

**THE
SUBTLE
ART OF
NOT
GIVING
A F*CK**

**A COUNTERINTUITIVE APPROACH
TO LIVING A GOOD LIFE**

MARK MANSON

The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck

*A Counterintuitive Approach
to Living a Good Life*

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CHAPTER 1

Don't Try

Charles Bukowski was an alcoholic, a womanizer, a chronic gambler, a lout, a cheapskate, a deadbeat, and on his worst days, a poet. He's probably the last person on earth you would ever look to for life advice or expect to see in any sort of self-help book.

Which is why he's the perfect place to start.

Bukowski wanted to be a writer. But for decades his work was rejected by almost every magazine, newspaper, journal, agent, and publisher he submitted to. His work was horrible, they said. Crude. Disgusting. Depraved. And as the stacks of rejection slips piled up, the weight of his failures pushed him deep into an alcohol-fueled depression that would follow him for most of his life.

Bukowski had a day job as a letter-filer at a post office. He got paid shit money and spent most of it on booze. He gambled away the rest at the racetrack. At night, he would drink alone and sometimes hammer out poetry on his beat-up old typewriter. Often, he'd wake up on the floor, having passed out the night before.

Thirty years went by like this, most of it a meaningless blur of alcohol, drugs, gambling, and prostitutes. Then, when Bukowski was fifty, after a lifetime of failure and self-loathing, an editor at a small independent publishing house took a strange interest in him. The editor couldn't offer Bukowski much money or much promise of sales. But he had a weird affection for the drunk loser, so he decided to take a chance on him. It was the first real shot Bukowski had ever gotten, and, he realized, probably the only one he would ever get. Bukowski wrote back to the editor: "I have one of two choices—stay in the post office and go crazy . . . or stay out here and play at writer and starve. I have decided to starve."

Upon signing the contract, Bukowski wrote his first novel in three weeks. It was called simply *Post Office*. In the dedication, he wrote,

“Dedicated to nobody.”

Bukowski would make it as a novelist and poet. He would go on and publish six novels and hundreds of poems, selling over two million copies of his books. His popularity defied everyone’s expectations, particularly his own.

Stories like Bukowski’s are the bread and butter of our cultural narrative. Bukowski’s life embodies the American Dream: a man fights for what he wants, never gives up, and eventually achieves his wildest dreams. It’s practically a movie waiting to happen. We all look at stories like Bukowski’s and say, “See? He never gave up. He never stopped trying. He always believed in himself. He persisted against all the odds and made something of himself!”

It is then strange that on Bukowski’s tombstone, the epitaph reads: “Don’t try.”

See, despite the book sales and the fame, Bukowski was a loser. He knew it. And his success stemmed not from some determination to be a winner, but from the fact that he *knew* he was a loser, accepted it, and then wrote honestly about it. He never tried to be anything other than what he was. The genius in Bukowski’s work was not in overcoming unbelievable odds or developing himself into a shining literary light. It was the opposite. It was his simple ability to be completely, unflinchingly honest with himself—especially the worst parts of himself—and to share his failings without hesitation or doubt.

This is the real story of Bukowski’s success: his comfort with himself as a failure. Bukowski didn’t give a fuck about success. Even after his fame, he still showed up to poetry readings hammered and verbally abused people in his audience. He still exposed himself in public and tried to sleep with every woman he could find. Fame and success didn’t make him a better person. Nor was it by becoming a better person that he became famous and successful.

Self-improvement and success often occur together. But that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re the same thing.

Our culture today is obsessively focused on unrealistically positive expectations: Be happier. Be healthier. Be the best, better than the rest. Be smarter, faster, richer, sexier, more popular, more productive, more envied, and more admired. Be perfect and amazing and crap out twelve-karat-gold nuggets before breakfast each morning while kissing your selfie-ready spouse and two and a half kids goodbye. Then fly your helicopter to your

wonderfully fulfilling job, where you spend your days doing incredibly meaningful work that's likely to save the planet one day.

But when you stop and really think about it, conventional life advice—all the positive and happy self-help stuff we hear all the time—is actually fixating on what you *lack*. It lasers in on *what you perceive your personal shortcomings and failures to already be*, and then emphasizes them for you. You learn about the best ways to make money *because* you feel you don't have enough money already. You stand in front of the mirror and repeat affirmations saying that you're beautiful *because* you feel as though you're not beautiful already. You follow dating and relationship advice *because* you feel that you're unlovable already. You try goofy visualization exercises about being more successful *because* you feel as though you aren't successful enough already.

