

CHAPTER 4

FIGURE OUT THE BIG STUFF

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

—LEWIS CARROLL, *ALICE’S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND*

I don’t think I can keep doing this, I thought after putting in another eighty-hour week at the hospital.

I had changed careers into medicine so that I could be happier and more engaged. After two years taking premed courses and getting experience as an EMT, I’d put in four years at medical school, and now I was in my first year of residency as a surgery intern. Technically, I was a doctor, but this wasn’t the life I’d envisioned.

I was seeing as many as twenty trauma patients a day, and I was drowning in paperwork and grunt work, which, while essential, didn’t feel particularly rewarding. My days were emotionally and physically draining, and I was gradually falling

further and further behind on sleep. I wasn't happier, and I was disengaging. I was too physically and emotionally exhausted to feel any reward in what I was doing. I still had over four years of surgery residency left, and all I could see was the next exhausting day in front of me. I was so focused on surviving that I didn't look up at the future I was trying to build.

I could switch to radiology, I thought. It would mean redoing my intern year, but I'd always found radiology interesting. It was essentially solving puzzles—looking at black-and-white images and drawing on clinical information to diagnose and treat injuries and diseases. And while radiology residencies are far from easy, they are less emotionally loaded than surgical training and generally don't require as much of a time commitment. The radiology interns were definitely getting a lot more sleep than me.

I told my wife I was thinking about quitting surgery and switching to radiology. She had good reason to say, "Yes, switch!" The past months had been hard on her too. I was gone all the time, and when I was home, I was tired and stressed. Frankly, I wasn't much fun to be around.

Instead of encouraging me to quit, though, she reminded me of my big-picture goal: doing work that was meaningful to me. "Is that a goal you still want to achieve?" she asked me. "If so, you should stick with surgery. We're talking about a few years of investment to make the next thirty years of your career better."

She was absolutely right. I'd already considered radiology when picking my residency but ultimately dismissed it for the same reasons I'd decided to leave engineering. I wasn't happy

as an engineer because I didn't find my work fulfilling. While radiology is undoubtedly important, it wouldn't give me the same sense of impact as being a surgeon. I wanted to be in the operating room, where I could directly see the positive outcomes of my work.

If it weren't for my wonderfully supportive wife and the fact that I'd already taken the time to figure out the big stuff—what I wanted from my life—there's a good chance I would've switched to radiology. And that definitely would have been a mistake. I would've spent the next five years working toward something that I didn't really want and that, when I stopped to think about it in the long term, I already knew wouldn't make me happy.

But because I knew what I wanted and *why* I wanted it, I was able to see past my current exhaustion and persevere. Instead of exchanging my future happiness for greater present comfort, I made the sacrifices needed to build the life I wanted. This is the power of having clear goals.

In the next chapter, I'll guide you through practical exercises that will help you define your long-term goals, but first, let's start with the big picture: why these goals matter, what makes us happy, what makes us feel like a good person, and the importance of passion and purpose.

WHY DO WE NEED GOALS?

Happiness isn't easy. Sure, short-term happiness might be easy—it can be bought with an entertaining TV show, a tasty meal, a shiny new gadget. But long-term, fulfilling happiness? That's a lifetime pursuit, and it takes work.

In any long-term endeavor—and a lifetime pursuit is about as long-term as it gets for an individual—you need a clear goal, something to work toward. You could be constantly taking steps, but if those steps aren't organized in a particular direction, they won't lead anywhere. You'll zigzag, backtrack, and wander, and either end up lost or right back where you started.



*Without a destination in mind,
you may be constantly moving
without actually going anywhere.*



To make progress, you need direction, and that comes from the “big stuff.” So what’s the “big stuff”? It’s all the things you want most out of life—your big hopes and dreams for your career, your relationships, your hobbies, and so on. Goals are important, but not all goals are created equal. Whether you’re aware of it or not, you have a hierarchy of goals. If you’ve made the effort to define it, the big stuff is at the very top. Long-term, top-level goals can be broken down into smaller mid-level and low-level goals.

