

## THE BIG IDEAS

### The 12 Rules

To create order in our lives.

### Order and Chaos

Integrating the two masterfully.

### Rule #1

Stand up straight.

### Rule #2

Treat yourself right.

### Rule #6

Clean up your life.

### Your Being

Is in your Becoming.

*"It is for this reason that every good example is a fateful challenge, and every hero a judge. Michelangelo's great perfect marble David cries out to its observer: 'You could be more than you are.' When you dare aspire upward, you reveal the inadequacy of the present and the promise of the future."*

~ Jordan B. Peterson

# 12 Rules for Life

## An Antidote to Chaos

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"How could the world be freed from the terrible dilemma of conflict, on the one hand, and psychological and social dissolution, on the other? The answer was this: through the elevation and development of the individual, and through the willingness of everyone to shoulder the burden of Being and to take the heroic path. We must each adopt as much responsibility as possible for individual life, society and the world. We must each tell the truth and repair what is in disrepair and break down and recreate what is old and outdated. It is in this manner that we can and must reduce the suffering that poisons our world. It's asking a lot. It's asking for everything. But the alternative—the horror of authoritarian belief, the chaos of the collapsed state, the tragic catastrophe of the unbridled natural world, the existential angst and weakness of the purposeless individual—is clearly worse.

I have been thinking and lecturing about such ideas for decades. I have built up a large corpus of stories and concepts pertaining to them. I am not for a moment claiming, however, that I am entirely correct or complete in my thinking. Being is far more complicated than one person can know, and I don't have the whole story. I'm simply offering the best I can manage. ...

I hope that these rules and their accompanying essays will help people understand what they already know: that the soul of the individual eternally hungers for the heroism of genuine Being, and that the willingness to take on that responsibility is identical to the decision to live a meaningful life.

If we each live properly, we will collectively flourish."

~ Jordan B. Peterson from *12 Rules for Life*

I've had this book on my shelf for a while. I decided to read it after [Cal Newport](#) and I were chatting about my recent talk (and class) called "[Optimizing for the Modern Hērō](#)." Cal told me that the themes I explored in that class reminded him of this book. So, I immediately found the book and devoured it.

Jordan Peterson is a Canadian clinical psychologist and professor at the University of Toronto. (Before that, he taught at Harvard.) He's published over 100 scientific articles and [he's super-popular on YouTube](#).

The book is wonderfully intense and equally thoughtful. Peterson's integration of everything from evolutionary psychology, politics, religion and morality is astounding. (It's the kind of book filled with endnotes that reminds you of just how little you know. :)

As I read the book, I was reminded of the intellectual intensity of [Yuval Noah Harari](#) and [Ray Dalio](#). (I was also reminded of [Ryan Holiday](#) as well—while Ryan brings ancient Stoic wisdom to life in a no-nonsense way, Jordan does the same thing for Judeo-Christian wisdom.)

*"Confront the chaos of being. Take aim against a sea of troubles. Specify your destination, and chart your course. Admit to what you want. Tell those around you who you are. Narrow, and gaze attentively, and move forward, forthrightly."*

~ Jordan B. Peterson

As the sub-title suggests, this book presents "An Antidote to Chaos." How do we mitigate the inevitable chaos of life that is so exponentially magnified in our modern lives? By creating ORDER. How? Well, Professor Peterson's 12 Rules are a great place to start.

I enjoyed the book and highly recommend it. In addition to being thought-provoking, it's (much more importantly) SOUL-expanding. (Get a copy [here](#).)

Of course, it's packed with Big Ideas. It's one of those books that's impossible to even try to distill into six pages, but I'm excited to share a super-quick look at the 12 Rules then shine a light on some of my favorite wisdom we can apply TODAY, so let's jump straight in!

## THE 12 RULES

"It took time to settle on a title: *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. Why did that one rise up above all others? First and foremost, because of its simplicity. It indicates clearly that people need ordering principles, and that chaos otherwise beckons. We require rules, standards, values—alone and together. We're pack animals, beasts of burden. We must bear a load, to justify our miserable existence. We require routine and tradition. That's order. Order can become excessive, and that's not good, but chaos can swamp us, so we drown—and that is also not good. We need to stay on the straight and narrow path. Each of the twelve rules of this book—and their accompanying essays—therefore provide a guide to being there. 'There' is the dividing line between order and chaos. That's where we are simultaneously stable enough, exploring enough, transforming enough, repairing enough, and cooperating enough. It's there we find the meaning that justifies life and its inevitable suffering."

The 12 Rules.

Peterson tells us that we need them to walk the line between order and chaos. We'll talk more about that dynamic in the next Idea. First, let's take a super-quick look at our Rules.