Ironically, this fixation on the positive—on what's better, what's superior—only serves to remind us over and over again of what we are not, of what we lack, of what we should have been but failed to be. After all, no truly happy person feels the need to stand in front of a mirror and recite that she's happy. She just *is*.

There's a saying in Texas: "The smallest dog barks the loudest." A confident man doesn't feel a need to prove that he's confident. A rich woman doesn't feel a need to convince anybody that she's rich. Either you are or you are not. And if you're dreaming of something all the time, then you're reinforcing the same unconscious reality over and over: that you are *not that*.

Everyone and their TV commercial wants you to believe that the key to a good life is a nicer job, or a more rugged car, or a prettier girlfriend, or a hot tub with an inflatable pool for the kids. The world is constantly telling you that the path to a better life is more, more, more—buy more, own more, make more, fuck more, *be* more. You are constantly bombarded with messages to give a fuck about everything, all the time. Give a fuck about a new TV. Give a fuck about having a better vacation than your coworkers. Give a fuck about buying that new lawn ornament. Give a fuck about having the right kind of selfie stick.

Why? My guess: because giving a fuck about more stuff is good for business.

And while there's nothing wrong with good business, the problem is that giving too many fucks is bad for your mental health. It causes you to become overly attached to the superficial and fake, to dedicate your life to

chasing a mirage of happiness and satisfaction. The key to a good life is not giving a fuck about more; it's giving a fuck about less, giving a fuck about only what is true and immediate and important.

The Feedback Loop from Hell

There's an insidious quirk to your brain that, if you let it, can drive you absolutely batty. Tell me if this sounds familiar to you:

You get anxious about confronting somebody in your life. That anxiety cripples you and you start wondering why you're so anxious. Now you're becoming *anxious about being anxious*. Oh no! Doubly anxious! Now you're anxious about your anxiety, which is causing *more* anxiety. Quick, where's the whiskey?

Or let's say you have an anger problem. You get pissed off at the stupidest, most inane stuff, and you have no idea why. And the fact that you get pissed off so easily starts to piss you off even more. And then, in your petty rage, you realize that being angry all the time makes you a shallow and mean person, and you hate this; you hate it so much that you get angry at yourself. Now look at you: you're angry at yourself getting angry about being angry. Fuck you, wall. Here, have a fist.

Or you're so worried about doing the right thing all the time that you become worried about how much you're worrying. Or you feel so guilty for every mistake you make that you begin to feel guilty about how guilty you're feeling. Or you get sad and alone so often that it makes you feel even more sad and alone just thinking about it.

Welcome to the Feedback Loop from Hell. Chances are you've engaged in it more than a few times. Maybe you're engaging in it right now: "God, I do the Feedback Loop all the time—I'm such a loser for doing it. I should stop. Oh my God, I feel like such a loser for calling myself a loser. I should stop calling myself a loser. Ah, fuck! I'm doing it again! See? I'm a loser! Argh!"

Calm down, amigo. Believe it or not, this is part of the beauty of being human. Very few animals on earth have the ability to think cogent thoughts to begin with, but we humans have the luxury of being able to have thoughts *about* our thoughts. So I can think about watching Miley Cyrus videos on YouTube, and then immediately think about what a sicko I am for wanting to watch Miley Cyrus videos on YouTube. Ah, the miracle of consciousness!

Now here's the problem: Our society today, through the wonders of

consumer culture and hey-look-my-life-is-cooler-than-yours social media, has bred a whole generation of people who believe that having these negative experiences—*anxiety, fear, guilt, etc.*—is totally not okay. I mean, if you look at your Facebook feed, everybody there is having a fucking grand old time. Look, eight people got married this week! And some sixteen-year-old on TV got a Ferrari for her birthday. And another kid just made two billion dollars inventing an app that automatically delivers you more toilet paper when you run out.

Meanwhile, you're stuck at home flossing your cat. And you can't help but think your life sucks even more than you thought.

The Feedback Loop from Hell has become a borderline epidemic, making many of us overly stressed, overly neurotic, and overly self-loathing.

Back in Grandpa's day, he would feel like shit and think to himself, "Gee whiz, I sure do feel like a cow turd today. But hey, I guess that's just life. Back to shoveling hay."