As an example of a small hierarchy, consider going on a date. You may have the goal to look good for your date. But that goal is really to serve a different (higher) goal: to make a good impression on your date. Serving that same higher-level goal, you may also have goals of choosing a movie your date will enjoy and a restaurant you both will be comfortable at. And for each of those goals, there will be even lower-level goals or tasks—seeing what’s showing at the local theater,

looking up movie and restaurant reviews, and so on. So you have tasks, under low-level goals, under one or more layers of mid-level goals. Now step back. Looking at your life, is making a good impression on this particular date one of your *main life goals*? Probably not. Making a good impression is in service of an even higher-level goal—a goal perhaps about long-term companionship, or love, or family.

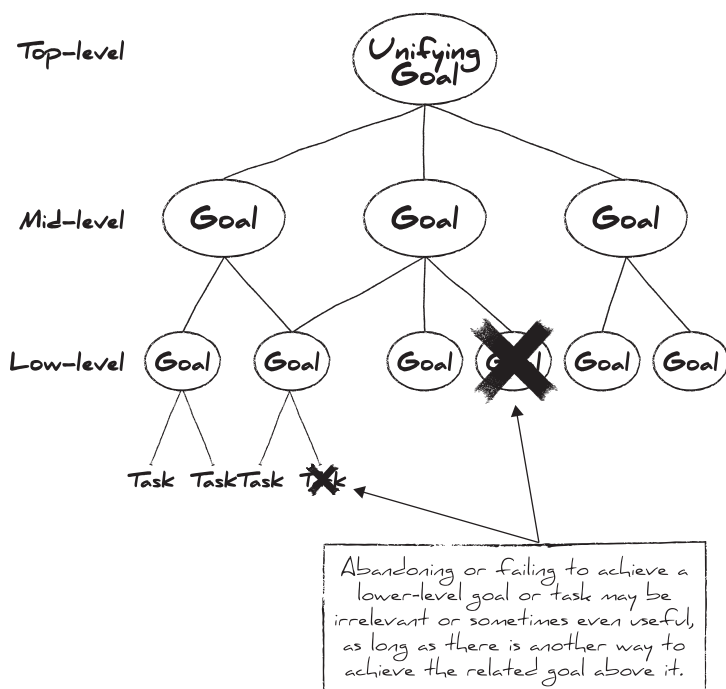
As you start to think about it this way, you might begin to see that, when defining goals, it is important to start at the top and work your way down. Writing out a bunch of tasks won't get you very far if they aren't organized around specific goals. And achieving those lower-level goals isn't going to mean much if they're not in service of a higher-level goal. If you are clear on your top-level goal, it can also help you move on when you fail at some low-level goals or leave some tasks incomplete. There will be other paths to reach your top-level goal, so any specific task or lower-level goal doesn't necessarily matter much for its own sake.

Consider the date example—picking a restaurant that turned out to be a dud may be a failure of a low-level goal you set for yourself, but it's unlikely to derail the entire process of finding long-term companionship in your life. The caveat here is that you have to treat that low-level failure as what it is: low level. If you go about the rest of your date and your future interactions acting like a disappointing menu was on the scale of a lifetime failure, you're going to miss out on opportunities to move forward. The opportunity cost of focusing on the subpar meal is the energy and time you could use to have other conversations or enjoy other activities together.

Achieving true top-level goals typically requires years of per-

sistence. By clearly defining them, you can better map out and organize the smaller goals and steps needed to reach your destination and also increase your resilience along the road.

Hierarchy of Goals



If you don't have all the big stuff figured out right now, don't worry. As J. R. R. Tolkien wrote, "Not all those who wander are lost." Wandering can serve a purpose. It can help us to better understand ourselves—our likes and dislikes, our talents, the things that bring us meaning. But there's a big difference between purposeful wandering and mindless wandering. The goal of wandering should be to figure out the big stuff. You don't want to spend your whole life wandering,

because chances are, you're not going to accidentally stumble upon your ideal destination. (Note that I'm speaking figuratively here. For some people, happiness might mean exploring and discovering new things. They might spend their whole lives "wandering," but I'd argue it's not wandering the way I use it here, as they are purposefully following the path that creates happiness for them.)

By figuring out what you want in the big picture, and then taking the steps needed to create that, you have a much better chance of building the future you want.

THE FIVE FACTORS OF WELL-BEING: WHAT MAKES US HAPPY?

It would be easy to just say "My goal is to be happy." But that's too vague to be very helpful. First, happiness is a little different for everyone. So you've got to figure out what you mean by "be happy," and then you can go about figuring out what will get you there. Second, the simple fact of the matter is that while we all want to be happy, we can be bad at making the decisions that will lead to the most happiness.

