



THE RULES WE LIVE BY

Free yourself from stressful
rules and obligations

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Let's say you are attending a party and you walk into a room with a bunch of strangers. You must decide how to behave. You have two choices. You can either 1) systematically assess the situation, gather information, list the pros and cons of different actions, assess the probability of a consequence occurring, then calculate the effectiveness of each action, or 2) just do what everyone else is doing.

The former is costly in terms of time, resources, effort, and you'd look silly standing there in the doorway looking blankly into a room while making calculations in your head. The latter – doing what everyone else is doing - is much more efficient, and has much fewer potential consequences.

Everyday life is rife with implicit behavioral rules directing the way we speak, walk, feel and respond. Default rules are stored in memory, cued up in a given context, and used to guide behavior. It's an effective mechanism really. We conform because such norms make life easier for us and because we want to 'fit in' or do the right thing.

Breaking norms might result in throwing off the balance of a social situation and could lead to gossip, exclusion, resentment, accusations of selfishness, as well as guilt, shame, and other negative feelings. These feelings of shame and guilt then reinforce our tendency to conform.

As a result, we possess a 'natural aversion' toward acting contrary to the preferences and expectations of others. Here lies the problem: We get so used to conforming that conformity becomes automatic. We obliviously obey social norms even when they don't serve us. No matter how rebellious or "against the grain" you think you are, you are falling victim to conformity all the time. This workbook will help you avoid getting duped into mindlessly following irrational rules that have ceased to serve you in positive ways.



Let's get started!

RULES INVESTIGATION

Reflect on the following questions by jotting down some notes. This will reveal the ways you might be conforming to behavioral rules without even knowing it.

How often do you push away, dismiss, minimize or hide from your emotions?

Do you tell yourself that you're a burden and not ask for help when you need it?

When was the last time you put your needs ahead of someone else's?

Have you ever declined an invitation without feeling any guilt?

Have you noticed a tendency to criticize yourself when you make a mistake?

What's it like for you to protest someone else's opinion or suggestion?

Have you stayed in a toxic or neglectful relationship because you were too afraid to let it go?

When was the last time you openly shared with someone that you were feeling sad, anxious, or angry?

Do you blindly follow all your doctor's recommendations without much question?

These are all examples of the ways we obey rules automatically and unreflectively. We are seldom aware of these rules until they are brought into awareness. We even obey norms when there is no obvious incentive or personal commitment to what the norm stands for.

IDENTIFYING RULES

Some of the common rules people follow. Check the ones you've bought into, either now or in the past.

- Women are weak/dramatic/emotional.
 - Men are supposed to be strong.
 - People can't be trusted.
 - Don't wallow in self-pity; pull up your bootstraps!
 - I am stubborn.
 - I must do it all.
 - It's too hard.
 - Emotions have no place in my life.
 - I'm to blame for another person's unhappiness.
 - It's selfish to put my own needs in front of others.
 - It has never worked before.
 - I always get sick in winter.
 - You can't have your cake and eat it too.
 - I have too much on my plate.
 - Other people must approve of what I do.
 - Better safe than sorry.
 - I'll never be happy unless _____ changes.
 - Love never lasts anyway.
 - Being different is bad.
 - It's unacceptable to challenge a doctor's recommendation.
 - I must do things myself for them to get done right.
 - If I get my hopes up, I'll just be more disappointed.
 - People will just let me down anyway.
 - Every time something good happens, something bad will happen.
 - Their needs are more important than mine.
 - Other people have control of my life.
 - Everything happens for a reason.
 - I can't tell the truth, or I may get judged.
 - I can't ask for what I want because I might get rejected.
 - I can't pursue my dreams because I might fail.
 - I'll do it wrong anyway, so why even try?
 - I am a procrastinator; I lack motivation.
 - It's too late to change.
 - I don't have time.
- Fill in the blank*
- I'm the kind of person who _____.
 - I'm always _____.
 - I can't _____.
 - I'm too _____.
 - I don't have enough _____.
 - I'm not _____.

