

EFFORTLESS: MAKE IT EASIER TO DO WHAT MATTERS MOST

by Greg McKeown

INSIGHTS BY:

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ABOUT:

This is a comprehensive summary of the book *Effortless: Make It Easier to Do What Matters Most* by Greg McKeown. Covering the key ideas and proposing practical ways for achieving what's mentioned in the text. Written by book fanatic and online librarian Ivaylo Durmonski. (Printable available only for supporting members.)

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Establish a new way of thinking about important tasks – i.e., they shouldn't be so hard to do.
- Stop struggling by constantly pushing uphill. Find a way to push your business, goals, etc., downhill.
- Throwing more effort at problems doesn't guarantee success. The only thing that guarantees is exhaustion.

ABSTRACT:

An extraordinarily ordinary book by the best-seller of Essentialism, Greg McKeown. Plainly, in this read, he talks about how the right things shouldn't take Herculean efforts to complete. Mr. McKeown tries to convince us, by sharing widely popular stories of successful people you've already probably heard (especially if you're a fan of self-help books), that important tasks can be easy to do. The not-everything-has-to-be-so-hard mantra is presented in a 3-step process called The Effortless Way. And while I can label most of the text as common sense, there are few gems hiding beneath the dusty veneer of mediocrity.

THE CORE IDEA:

Apparently, the author wasn't living to what he suggested in his previous book and that's why he wrote another one – this one. As he states: “Essentialism was about doing the right things; Effortless is about doing them in the right way.” Not everything that is important should be hard. That's the main message. Thus, the text is helping us divorce the concept that important things should be hard and find an easier, simpler path to achieve our goals and live the life we want. The idea might sound laughable at first – “Important tasks are always hard,” we say to ourselves. But when you think about it, you can sense why it's precious to stop and consider how you can reduce your efforts.

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KEY LESSONS FROM EFFORTLESS:

- LESSON #1: THINK HOW YOU CAN MAKE THE ESSENTIAL PROJECTS EASIER TO DO
- LESSON #2: CONSTANTLY ASK YOURSELF: WHAT IF THIS PROJECT COULD BE EASIER?
- LESSON #3: MORE EFFORT DOESN'T PRODUCE BETTER PERFORMANCE
- LESSON #4: FIND LEVERS. BUILD SYSTEMS. AIM FOR RESIDUAL RESULTS
- LESSON #5: CHOOSING THE LIGHTER PATH CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE

LESSON #1:

THINK HOW YOU CAN MAKE THE ESSENTIAL PROJECTS EASIER TO DO

Stop powering through. Avoid burnout. Make what matters easier to do. That's the grand goal. What the author is trying to communicate with the book.

But transforming the most important things in our life to become easy-peasy tasks seems, I don't know, too good to be true. Doesn't it?

It does. Mainly because the current mindset of a regular worker is that success requires struggle. That all important decisions should be hard to make. That everything that matters should require a lengthy process, a lot of meetings, money, and time away from your family.

When there is a problem, we usually start working longer and harder. This is the default option.

“To hell with that way of living,” says Greg McKeown.

Instead of adding more load on your plate and making everything seem impossible to finish, he recommends the Effortless Way. Yes, it immediately brings the motto of the Mandalorian religion to mind (This is the way!) but it’s not at all related to bounty hunting or roaming the galaxy.

And while I am yet to implement the Effortless Way with all its glorious strategies in my life, one thing is certain when I heard the author talk about making hard things easier: The mere fact of thinking about making hard things easy is helpful – it changes your perspective.

The Effortless Way gives you the opportunity to think, actively, about alternative solutions.

Life is already hard. We have family, friends, other people who we need to meet and remember their names – or strategically avoid. Bills to pay. A job. And probably a side hustle we’re hoping to turn into a commercial success.

So, instead of settling for an impossible life that involves constant struggle that will probably lead you to exhaustion and breakdown. We can ditch the burnout badge of honor and think about how we can make our life lighter.

