

**Why we do what we do
and how to change**

CURIOUS HABITS

LUKE MATHERS



**MAJOR
STREET**



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info@majorstreet.com.au | +61 421 707 983 | majorstreet.com.au

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Preface

‘The reasonable man adapts himself to the world:
the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world
to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the
unreasonable man.’

– George Bernard Shaw

Dave was always the angry kid. He liked being thought of as a bit of a psycho.

As a 12-year-old, he loved baseball and played catcher. He was a skinny blond kid with a sideways snarl, and anyone who rounded third base had to get past him. Whether the ball was close or not, he would drop his bony prepubescent shoulder into anyone brave enough to head for home plate. He was the psycho catcher and his team loved him for it. He was *their* psycho!

Even as a kid, Dave was disagreeable, rebellious and a bit of a turd. He was a shit-stirrer; he was unreasonable, and he kind of liked that.

His father was an alcoholic who left his family when Dave was only four years old. His two sisters were 18 and 15 years older than him and were more like aunties than sisters. The family were Jehovah’s Witnesses, but it is hard to imagine Dave with a shirt and tie going door to door with a bag full of Bibles and leaflets trying to convert any unsuspecting heathen.

Dave was going to change the world. He didn't know how, but he was angry enough, determined enough and certainly unreasonable enough to make something happen.

It was the late '70s, and teenage Dave was looking for other ways to vent his anger. After baseball, he found heavy metal. Big hair, angry guitars and a sound that could make your ears bleed. With a guitar in hand, Dave had found his calling and it was like a hand in a glove.

When his parents divorced, Dave and his sisters moved around a lot in an attempt to dodge his pissed-off father (the apple doesn't fall far from the tree). He moved out of home at 15 and could only afford to rent an apartment by selling drugs. One of his customers worked at a record store and would swap vinyl for drugs in a fortuitous exchange of one vice for another. Dave ended up with a massive collection of Iron Maiden, AC/DC and Judas Priest and would have really annoyed any unsuspecting neighbour who had the misfortune of living next door.

As the '80s came around, Dave joined a band. That band fell apart, so Dave answered a newspaper ad to join another band and was accepted. He was still angry, but the anger fuelled his guitar sound. The band started to record its debut album.

Musically, everything sounded fantastic, but Dave's disagreeable nature was taking its toll. One day in 1983, the band had finally had enough of their talented but angry guitarist. He got kicked out of the band, dumped at the Greyhound bus station and sent home. Fuming, he wrote songs and vowed to 'show them.' As soon as he got back home to San Francisco, he started a new band that was going to be huge.

His drive, passion and disagreeable nature paid off. His new band went on to sell 25 million albums and sell out stadiums around the world, and is considered one of the top heavy metal bands of all time.

Dave's full name is Dave Mustaine. His band is Megadeth.

Anger helped Dave become a good thrash metal guitarist. It helped him write songs that appealed to aggro teenagers in the '80s

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and '90s. Being aggressive, angry and disagreeable helped with a lot of things... until it didn't.

You'd think he'd be happy, but the booze, addiction, anger and aggression continued. The angry thought habits Dave had hammered into place over the years gave him a messed up, misguided idea that if he became really successful, he'd be joyful and happy. But he wasn't.

Harvard positive psychology scholar Shawn Achor calls this 'pushing happiness over the cognitive horizon'. We all do it:

- 'If I have the biggest thrash metal band in the world, then I'll be happy.'
- 'If I can pay the rent this month, then I'll be happy.'
- 'If I can get this piece of Kung Pao chicken out of my teeth, then I'll be happy.'
- 'If I can buy a seventh Ferrari, then I'll be happy.'

Putting off happiness until we've mastered or achieved something is a curious habit. It doesn't work, but we do it anyway.

By anyone's standards, Megadeth was successful. There's only one problem: the band Dave Mustaine got kicked out of in 1983 was Metallica, which went on to sell 250 million records and become the biggest metal band of all time. Success is relative and, for the angry Mr Mustaine, his benchmark was, unfortunately, the biggest band in town.

Former US President Theodore Roosevelt called comparison 'the thief of joy'. The Megadeth frontman found very little lasting joy for many years. His default habit was to look for pleasure in booze, drugs and massive parties. Any joy to be had was lost in a haze of cocaine or drowned in alcohol. His curious habit of being angry was always there, lurking in the background, waiting to rain on the parade of his success.

Dave's problem? He never got curious about his habits.

Introduction

‘I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.’