GETTING REAL ABOUT RULES

Write down your rules or beliefs about each of the following subjects. You might notice your mind battling over what is the “right” answer, and what is the “real” answer. Being honest about your rules will help you become more aware, and ultimately the rules will assert less control over you.

Rules about being happy

Rules about being sad

Rules about saying no

Rules about protesting

Rules about wanting things

Rules about asking for help

Rules about refusing doctor's orders

Rules about taking medication

Rules about expressing your emotions

Rules about what healthy means

Rules about feeling guilty

Rules about feeling fear

Rules about putting yourself first

Rules about making mistakes

Rules about being chronically ill

TURNING TOWARDS VALUES

Rather than turning towards arbitrary rules and social norms, I suggest turning towards your values instead. Below is an example of how someone might follow the rule, "I must complete all the things on my to-do list."

A rule or obligation that you follow that causes stress	<i>I must complete all the things on my to-do list.</i>
Is this a choice?	<i>Yes, it's a choice. None of the things on the to-do list are do-or-die. Although it feels like it sometimes!</i>
What negative outcomes do you avoid by doing this?	<i>Feeling bad about myself when I don't get things done; I tell myself that I'm lazy; Thinking everything will fall apart; People count on me to get things done.</i>
Is it workable?	<p>In the long term...</p> <p>Does this rule make you feel: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> bad about yourself or <input type="checkbox"/> good about yourself?</p> <p>Does this rule: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> make you feel stuck or <input type="checkbox"/> open your life?</p> <p>Does this rule: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> take away your power or <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> empower you?</p>
Is there a personal value or principle involved in this?	<i>There's some ease that comes when I have completed some tasks; I feel good about the things on the list that serve others; I value being effective and diligent; some of the tasks are very important to my family.</i>
How can you approach the situation in a new way?	<i>I can remind myself that some of the tasks are meaningful to me; I can get some help from others; I can practice letting go of the negative self-talk that says I'm lazy; I can serve others in different ways.</i>

Think of a rule or obligation you follow. Fill out the chart in the same way.

A rule or obligation that you follow that causes stress	
Is this a choice?	
What negative outcomes do you avoid by doing this?	
Is it workable?	In the long term... Does this rule make you feel: <input type="checkbox"/> bad about yourself or <input type="checkbox"/> good about yourself? Does this rule: <input type="checkbox"/> make you feel stuck or <input type="checkbox"/> open your life? Does this rule: <input type="checkbox"/> take away your power or <input type="checkbox"/> empower you?
Is there a personal value or principle involved in this?	
How can you approach the situation in a new way?	

“Know the rules well so you can
break them effectively.”

- Dalai Lama XIV



Now that you've had a chance to identify better ways to approach one rule or obligation, challenge yourself to explore other ones. You might find important core values involved in your rules, but that your behavior doesn't completely align with your values. Or you might discover that the rule itself is a problem and needs to be changed or let go. Are there some rules you can ditch? Are there some behaviors or actions you can shift so that you're better aligning with your values?

You've done some good work here! We over-identify with rules to the point where they become "the truth." When we get attached to rules in this way, it's easy to see how powerful they can be. Take a moment and acknowledge your Willingness to complete this workbook even though it may have brought up some discomfort.

The purpose of this workbook was for you to see the true nature of your rules. You learned how these rules are problematic and cause distress and struggle in your life. Now you can view them for what they are; just thoughts and beliefs you've attached to over time, not rules for living. Turning Towards Values provides a guide for new actions or beliefs that are based on what "works" rather than what disempowers you or makes you feel stuck.

As you practice getting some distance from rules and aligning with your values, you might notice more discomfort. This is just a normal response from your mind noticing that you're doing something new and different. It's okay, just keep going. You can make a choice to consciously notice your discomfort and not get entangled in it.

Lastly, go easy on yourself. Blaming yourself for your rule abiding behavior is never helpful, productive or kind. Just make a commitment to be more aware of your choices and intentional with your actions.

*In health,
Emily*