That’s pretty much how the book starts. Greg McKeown shares a story of how he, the Father of Essentialism, collapsed mentally and physically because there were so many important things

on his plate that were suffocating him. But instead of removing important things from his to-do list. He decided to make them easier to do.

It's not only him, but generally speaking, we are on the verge of becoming a chronically exhausted society. Always on. Always hustling. Consuming information like the world is about to end.

Fortunately, there is a way out. Greg McKeown tells us that there is a better, simpler path. It's about making the most essential activities easier.

How exactly?

By focusing on these 3 components (this is actually how the book is structured): Effortless State; Effortless Action; Effortless Results.

Plus, on a most basic level, change the way you think about important things. Shift from saying things like: "Anything worthy should take tremendous effort"; To saying things like: "Important things can be easier to achieve."

"What could happen in your life if the easy but pointless things became harder and the essential things became easier? If the essential projects you've been putting off became enjoyable, while the pointless distractions lost their appeal completely? Such a shift would stack the deck in our favor. It would change everything. It does change everything." Greg McKeown

LESSON #2:

CONSTANTLY ASK YOURSELF: WHAT IF THIS PROJECT COULD BE EASIER?

“If you keep it simple, less can go wrong,” said Elena Delle Donne. The best free-throw shooter. Yes, surprisingly, it’s not Michael Jordan or one of the other famous basketball players.

Donne’s secret when performing her free throws to achieve a success rate of 93.4 percent is incredibly simple. Basically, she follows a process she practiced since eighth grade and actively blocks distracting thoughts from getting inside her head.

The author describes this as the Effortless State – the first stage in reaching the Effortless way. You clear your mind and focus on doing only one thing at a time without overthinking it.

Personally, I think that McKeown simply borrowed the concept of the famous flow state and adjusted it to fit his concept, but let’s not hate him for this usage of a popular term without any reference in the book, shall we?

Moving on...

So what's the Effortless State exactly?

The author describes it as clearing the browser cache on your computer. I know, strange. But it kind of makes sense.

Think about it for a moment. If you're searching something online and if you have 40+ tabs open and can't figure out from where the music is coming from, do you actually comprehend the information from all the tabs or you're simply suffocating your mind? It's surely the latter.

Both your brain and computer slow down.

Instead of adding more tabs open – both inside your head and on your computer – we should change our perspective.

Or invert it as the author states. In his words, "To invert means to turn an assumption or approach upside down, to work backward, to ask, "What if the opposite were true?"

We assume that huge efforts are needed to solve a problem. Any problem. But if this is true, it will basically mean that we'll never rest. We'll have to work 100 hours a week if we want to reach the glorious goal we created for ourselves.

Effortless Inversion – another popular term tailored to fit the goal of the author – is giving us an alternative view. We think

about ways to put less effort into what we're trying to do. We ask ourselves, "What if this could be easy?". Then, we go ahead and think about, "How I can make this task easier?"

In other words, not everything you think is necessary to do is actually necessary. We often convince ourselves that we should do certain things because 1) of outside pressure; 2) this is how we've always done things in the past.

But adding more will always lead to more work. A lot of times, more is not what people want. Especially today. We can do less and increase the quality. Hence, reduce our efforts while keep doing a good job.

"Marketing author Seth Godin once shared the following: "If you can think about how hard it is to push a business uphill, particularly when you're just getting started, one answer is to say: 'Why don't you just start a different business you can push downhill?'" Greg McKeown

LESSON #3:

MORE EFFORT DOESN'T PRODUCE BETTER PERFORMANCE

Forget about working long hours. There is something else you need if you want to increase your rate of output. You want Effortless Action (stage two of the Effortless Way).

We falsely believe that the amount of time we put into a specific task, or the more we hustle, the more we'll increase our level of production.

Sometimes this strategy works, but not always.

For example, you can read for two hours and go through 30 pages. However, this doesn't mean that if you read for 4 hours you'll complete 60 pages. It's not proportional. You get tired. Distracted. The evil voice in your head starts to heavily promote doing something else that's less intensive – i.e., check social media.