**RULE 1** / *Stand up straight with your shoulders back.* <- Step 1? Get your power back. Act like a victorious lobster. Optimize your posture. (More on this in a moment! :)

**RULE 2** / *Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping.* <- Did you know that people are more likely to give their PETS prescribed medication than they are to give it to themselves? Yep. We need to treat ourselves better.

**RULE 3** / *Make friends with people who want the best for you.* <- Remember: We're the average of the five people with whom we spend the most time. Make sure the people you're hanging out with want the best for you (and for themselves!).

**RULE 4** / *Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today.* <- Are you better today than you were yesterday? AWESOME. Repeat again so it's true tomorrow. And the day after that. Forever. Don't waste your time and energy comparing yourself to others.

**RULE 5** / *Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them.* <- I might've gotten into a little argument with Alexandra about this section. (Hah.) Part of a longer chat on the myriad of ways to land in the "[Wise Parenting](#)" quadrant. Short story: Don't be permissive. Or authoritarian. (Or absent.) Let's find the sweet spot of high standards and high warmth as Wise/Authoritative parents creating proper boundaries to "bring forth" the best within our kids.

**RULE 6** / *Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world.* <- It's REALLY easy to criticize the world and blame something outside ourselves for all of our problems. It's MUCH harder to get our own lives Optimized. Start there.

**RULE 7** / *Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient).* <- What's the right thing to do? Ignore the quick-hit gains and do that.

**RULE 8** / *Tell the truth—or, at least, don't lie.* <- This chapter reminded me of Don Miguel

*"To straddle that fundamental duality is to be balanced: to have one foot firmly planted in order and security, and the other in chaos, possibility, growth and adventure. When life suddenly reveals itself as intense, gripping and meaningful; when time passes and you're so engrossed in what you're doing you don't notice-it is there and then that you are located precisely at the border of order and chaos."*

~ Jordan B. Peterson

*"No tree can grow to Heaven, adds the ever-terrifying Carl Gustav Jung, psychoanalyst extraordinaire, 'unless its roots reach down to Hell.' Such a statement should give everyone who encounters it pause. There was no possibility for movement upward, in that great psychiatrist's deeply considered opinion, without a corresponding move down. It is for this reason that enlightenment is so rare."*

~ Jordan B. Peterson

Ruiz's first agreement to be impeccable with your word. When? Always.

**RULE 9** / Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don't. <- That includes yourself when you do some hard thinking.

**RULE 10** / Be precise in your speech. <- Know what you want in your life. Have a clear aim. Go get it. That's our path to meaning.

**RULE 11** / Do not bother children when they are skateboarding. <- Moral of this section? Life demands challenges. An overprotected human is weak. We want to be strong. Therefore, we must be willing to stretch ourselves and do "dangerous" things.

**RULE 12** / Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street. <- This a tongue in cheek title. Basic idea: Appreciate how awesome life is and how blessed we are.

With that, let's talk a little more about the dynamic interplay between order and chaos!

## ORDER + CHAOS

"Order is not enough. You can't just be stable, and secure and unchanging, because there are still vital and important new things to be learned. Nonetheless, chaos can be too much. You can't long tolerate being swamped and overwhelmed beyond your capacity to cope while you are learning what you still need to know. Thus, you need to place one foot in what you have mastered and understood and the other in what you are currently exploring and mastering. Then you have positioned yourself where the terror of existence is under control and you are secure, but where you are also alert and engaged. That is where there is something new to master and some way that you can be improved. That is where meaning is found."

The essential theme of the book is that we need to do the (hard!) work to get \*really\* good at managing Order and Chaos.

Peterson often uses the yin and yang symbol to capture the essence of the interplay between Order and Chaos. The light part of the symbol represents Order. The dark part represents Chaos. A little bit of light (Order!) exists in the dark (Chaos) and a little bit of dark (Chaos!) exists in the light (Order). Always. And the two are flowing into one another. Always.

The trick is to gracefully evolve at the edge of that dynamic flow. One foot in Order. The other in Chaos. And the trick to THAT, Peterson says (and I agree), is to focus on what you *can* control so you can most powerfully deal with all the stuff you *can't* control. (Enter: RULES!!!)

Order. Chaos. Order. Chaos. Order. Chaos.

All of which reminds me of [Dan Siegel's](#) insights into what he calls "[the river of flexibility](#)." As we've discussed, a hallmark of a healthy human is his or her flexibility. Dan tells us that we need to flow between the banks of "structure" and "spontaneity." Too much structure and we have rigidity. Too much spontaneity and we have chaos. Structure + Spontaneity = Flexibility.

I'm also reminded of Nassim Taleb's antifragile barbell strategy. We need to be BOTH super-conservative AND super-aggressive. Order. Chaos. Order. Chaos. Order. Chaos.