– Albert Einstein

The sea squirt has a pretty small brain. A few thousand neurons are all it needs to avoid danger and find a nice place to settle down. It moves away from toxins and towards food and safety. Once it's found a good spot, it settles in – and by that I mean it settles in *permanently*. We know this because the sea squirt then digests its own brain. Yeah, you read that right. It settles down on the sea floor and proceeds to eat its own cerebrum. If you don't need to move, you don't need a brain.

I once told this story during a workshop I was running with a local city council and they were positive they had a few departments made up entirely of sea squirts.

It may seem strange to start a book about curious habits with a story of a marine slug, but you and I have a few things in common with these intriguing little fellas. We naturally move towards things that feel good and away from threats. We crave safety and try to save energy. As children, we even eat our own brains. Maybe not in the same dramatic fashion as our sea squirt friends, but we do go through a complex stage of development that reinforces brain areas that are being used a lot and prunes circuits that aren't being utilised. If, as a kid, you play a lot of football and hate reading, your circuits

for running, catching and kicking will be really strong, while those associated with reading will have less brain space dedicated to them. It may not be the complete lobotomy of the sea squirt, but our brains shape themselves to what we habitually do.

Unlike the sea squirt's brain, human brains are made up of 86 billion neurons with 100 trillion links to other nerve cells. They're a complex bit of kit that scientists are only just starting to understand. One thing we do know is that the big, grey ball of jelly that we all have in our heads is a fuel guzzler. Your brain accounts for about 2 percent of your body weight but takes up around 20 percent of your energy needs. It's an expensive piece of equipment, and evolution wouldn't put up with that unless there was an upside.

We evolved in an environment without 7-Eleven, McDonald's or cheese nachos. Food was scarce and finding it took a lot of effort. A big, expensive brain would be a liability unless it helped us move, stay safe, connect with other people and find food. A large chunk of our brains is dedicated to those four motivating factors. Evolutionary biologists refer to the four Fs of motivation: fighting, fleeing, food and... reproduction. To save energy, our brains run partly on auto-pilot – driven by the four Fs.

The four Fs served us well for thousands of years. However, as our environment has become more plentiful, the four Fs are starting to F with us. Obesity, heart disease, stress, auto-immune diseases and cancer are rampant due to us not being deliberate with our intake, our energy or how we spend our time. The four Fs are useful, but without direction they can lead to some terrible outcomes. The problem is, they have a bias for short-term safety (or pleasure) and don't give a damn about your long-term plans.

We've allowed the four Fs to drive the ship without a compass for too long. Our habits – designed to help us avoid pain, seek pleasure and save energy – have been good to get us here, but we need to get

curious about them if we want to thrive in a world with electric cars, iPhones, wi-fi and Uber Eats. As author Marshall Goldsmith says, 'What got you here won't get you there.'

Our world is safer and less violent. Medicine has improved out of sight, and diseases are causing less suffering than any time in history (COVID-19 excepted). But despite this, we are the most addicted, distracted, obese, in-debt, medicated, anxious, depressed and messed up group of adults the Western world has ever known.

But we don't have to be. Let's get curious.

Some is good, more is better

In my late twenties, I had a curious habit of working like a madman and trying to party like a rock star. I was an optometrist and spent my days helping people see better, and my nights and weekends seeing how much fun I could squeeze into whatever time there was leftover.

I was running my first business: the Specsavers store in the sleepy little town of Crawley, West Sussex, England. The town was rapidly developed in the postwar period and was full of square brick, soulless buildings that housed people who were way more fun than their ugly-duckling town suggested. The store was a 'dog with fleas' when I took it over: exhausted, unappreciated staff giving shit service, with really bad systems and leaders who only cared about how much money they made (more about this curious habit later). The store was losing money, and the wannabe-rich owners wanted out.

I realised that lots of people were coming through the door; the problem was, they weren't being looked after very well. The staff had good intentions, but good intentions with poor systems only lead to frustration and burnout.

Curious Habits

My first job on day one was to fire the manager. She was nicknamed ‘the rottweiler’, and every staff member was petrified of doing something wrong and getting chewed out by the boss. Micromanaging is a curious habit, and she was great at it. She had to go.

We got curious about our systems, and I encouraged the staff to try new ways of doing things. It turns out they had lots of great ideas; all they needed was the safety to express them and the trust that it was OK to try something new, even if it failed.

The crew was working hard, and their new systems, along with increased autonomy and appreciation, gave them energy to burn. Before long, we had created a beast of a business and our financial worries were over. The place was booming.

At that time, my default way of doing things was ‘some is good, more is better’. I applied this to work, partying, beer, food, exercise and anything I enjoyed. I didn’t apply it to self-care, meditation or relaxation. I was living the Bon Jovi principle of living while you’re alive and sleeping when you’re dead. Like all curious habits, it worked until it didn’t.

