFE. He highlights four key commitments: to our vocation, to our marriage/family, to our philosophy/faith, and to our community.

Here's how he describes our commitments to our marriage: *"During these low moments, it is helpful to remember that marriage is not just a relationship; it is a covenant. It's a moral promise to hold fast through thick and thin. Both people have vowed to create this project or cause, the marriage, that is more important than each person's emotional weather. Of course, there are times when divorce is the right and only course, but there are other times when the sentiment that guides Parker Palmer comes in handy: 'If you can't get out of it, get into it!' If you can't easily walk away from something, then the only way forward is to double down."*

Of course, as he points out, all relationships have their own idiosyncratic challenges and destinies. But, for those of us who are married, let's remember that, when we exchanged our sacred vows, we said, "I DO." Not, "I'll try."

P.S. Alexandra and I talk about a lot of this wisdom in an Optimal Living 101 class we did together years ago called "[Love 101](#)."

## THE THREE DISCIPLINES

"Victory over evil comes only through changing our reaction to it. This is a spiritual issue. Once you look evil in the face it's impossible to go forward with life without some connection to higher forces. If evil inspires us to find these inner resources, then it becomes our spiritual teacher. This changes evil from a force that makes your goals feel meaningless to one that pushes you to achieve them. It makes you undefeatable as a person and, if we all can understand

*"To put it more simply, Part X invents problems that we don't really have, and creates solutions that only make those problems worse."*

~ Phil Stutz

this, undefeatable as a nation. But if we don't develop a positive reaction to evil, we become paralyzed.

How do we connect to these higher forces and become undefeatable? Prayer and worship are key. But there's something just as crucial—discipline. Discipline forms an invisible structure in your life, a structure that attracts and holds the higher forces. If spiritual forces are like fruit in an orchard, invisible structure is a box we use to carry the fruit home."

That's from a chapter called "Staying on Track."

This is where Phil introduces us to the THREE disciplines we need to master.

He tells us: *"The first is called **structural discipline**. It consists of things you do routinely—eat, sleep, exercise, etc. The goal is to live in a constant rhythm. This connects us to higher forces because the universe functions in rhythm. Living each day with an organized structure teaches the ego to submit to something bigger than itself—time. To get out of a lethargic state, the first thing to do is put structure back into daily living."*

That, my dear friend, is worth a reread.

We're going to come back to this in a moment as we talk about what Phil calls "emotional stamina" that I've adapted into what I call "antifragile confidence."

Phil continues with the second type of discipline that he calls **"reactive discipline"**. *It's the ability to control your reactions to the events that bombard you all day."*

Basic idea here? Victor Frankl captured the essence of reactive discipline brilliantly in [Man's Search for Meaning](#) where he tells us: *"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."*

Then we have the third discipline that Phil calls **"expansive discipline"**. *This refers to action steps you must force yourself to take to expand your life. ... The universe is constantly expanding. To stay connected to its higher forces, we need to keep up with it."*

Expansive discipline is, essentially, the operationalization of the virtue of courage. We MUST be willing to act in the presence of fear. We MUST approach our challenges rather than avoid them. This is a discipline.

The best tool to employ with this? Every single time you feel even a niggles of pain (in the form of anxiety, overwhelm, whatever), say to yourself: "BRING IT ON!"

Quick recap...

The three disciplines are *structural* discipline, *reactive* discipline, and *expansive* discipline.

Quick inventory...

What's working for you? Keep dominating that. What needs work? Get on that.

Now...

Let's talk about emotional stamina.

Note: This is THE most life-changing idea Phil has ever taught me.

Here's the origin story.

Once upon a time, in one of our very first coaching sessions, Phil ended by telling me: "You have a lot of emotional stamina—perhaps more than I've ever seen."

To which I thought to myself: "I have no idea what that means but awesome!" (Hah.)

In our next session I asked him what emotional stamina was. Phil told me that emotional stamina is, essentially, your ability to handle life's inevitable pain, uncertainty, and hard work.

*"That is the essence of an addiction: we try to fill an infinite hole with a finite experience."*

~ Phil Stutz

*"True individuality can only be gained through discipline and submission. Not submission to an individual, but to a higher form of authority that is presented to us in the specific demands of life itself."*

~ Phil Stutz

Then I asked him how I could get more of it. He told me (and this has been tattooed on my consciousness since that chat): "If you want to cultivate emotional stamina then you need to be MOST committed to your protocol when you feel the WORST."

That may not sound like a huge revelation but I literally can't think of ANYTHING more powerful than TRULY getting (and relentlessly practicing!) this idea. It's the essence of how we forge antifrangible confidence and get as close to being invincible as we can become.

To state the obvious: What do most people do when life hits them hard? They go off the rails and start doing all the things they \*know\* they SHOULDN'T be doing.

What would happen if, instead, when life hits you hard and you feel overwhelmed and scared and ready to give up, you somehow got yourself to FIERCELY dominate your protocol and do the things you do when you're at your absolute best?

I'll tell you what happens if you get just 3-5-10% better at this...

You fundamentally and permanently change your life as you forge antifrangible confidence—knowing you have what it takes to respond to *whatever* life throws at you.

Of course, all that presupposes you HAVE a protocol. (Right?)

Know this: We architected our ENTIRE Heroic app with THIS wisdom in mind—helping you get clarity on who you are at your absolute best to help you craft a protocol you can dominate when you feel your absolute worst.

This is the essence of why our app has been scientifically shown to change lives and why it can help THE MOST ELITE performers go to the next level in their lives *while simultaneously* helping people who don't know if they want to live another day re-build a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.

For now... Spotlight on you...

What's ONE thing you \*know\* you could START doing that would most positively change your life? And... What's ONE thing you \*know\* you could STOP doing that, if you stopped doing it, would most positively change your life?

Here's to letting adversity be the catalyst for our next level of growth as we move from Theory to Practice to Mastery embodying the wisdom from these lessons for living.

Today's the day. We're all in. LET'S GO, HERO!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of *Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential*. He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. As a Founder/CEO he's made crowdfunding history and built and sold two social platforms. As a Philosopher/teacher, he's helped millions of people from around the world, trained 10,000+ [Heroic Coaches](#) from 100+ countries and created a protocol that science says changes lives. He lives in the country outside Austin, Texas, with his wife, Alexandra, and their two kids, Emerson and Eleanor. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).

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you'll probably like...

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