And... I'm reminded of [Barbara Fredrickson's](#) ideas around buoyancy and the fact that we need to have BOTH levity \*and\* gravity. Too much of one or the other = not so good.

Finally, as I read the book, I reflected on emotional stamina and the idea that THE WORSE you feel, THE MORE committed you need to be to your protocol. In other words, feeling a lot of chaos in your life? Create EVEN MORE order by crushing your protocol (aka your "rules" or "[algorithms](#)" or "good [habits](#)") like never before!

So... One more time: Order. Chaos. Order. Chaos. Order. Chaos. Always in flow.

We need to embrace both to Optimize and Actualize.

*"Taking the easy way out or telling the truth—those are not merely two different choices. They are different pathways through life. They are utterly different ways of being."*

~ Jordan B. Peterson

## **RULE #1: STAND UP STRAIGHT WITH YOUR SHOULDERS BACK**

**"To stand up straight with your shoulders back is to accept responsibility of life, with eyes wide open. It means deciding to voluntarily transform the chaos of potential into the realities of habitable order. It means adopting the burden of self-conscious vulnerability, and accepting the end of the unconscious paradise of childhood, where finitude and mortality are only dimly comprehended. It means willingly undertaking the sacrifices necessary to generate a productive and meaningful reality (it means acting to please God, in the ancient language).**

**To stand up straight with your shoulders back means building the ark that protects the world from the flood, guiding your people through the desert after they have escaped tyranny, making your way from comfortable home and country, and speaking the prophetic word to those who ignore the widows and children. It means shouldering the cross that marks the X, the place where you and Being intersect so terribly. It means casting dead, rigid and too tyrannical order back into the chaos in which it was generated; it means withstanding the ensuing uncertainty, and establishing, in consequence, a better, more meaningful and more productive order.**

**So, attend carefully to your posture. Quit drooping and hunching around. Speak your mind. Put your desires forward, as if you had a right to them—at least the same right as others. Walk tall and gaze forthrightly ahead. Dare to be dangerous. Encourage the serotonin to flow plentifully through the neural pathways desperate for its calming influence."**

That's Rule #1: *"Stand up straight, with your shoulders back."*

Guess what living creature Professor (of Evolutionary Psychology) Peterson uses as our model for proper posture? A lobster. More specifically, a victorious lobster.

Very short story: Lobsters have been on the planet for a staggering 350 million years. (To put that number in perspective, dinosaurs arrived *only* 65 million years ago.)

And, guess what? For nearly half a billion years, lobsters have lived within "dominance hierarchies." The most powerful lobsters had the best "posture"—which was correlated with the amount of (feel good) serotonin they had going through their little brains and bodies.

Fast-forward to today. To create powerful order in our lives, Jordan tells us that the **FIRST** step is to *"Look for your inspiration to the victorious lobster, with its 350 million years of practical wisdom. Stand up straight, with your shoulders back."*

P.S. After that recent talk I gave a woman told me that the first thing she noticed was my posture. She was a ballerina and was trained to always hold herself in such a manner that she was going UP \*and\* DOWN at the same time. She told me that I did that well and looked like I could be a ballet dancer. I said thank you! :)

As I reflected on that, three tips came to mind: [Head Threads](#) + [Power Poses](#) + Thor's Hammer. (Thor? Yah. Chris Helmsworth wrote the foreword to Eric Goodman's book [True to Form](#). His #1 tip for proper, powerful posture? Chest up, chin down.)

Even simpler: *"Stand up straight, with your shoulders back."* <- Try it now. And remember it all day every day. Cultivate your power via your posture so you can give us all you've got. (Please!)

P.P.S. This is powerful: *"The body, with its various parts, needs to function like a well-rehearsed orchestra. Every system must play its role properly, at exactly the right time, or noise and chaos will ensue. It is for this reason that routine is so necessary. The acts of life we repeat every day need to be automatized. They must be turned into stable and reliable habits, so they lose their complexity and gain predictability and simplicity.*

*It is for such reasons that I always ask my clinical clients first about sleep. Do they wake up in the morning at approximately the time the typical person wakes up, and at the same time*

*every day? If the answer is no, fixing that is the first thing I recommend. It doesn't matter so much if they go to bed at the same time each evening, but waking up at a consistent hour is a necessity. Anxiety and depression cannot be easily treated if the sufferer has unpredictable routines. The systems that mediate negative emotion are tightly tied to the properly cyclical circadian rhythms."*

## **RULE #2: TREAT YOURSELF**

"You need to consider the future and think, 'What might my life look like if I were caring for myself properly? What career would challenge me and render me productive and helpful, so that I could shoulder my share of the load, and enjoy the consequences? What should I be doing, when I have some freedom, to improve my health, expand my knowledge, and strengthen my body?' You need to know where you are, so you can start to chart your course. You need to know who you are, so that you understand your armament and bolster yourself in respect to your limitations. You need to know where you are going, so that you can limit the extent of chaos in your life, restructure order, and bring the divine force of Hope to bear on the world."