But now? Now if you feel like shit for even five minutes, you're bombarded with 350 images of people *totally happy and having amazing fucking lives*, and it's impossible to not feel like there's something wrong with you.

It's this last part that gets us into trouble. We feel bad about feeling bad. We feel guilty for feeling guilty. We get angry about getting angry. We get anxious about feeling anxious. *What is wrong with me?*

This is why not giving a fuck is so key. This is why it's going to save the world. And it's going to save it by accepting that the world is totally fucked and that's all right, because it's always been that way, and always will be.

By not giving a fuck that you feel bad, you short-circuit the Feedback Loop from Hell; you say to yourself, "I feel like shit, but who gives a fuck?" And then, as if sprinkled by magic fuck-giving fairy dust, you stop hating yourself for feeling so bad.

George Orwell said that to see what's in front of one's nose requires a constant struggle. Well, the solution to our stress and anxiety is right there in front of our noses, and we're too busy watching porn and advertisements for ab machines that don't work, wondering why we're not banging a hot blonde with a rocking six-pack, to notice.

We joke online about "first-world problems," but we really have become victims of our own success. Stress-related health issues, anxiety

disorders, and cases of depression have skyrocketed over the past thirty years, despite the fact that everyone has a flat-screen TV and can have their groceries delivered. Our crisis is no longer material; it's existential, it's spiritual. We have so much fucking stuff and so many opportunities that we don't even know what to give a fuck about anymore.

Because there's an infinite amount of things we can now see or know, there are also an infinite number of ways we can discover that we don't measure up, that we're not good enough, that things aren't as great as they could be. And this rips us apart inside.

Because here's the thing that's wrong with all of the "How to Be Happy" shit that's been shared eight million times on Facebook in the past few years—here's what nobody realizes about all of this crap:

The desire for more positive experience is itself a negative experience. And, paradoxically, the acceptance of one's negative experience is itself a positive experience.

This is a total mind-fuck. So I'll give you a minute to unpretzel your brain and maybe read that again: *Wanting positive experience is a negative experience; accepting negative experience is a positive experience.* It's what the philosopher Alan Watts used to refer to as "the backwards law"—the idea that the more you pursue feeling better all the time, the less satisfied you become, as pursuing something only reinforces the fact that you lack it in the first place. The more you desperately want to be rich, the more poor and unworthy you feel, regardless of how much money you actually make. The more you desperately want to be sexy and desired, the uglier you come to see yourself, regardless of your actual physical appearance. The more you desperately want to be happy and loved, the lonelier and more afraid you become, regardless of those who surround you. The more you want to be spiritually enlightened, the more self-centered and shallow you become in trying to get there.

It's like this one time I tripped on acid and it felt like the more I walked toward a house, the farther away the house got from me. And yes, I just used my LSD hallucinations to make a philosophical point about happiness. No fucks given.

As the existential philosopher Albert Camus said (and I'm pretty sure he wasn't on LSD at the time): "You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life."

Or put more simply:

Don't try.

Now, I know what you're saying: "Mark, this is making my nipples all hard, but what about the Camaro I've been saving up for? What about the beach body I've been starving myself for? After all, I paid a lot of money for that ab machine! What about the big house on the lake I've been dreaming of? If I stop giving a fuck about those things—well, then I'll never achieve *anything*. I don't want that to happen, do I?"

So glad you asked.

Ever notice that sometimes when you care *less* about something, you do better at it? Notice how it's often the person who is the least invested in the success of something that actually ends up achieving it? Notice how sometimes when you stop giving a fuck, everything seems to fall into place?

What's with that?

What's interesting about the backwards law is that it's called "backwards" for a reason: not giving a fuck works in reverse. If pursuing the positive *is* a negative, then pursuing the negative generates the positive. The pain you pursue in the gym results in better all-around health and energy. The failures in business are what lead to a better understanding of what's necessary to be successful. Being open with your insecurities paradoxically makes you more confident and charismatic around others. The pain of honest confrontation is what generates the greatest trust and respect in your relationships. Suffering through your fears and anxieties is what allows you to build courage and perseverance.

Seriously, I could keep going, but you get the point. *Everything worthwhile in life is won through surmounting the associated negative experience*. Any attempt to escape the negative, to avoid it or quash it or silence it, only backfires. The avoidance of suffering *is* a form of suffering. The avoidance of struggle *is* a struggle. The denial of failure *is* a failure. Hiding what is shameful *is* itself a form of shame.