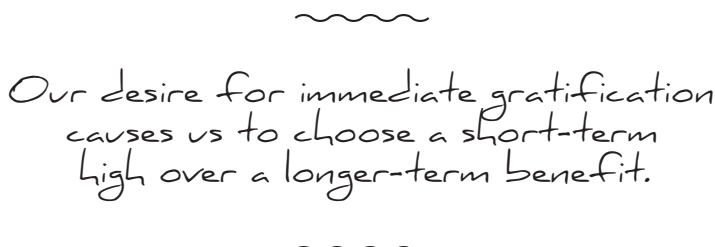
Here's a thought exercise to prove it. Imagine you are walking down the street. You look down and see, partially covered by some old dry leaves, a twenty-dollar bill. There is no way to know who lost the money or to return it to anyone. That twenty dollars is now yours! What would you buy with this out-of-the-blue money to make yourself happy?

Pause and think about it for a moment.

Now, imagine a different scenario. Let's say there's an experi-

ment going on. The researcher approaches various people and gives them twenty dollars. For half the group, the money is given on the condition that they have to spend it on something for themselves before the end of the day. For the other half of the group, they have to spend it on something for someone else within the same time frame. Which of the two groups do you think was happier at the end of the experiment?

If you said the people who spent the money on someone else, you're correct. When researchers actually ran this study, the people who had to spend the money on someone else were significantly happier about the twenty-dollar windfall than the people who had to spend it on themselves.²⁶ When you imagined what you would spend your found twenty dollars on, did you think about buying something for someone else, or for yourself? Don't beat yourself up over this. One of the major findings of this study and others like it is that we pretty much all do this as our default: think of ourselves first and expect that to make us happier. This is an effect that, if we're being honest, all of us have experienced in our lives.



Our desire for immediate gratification
causes us to choose a short-term
high over a longer-term benefit.

26 Elizabeth W. Dunn, Lara B. Aknin, and Michael I. Norton, "Prosocial Spending and Happiness: Using Money to Benefit Others Pays Off," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 23, no. 1 (February 2014): 41–47.

So what will actually lead to lasting happiness? Thankfully, a lot of research has been done on happiness and well-being, in both the short and long term, and some consistent themes and patterns have emerged.

First, money isn't everything. It's just a tool. While we sometimes get caught up chasing more money, we don't really want the money—we want what the money can buy us. Money itself won't make us happy, but what it provides can. Also, as discussed in the previous chapter, as much as we enjoy *getting* material things, *having* them doesn't continue to make us as happy.

If money doesn't make us happy, what does? A fancy job title? Respect? Power? Not quite. According to the research, these five factors are what make us happy²⁷:

- Social connection
- Health and activity
- Curiosity
- Learning
- Giving

These five factors are well-established as the things that make all humans happier and more well in the long run. To choose goals that give you the best chances of happiness and well-being, keep these categories in mind. There are any number of ways to accomplish these things, so you can still personalize your goals to your individual tastes. That said, you can quickly narrow a field of choices down by remembering you want to build relationships, be healthy and active, discover

27 J. Aked, N. Marks, C. Cordon, and S. Thompson, "Five Ways to Wellbeing," Centre for Wellbeing, New Economic Foundation, 2008, <https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/five-ways-to-wellbeing-1.pdf>.

new things, learn more about what interests you, and give back to others.

But goals take work to achieve. Even if you know your goals will help lead to happiness and meaning, if you're not *excited* about those goals, it'll be hard to motivate yourself to do the needed work. So there's another important ingredient you need: passion.

HOW DO WE FIND OUR PASSION?

Did you ever have a project in school that you just didn't care about? It mattered for your grade, but the topic was so boring that you can barely even remember at this point what it was actually about? How did that go? Regardless of the grade,²⁸ how much did you actually learn, and how did you feel about the final product you presented or turned in?

Now compare that to a project you were interested in—a paper, art project, lab write-up, or independent study topic that you were really fired up about. Again, setting the grade aside, how much did you learn? What was the quality of the work you produced?

The difference between the two is passion. What you get out of your work and the quality you produce depend on how much you enjoy the work—your passion for it. If you're interested in something for its own sake, it is energizing to work on it. It is satisfying and rewarding, and this drives you to put in more time and be more focused during that time.