After four years of long work hours, English winters (which totally suck) and lots of partying, I was feeling burnt out and longing to move back to Australia. I sold the goose that laid the golden egg and moved home. Cashed up, I bought a house, invested the rest and essentially retired (for the first time). I was 31 years old. (Cue fireworks, streamers and balloons!)

It sounds awesome, doesn’t it? I didn’t have to work anymore, after slogging away and working my butt off for many years. The struggle to balance earning, spending and ambition was finally over. I’d made it to the top of my mountain. It was like I had won the lottery. I got my golf handicap down to six, I went surfing most days, and a new baby arriving was the cherry on the top of the cake of my new utopia life.

You can feel a ‘but’ coming, can’t you? Of course, you can! Be careful what you wish for – you might just get it.

About 18 months later, I started to get a bit agitated, disillusioned and bored. My friends were all doing amazing things with their businesses, feeling great about the directions they were headed in and the contributions they were making to the world. I was attaching my self-worth to my golf score or how well I surfed. If you’ve ever seen me putt or surf, you’ll realise this is a recipe for disaster.

Is the world a better place because you are in it? If the answer is ‘no’, think again. If the answer is still ‘no’, do something positive and contribute.

If you aren’t contributing, your self-worth will nosedive, and little things will become big worries. We humans need challenges in our lives. If you don’t have a challenge that contributes to the greater good, you start creating dramas and causing problems just to have something to overcome.

There is an African proverb that says, ‘A child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth.’ To be fully embraced by your village, you need to contribute. Without a sense of contribution, you’ll start to develop curious habits that burn down your life. You’ll find dramas where there are none, create problems that don’t need to be created and do things ‘just to feel the heat’. That’s a really curious habit.

That’s what happened to me. I had spent four years building a business and contributing to my team, and suddenly it was all over. The relief and euphoria of not having to work was ridiculously fleeting. Before long, my mood was in the gutter. Without a purpose and the stress of striving to improve, my days were blurring into each other, with no challenges to punctuate the weeks.

When life is out of balance, we long for the other extreme. Too busy? All we want to do is chill. Bored? Let’s get fired up. The grass is

always greener. This can be destructive unless we get curious about what we feel, think and do. Curiosity lets us find joy by bouncing deliberately from one side of the fence to the other. When we master this, we get to chow down on the greenest grass and embrace life with the presence and acceptance that comes with being truly curious.

Curiosity: the superpower to change

There are hundreds of books about habits – atomic habits, tiny habits and habits of highly effective people (there are seven of those). There are books on ‘how to change’, ‘the power of habit’ and understanding ‘the craving mind’. Great philosophers, writers, scientists and scholars have written about habits since Moses found the ten habits that won’t piss off God.

This book is different. It draws from the collective wisdom – everything from evolutionary biology and neuroscience to ancient wisdom, Stoic philosophy and Instagram – and looks at habits through the lens of curiosity, not scarcity.

Have you ever stopped after doing something you’ve done a hundred times and thought, ‘Why the hell do I do that?’

That’s a curious habit.

A curious habit is anything you feel, think or do where your default no longer helps.

Your curious habits served a purpose at some point. They helped you deal with life as a messy human. But over time, they’ve become redundant (or worse, destructive). Because you’re human – and you crave safety and pleasure, just like the sea squirt – your curious habits are running your life. Left unchecked, they may have led you away from the very things that make life joyful and meaningful.

If you’re like most people, you probably blame yourself for the curious habits you’ve unconsciously developed. But what if you could

look at your habits from a place of love and acceptance instead? What if you knew that change is possible if you *want* to change?

The modern world tells us that we are not good enough – that we need to be richer, thinner and more successful to be worthy humans. Instead, let's embrace the joy of growth from a place of love (of ourselves and others).

A curious habit is not so much unconscious as unexamined, and this examination is within your power to do.

When you get curious about your habits, your default position becomes 'I *want* to change, because I know I have more to offer', rather than 'I *have* to change, because I'm not good enough'. You approach change from a place of positivity and striving. This is when lasting change happens.

I'd love to say that I'm writing this book because I have mastered all my habits. If that were true, I'd be sporting a sixpack and sailing on my superyacht, and Tony Robbins would be coming to me for advice. This book is not about *perfect*. If it was, I wouldn't be the right author. I procrastinate. I struggle with my weight and wrestle with imposter syndrome. But it's still great being me.

There are things we all want to change about ourselves and what we do. Unfortunately, the default method of change usually starts with 'I'm not enough'. Most people try to change their habits from a place of scarcity and lack. This book will make you get curious about what you do and get your habits to work for you, rather than continuing your constant battle with failing willpower. My first book, *Stress Teflon*, was about the positive side of stress. This book is about taking the stress out of change. We are going to learn to change because we *want* to, not because we have to.