Pain is an inextricable thread in the fabric of life, and to tear it out is not only impossible, but destructive: attempting to tear it out unravels everything else with it. To try to avoid pain is to give too many fucks about pain. In contrast, if you're able to not give a fuck about the pain, you become unstoppable.

In my life, I have given a fuck about many things. I have also *not* given a fuck about many things. And like the road not taken, it was the fucks not

given that made all the difference.

Chances are you know somebody in your life who, at one time or another, did not give a fuck and then went on to accomplish amazing feats. Perhaps there was a time in your own life when you simply did not give a fuck and excelled to some extraordinary height. For myself, quitting my day job in finance after only six weeks to start an Internet business ranks pretty high up there in my own “didn’t give a fuck” hall of fame. Same with deciding to sell most of my possessions and move to South America. Fucks given? None. Just went and did it.

These moments of non-fuckery are the moments that most define our lives. The major switch in careers; the spontaneous choice to drop out of college and join a rock band; the decision to finally dump that deadbeat boyfriend whom you caught wearing your pantyhose a few too many times.

To not give a fuck is to stare down life’s most terrifying and difficult challenges and still take action.

While not giving a fuck may seem simple on the surface, it’s a whole new bag of burritos under the hood. I don’t even know what that sentence means, but I don’t give a fuck. A bag of burritos sounds awesome, so let’s just go with it.

Most of us struggle throughout our lives by giving too many fucks in situations where fucks do not deserve to be given. We give too many fucks about the rude gas station attendant who gave us our change in nickels. We give too many fucks when a show we liked was canceled on TV. We give too many fucks when our coworkers don’t bother asking us about our awesome weekend.

Meanwhile, our credit cards are maxed out, our dog hates us, and Junior is snorting meth in the bathroom, yet we’re getting pissed off about nickels and *Everybody Loves Raymond*.

Look, this is how it works. You’re going to die one day. I know that’s kind of obvious, but I just wanted to remind you in case you’d forgotten. You and everyone you know are going to be dead soon. And in the short amount of time between here and there, you have a limited amount of fucks to give. Very few, in fact. And if you go around giving a fuck about everything and everyone without conscious thought or choice—well, then you’re going to get fucked.

There is a subtle art to not giving a fuck. And though the concept may sound ridiculous and I may sound like an asshole, what I’m talking about

here is essentially learning how to focus and prioritize your thoughts effectively—how to pick and choose what matters to you and what does not matter to you based on finely honed personal values. This is incredibly difficult. It takes a lifetime of practice and discipline to achieve. And you will regularly fail. But it is perhaps the most worthy struggle one can undertake in one’s life. It is perhaps the *only* struggle in one’s life.

Because when you give too many fucks—when you give a fuck about everyone and everything—you will feel that you’re perpetually entitled to be comfortable and happy at all times, that everything is supposed to be just exactly the fucking way *you* want it to be. This is a sickness. And it will eat you alive. You will see every adversity as an injustice, every challenge as a failure, every inconvenience as a personal slight, every disagreement as a betrayal. You will be confined to your own petty, skull-sized hell, burning with entitlement and bluster, running circles around your very own personal Feedback Loop from Hell, in constant motion yet arriving nowhere.

The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck

When most people envision giving no fucks whatsoever, they imagine a kind of serene indifference to everything, a calm that weathers all storms. They imagine and aspire to be a person who is shaken by nothing and caves in to no one.

There’s a name for a person who finds no emotion or meaning in anything: a psychopath. Why you would want to emulate a psychopath, I have no fucking clue.

So what *does* not giving a fuck mean? Let’s look at three “subtleties” that should help clarify the matter.

Subtlety #1: Not giving a fuck does not mean being indifferent; it means being comfortable with being different.

Let’s be clear. There’s absolutely nothing admirable or confident about indifference. People who are indifferent are lame and scared. They’re couch potatoes and Internet trolls. In fact, indifferent people often attempt to be indifferent because in reality they give way too many fucks. They give a fuck about what everyone thinks of their hair, so they never bother washing or combing it. They give a fuck about what everyone thinks of their ideas, so they hide behind sarcasm and self-righteous snark. They’re afraid to let anyone get close to them, so they imagine themselves as some