²⁸ Grades are so heavily weighted by other biases and considerations that they're a really poor indicator of learning or quality of work produced.

That focus decreases distraction and increases both creativity and productivity.

Clearly, passion is important—so what do you do if you don't know what fires you up? How do you find your passion? Short answer: you don't.



Passion is not found. It is created.



“Finding” your passion implies that there is “a passion” out there already developed and waiting for you to get to it. As if you will know on the first try whether something is your passion, like being struck by lightning. Rarely is that the case. First of all, the first time you try something, you're probably not going to be great at it. Even if you have a growth mindset, it can be hard to feel passionate about something you're not good at yet. Second, a true passion is something that will sustain your interest and energy for years to come. Often, the things you feel passionate about right away end up flaming out in a relatively short period of time. Once the “honeymoon period” is over, you're just not that interested anymore. This is hedonic adaptation in action once more. Something may be fun and exciting when it's new, but eventually, it'll become your normal. If it's not still fun and exciting at that point, it's not your passion.

Instead, as Dr. Angela Duckworth, author of *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (which I highly recommend), said in one interview, “A passion is developed more than it is

discovered.”²⁹ This doesn’t mean that drudging, life-sucking work will magically turn into something you are passionate about if you just stick with it long enough. But if a certain kind of work has meaning to you, has some aspects you enjoy, and isn’t sucking the life out of you, it could be your pre-passion work. If you identify the areas that are most interesting to you and work on skill development and personal growth in those areas, you will grow your passion.

It’s a cycle: feelings of accomplishment and growth reinforce your enjoyment, which reinforces the activities that lead to accomplishment and growth. Over time, the accumulation of positive feelings, sustained growth, and focused interest become just the thing many others are still waiting to “discover”: a real passion for your work. As you gain understanding and skill, you may also develop a broader perspective of how your work benefits others, which can lead to a sense of purpose.

The problem for many of us is how to sustain that effort and focus in the early days. If we’re not struck out of the blue by great passion for a job, (a) how do we know if it will eventually become a passion and (b) how do we stick with it long enough to get to the point where it actually feels like a passion? The answer to both questions is related to purpose. You may already be aware that a passion can develop into purpose, but it works in reverse as well: purpose can lead you to a passion.

29 Dan Shawbel, “Angela Duckworth: ‘A Passion Is Developed More Than It Is Discovered,’”

Forbes, January 9, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2017/01/09/>

[angela-duckworth-a-passion-is-developed-more-than-it-is-discovered/?sh=511885c3cob4](https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2017/01/09/angela-duckworth-a-passion-is-developed-more-than-it-is-discovered/?sh=511885c3cob4).


HOW DO WE FIND OUR PURPOSE?

It turns out that to sustain interest and engagement over time, it may be even more important that you feel your work has meaning than for it to excite you. Having a reason outside of yourself for why you do what you do is one of the strongest predictors of satisfaction, advancement, and longevity at a job. Plus, as already discussed, giving back to others is a key factor of happiness, and by addressing a need in the world, you can feel more “deeply good.” So if you want to know whether something can transform into a passion and ensure you have the motivation to stick with it until it does, purpose is a great place to start.


Thankfully, this doesn’t mean we all have to be solving global poverty or working toward world peace with every hour of our career. What it means is that, whatever we are doing, we should frame it in a way that ties our efforts to something meaningful outside ourselves. Remember: mindset matters. How we think affects how we feel and act.

As an example, on a tour of a NASA facility, John F. Kennedy stopped and introduced himself to a man carrying a broom down the hall. When JFK asked the man what he was doing, he replied, “Mr. President, I’m helping put a man on the moon.” This story can seem a little trite—it’s *too* good, like it was made up to make us all feel good about our jobs regardless of what we’re doing. But it actually happened! JFK was well known for taking the time to meet and speak with anyone and everyone along the way on such visits. The exact details aren’t certain—in some versions of the story, the man is using the broom, not carrying it, or he has a mop instead. But presidential archives and interviews indicate that such an interaction did in fact occur.