It's about how to change your thought habits – your beliefs and the stories you tell yourself – so you can deal with your shit and live a more authentic life. It's about making decisions rather than relying

on defaults. It's about discovering the joy of doing things on purpose and for the right reasons (that are your own), and becoming aware of when you are on autopilot. It's about choosing deliberate habits that are aligned with who you want to be. It's about knowing that emotion drives action, and having the power to put space between your emotional reactions and your deliberate behaviours so you can make better choices.

In the words of Walt Whitman (and Ted Lasso), 'Be curious – not judgemental.'

Finding your 'why' (without vomiting in your mouth)

Self-help gurus tell us we need to find our 'why'. There are thousands of 'live a life of purpose' evangelists who will teach you how to discover life's answers for three easy payments of \$49.95. This type of self-help speak makes a lot of people (including me) feel like they want to vomit in their mouths.

Unfortunately, finding your 'why' is really important. Unless you have a bigger, better reason driving your actions, it is impossible to sustain motivation and commitment. The problem is, a lot of self-help bullshit is condescending, blames the victim and uses guilt and scarcity to drive change. If you tell me I 'have to' do something, my instant reaction is to say 'Get lost'. Psychologists call the extreme version of this 'object defiance disorder', and I think that even the most agreeable people have a bit of defiance in them. Lasting change happens when we 'want to' do something because it aligns with our values and goals.

In this book, we are going to use curiosity to find exactly what our values are and uncover 'why' we do what we do. My aim is to do it without being preachy or prescriptive. You won't find any buzzwords

like ‘pivot’, ‘circle back’ or ‘synergy’, or any language that makes you feel like you’ve just joined a cult.

Everyone has a different appreciation of and tolerance for nerdy science stuff. There are a million books that go super-deep into the science of habits. I’m going to draw on a bunch of them and give you some tools to help you get curious about change without making you feel like you just stepped into a neuroscience masterclass.

Getting curious about what motivates you is a great way to get shit done and enjoy doing it. It’s much easier to commit to something you *want* to do than something you *have* to do to fit in with someone else’s idea of what’s important.

You’re a diamond

My friend Michael DeSanti runs a men’s coaching group called Find Your Tribe. He says: ‘You are a diamond that is covered in shit.’

Capitalism tells us that diamonds are good, and we need to go out and get more diamonds. Mike’s view is, **‘Why don’t we just wipe the shit off?’**

Getting curious and deliberate about your habits means discarding the stuff that isn’t in line with your best self. Often subtraction is easier and more effective than addition; getting curious allows you to do both, regardless of your mathematical skillset. It’s about finding harmony within yourself. As Mahatma Gandhi said: **‘Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony’.**

When you scrape off the shit, you can show up as the better version of you that was there all along. You can direct your energy towards what I call your ‘identity goals’: characteristics that align with your ‘why’ and that you want to cultivate. Identity goals are intrinsic, intentional and infinite. If you get them right, they act as a north star, guiding you to be deliberate with your decisions and defaults.

To get rid of the shit, you have to learn how to get comfortable with discomfort. I think of this as a software upgrade that's designed to overcome your outdated (sea squirt) hardware. Human hardware has an evolutionarily outdated, obsolete and often unhelpful reward system. This messed-up system was great when we were chasing woolly mammoths around, but it doesn't work so well now. It leads to addiction and other behaviours that take you further and further away from who you want to be.

Getting comfortable with discomfort is necessary if you want to address your curious habits.

We're all looking for answers – this book is about asking questions

You want to know why your finances are down the toilet; why you can't find work-life balance (spoiler alert: it's always fleeting); why motivation eludes you, even when you really, *really* want something. You want to find the answers to better health, lower body fat and increased fitness. Maybe you want to find out why your relationships aren't working, and discover the secrets that unlock performance and happiness. None of these questions have hard-and-fast answers. Everybody is different, and what works for one person might be a disaster for another.

You know what *does* work for all of us, though? Curiosity.

This book will help you look at the things you do, and get curious about what you're getting out of them and how you can do things differently. Better.

We will look at curious habits around health and wealth, love and life, business and pleasure. I'll share some stories, sprinkle in some science, add some clumsy metaphors and overshare a bit of personal experience.

Introduction

This book is not about how to *do* anything. It's about how to be curious. It's about always having options and being deliberate while looking at habit change from a place of thriving acceptance – not from the swamp of scarcity.

It's about living with more curiosity; less judgement. More bravery; less fear. More vulnerability; less perfection. More acceptance; less scarcity.

Are you curious? Let's jump in.