Welcome to Rule #2: *Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping.*

Did you know that people are more likely to give their PETS prescribed medication than they are to give it to themselves? Yep. Enter: Rule #2: We need to treat ourselves better.

We need to have enough self-respect to take care of ourselves and do the little things that we KNOW can help us Optimize.

*"Treat yourself like someone you're responsible for helping."* <- Imagine that for a moment. And act like that all day today. (And tomorrow. And...)

## **RULE #6: HAVE YOU CLEANED UP YOUR LIFE?**

"Consider your circumstances. Start small. Have you taken full advantage of the opportunities offered to you? Are you working hard on your career, or even your job, or are you letting bitterness and resentment hold you back and drag you down? Have you made peace with your brother? Are you treating your spouse and your children with dignity and respect? Do you have habits that are destroying your health and well-being? Are you truly shouldering your responsibilities? Have you said what you need to say to your friends and family members? Are there things that you could do, that you know you could do, that would make things around you better?"

Have you cleaned up your life?

If the answer is no, here's something to try: *Start to stop doing what you know to be wrong.* Start stopping today. Don't waste time questioning how you know that what you're doing is wrong, if you are certain that it is. Inopportune questioning can confuse, without enlightening, as well as deflecting you from action. You can know something is wrong or right without knowing why. Your entire Being can tell you something that you can neither explain nor articulate. Every person is too complex to know themselves completely, and we all contain wisdom that we cannot comprehend.

So, simply stop, when you apprehend, however dimly, that you should stop. Stop acting in that particular, despicable manner. Stop saying those things that make you weak and ashamed. Say only those things that make you strong. Do only those things that you could speak of with honor."

It's really easy to criticize the world. It's a LOT harder to get our lives in perfect order.

New Rule: *Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world.* <- Think about THAT the next time you find yourself complaining about the world or pointing out someone's flaws.

*" Aim small. You don't want to shoulder too much to begin with, given your limited talents, tendency to deceive, burden of resentment, and ability to shirk responsibility. Thus, you set the following goal: by the end of the day, I want things to be a tiny bit better than they were this morning. Then you ask yourself, ' What could I do, that I would do, that would accomplish that, and what small thing would I like as a reward?'"*

~ Jordan B. Peterson

*"A superhero who can do anything turns out to be no hero at all. He's nothing specific, so he's nothing. He has nothing to strive against, so he can't be admirable. Being of any reasonable sort appears to require limitation. Perhaps this is because Being requires Becoming, as well as mere static existence—and to become is to become something more, or at least something different. That is only possible for something limited."*

~ Jordan B. Peterson

And, remember: The fastest way to Optimize? STOP doing stupid stuff.

What will it be for you today?

## YOUR BEING IS IN YOUR BECOMING

"There is no enlightened one. There is only the one who is seeking further enlightenment. Proper Being is process, not a state; a journey, not a destination. It's the continual transformation of what you know, through encounter with what you don't know, rather than the desperate clinging to the certainty that is eternally insufficient in any case. That accounts for the importance of Rule 4 (Compare yourself . . .). Always place your becoming above your current being. That means it is necessary to recognize and accept your insufficiency, so that it can be continually rectified. That's painful, certainly—but it's a good deal."

That's from the final chapter called "Coda" in which Peterson walks us through some big questions and recaps the Rules.

The ultimate dance between chaos and order? Right there at the edge of your Being and your Becoming. In fact, your ultimate Being IS your Becoming. Or, as Jordan puts it, our *"Proper Being is a process, not a state; a journey, not a destination."*

As we discuss often, there are no enlightened beings. Only more or less enlightened moments. And, there is no static "done!" version of you (or me). We're ALWAYS in a dynamic state.

Which brings us back to Rule #4: Don't compare yourself to other people. Compare yourself to who you were yesterday. And, be willing to let go of who you are TODAY so you can be proud of who you are TOMORROW. Repeat that enough times and what happens?

All that magic we talk about all the time when we truly embrace the idea of incremental optimization. In fact, Jordan talks about the magic of compounding. It's real.

But, it requires a never-ending string of micro-deaths and rebirths. Constantly dying to the lesser-version of ourselves so we can be born again into the next-best version of ourselves—shouldering as much responsibility as we can and giving life all we've got.

As we said in the intro: *"If we each live properly, we will collectively flourish."* <- Let's!!!

B

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### About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](https://heroic.us).

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