Not only is this story true, but there are many others like it, as well as research supporting the idea. In a study of job satisfaction, Morten T. Hansen and a team of researchers interviewed and observed people at all levels of different types of organizations, from workers in a factory to senior business leaders to lawyers to sales reps.³⁰ Across all levels of every organization, finding purpose in work was strongly associated with job satisfaction and was also a predictor of success, as measured by both advancement and evaluations from peers and managers. The study also found that, within the same role, there was a huge range in how much purpose people felt their job had. This suggests that purpose comes not from the work itself, but from each individual's *perception* of the work. For example, in related studies among hospital cleaning staff, those who framed their work as helping people heal were happier at their jobs, had a better sense of balance between work and the rest of their life, and had fewer symptoms of burnout or depression than those who described their work based on the tasks they did. These people were also more likely to be rated above average at their work by their peers and managers and were more likely to be recommended to other positions.³¹



A sense of purpose comes not from
your work, but from how you
think and feel about your work.



³⁰ Morten T. Hansen, *Great at Work: The Hidden Habits of Top Performers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018). See especially chapter 5, “P-Squared (Passion and Purpose).”

³¹ Hansen, *Great at Work*, 108.

This doesn't mean that everyone will suddenly enjoy how they spend their time at work or at school just by telling themselves it's for a bigger purpose. You have to actually *believe* it. As an engineer, I could mentally come up with a purpose for my work. I was in research and development making electron microscopes, and I would tell myself that by helping produce this tool, I was contributing to all sorts of scientific studies that were bettering humankind. Honestly, that very well could have been true, but I never knew exactly how the microscopes were used or if they led to any important discoveries. No matter what I told myself, I just didn't feel that my work had purpose for me, even though lots of other engineers feel their work is very meaningful.

If you're struggling to believe in the purpose of your work, start with baby steps. Similar to passion, purpose is created more than found. In his book *Great at Work*, Morten T. Hansen details the "purpose pyramid."³² At the base of the pyramid is the belief that your work creates value without doing harm. From there, you can move up to the next level: crafting personal meaning in what you do—what *you* find valuable about your work. Finally, you can reach the apex of the pyramid: a social mission, in which you connect your work to the value it provides to the world or other people. By accessing the base level of the pyramid first, then working your way up, you can build a stronger and stronger sense of purpose over time.

If this approach doesn't work and you still can't find any reason you're doing your job besides making money, it's time to face facts: this work does not provide you with a sense of

³² Hansen, *Great at Work*, 105.

purpose. That doesn't make you a bad person or mean that the work has no purpose. It means that this particular work lacks a strong sense of purpose for *you*. And that's okay. It simply means the job isn't a good fit for you, and likely also means you won't be able to develop or sustain a passion for it. It's time to choose change. This was the case for me with engineering, which is why I switched to surgery.

Since passion and purpose are both created rather than found, a good goal is to find work that leverages both. Either can lead to the other, so start by cultivating whichever comes more naturally to you, then work to combine them.

MAKING GOALS DOESN'T NEED TO BE SCARY

Determining your long-term goals can feel overwhelming. Deciding what you want out of your *entire* life? That's a lot of pressure. What if you get it wrong? You could end up wasting your whole life!

Relax. Take a deep breath. There are no right or wrong answers when it comes to top-level goals. The only ways to really screw this up are (1) to not set goals at all and (2) to never reevaluate your goals.

You now know which factors have been scientifically linked to happiness:

- Social connection
- Health and activity
- Curiosity
- Learning
- Giving

You also know that passion and purpose are each important, and that both are created rather than found.

The next step is to set goals that will bring you closer to those things in your own life. And remember: your goals aren't set in stone. No fixed mindsets here. It's quite possible you will change your mind about your goals in the future, and there's nothing wrong with that. You're striving for growth and improvement, not perfection. When I had that crisis moment during residency, I could have realized, "Actually, this goal isn't something I want anymore." I could have chosen to switch to radiology or even leave medicine altogether. It wouldn't have meant that I made the "wrong" goal; it would've meant that I'd changed or learned more about myself, so I needed to adjust my goals. This is what my friend Jacob (mentioned in Chapter 2) did in leaving residency and building himself (and his family) a happier life with a better career fit.

There's a reason people who set goals are more likely to achieve them: we need goals to give us direction and keep us focused. By consciously setting goals, you can make sure you're less swayed by temporary circumstances or in-the-moment emotions. You can keep your eye on the prize.

I'm not going to pretend that setting goals is easy. It can take time and effort. Fortunately, there are a lot of great exercises that can help. In the next chapter, we'll go through a few that many people find helpful and even fun.