Simply put, we're not machines that can do stuff with a push of a button. We are complex organisms dominated by our feelings. And to get more done, we need to reach a state where the tasks we do feels effortless. Easy. Even fun.

As the author shares in the book: "Haven't you found that when you do your very best work, the experience feels effortless? You act almost without thinking. You make things happen without even trying to make things happen. You are in the zone, in flow, in peak performance."

But how to avoid your mind from freezing when you approach tasks? And, most importantly, how to eliminate the overachiever in you who is constantly pushing you to do more – more calls, more emails, more analysis that leads to paralysis?

Simple. Define how done looks like.

See, I often do it myself. I say, I'll write an article about topic X but I sometimes fail to create a structure that can help me along the way. And when I do this – when I don't define the end results – I struggle. I approach the task sporadically, instead of strategically. And strategy, is what we want if we want to get the job done faster.

OK, but how to do it?

Clearly define how the end will look like. State the goal of your project. Why it's important. How do you imagine the finished product. And lastly, add a "definition of done."

The last part gives you an easy checklist that allows you to see if you're moving in the right direction.

When you know how “done” looks like, you're no longer spinning your wheels. You know exactly what to do. You get clarity.

For instance, instead of *just* writing an article. I take some time to create a structure for the article and state what my final big message in the article should state. The definition of done looks something like this: “Did I covered all subtopics? Is the main message clearly expressed?”

And if this is not enough – which is commonly the case. I consider making a “done for the day” list.

That's the antidote to burnout. Don't simply state, “Today I will walk” or “today I will write”. To prevent being defeated by our ever-growing pile of tasks, re-define the end goal by adding volumes. Like this: “Today I will walk 6,000 steps.”; “Today I will write 1,000 words.” And when you reach these numbers, stop. You've done your task for the day. Now you deserve a rest.

“Getting clear on what “done” looks like doesn't just help you finish; it also helps you get started. All too often, we procrastinate or struggle to take the first steps on a project because we don't have a clear finish line in mind. As soon as you define what “done” looks like, you give your conscious and unconscious mind a clear instruction.” Greg McKeown

LESSON #4:

FIND LEVERS. BUILD SYSTEMS. AIM FOR RESIDUAL RESULTS

Rampaging to achieve something big once will get you results, once.

Even if you don't work out, you can probably lift an equivalent of your weight on the bench. Thus, probably impress the people in the gym.

But where does this gets you?

Probably in a medical facility. Doctors trying to salvage your spine.

Regardless of the work you do, you don't want one-time results. For example, going to the gym once in your life.

You want residual results. Such as, deciding that you'll be the type of person who exercises every day.

If you wake up and ask yourself, “Should I go to the gym today?” You bound yourself to failure. There are a lot of reasons not to go to the gym. Surely you’ll find one.

Conversely, if you convince your mind that you’ll train daily, without exceptions. You will ask yourself something completely different. You will state, “Should I train now or can I do it a bit later?”

Not exercising is out of the picture. You know you have to do it. It’s not a matter of “should I do it?”, it’s a matter of “when should I do it?”

You probably know where we are getting here. Yes, the author talks about the good old-fashioned compound interest concept.

As Benjamin Franklin famously said, “Money makes money. And the money that money makes, makes money.”

That’s the main idea of the third, and final part of the Effortless Way – Effortless Results.

And to make the result effortless, we basically need to create a system. Look for ways to improve our current flows and take advantage of the available levers.

You know, the type of levers Archimedes mentioned when he said, “Give me a place to stand and with a lever I will move the whole world.”

Automating. Preventing. Improving. This is how you make the results feel effortless.

Here are a few examples directly from the book:

“Lever: Trusting

If you hire the right person once, they’ll produce results hundreds of times.

Lever: Preventing

Solving a problem before it happens can save you endless time and aggravation later on.

Lever: Automating

Automate something once, and then forget about it as it continues to work perpetually.” Greg McKeown

We use levers all the time without realizing it.

We purchase tools that help us automate tasks. We set automatic payments instead of paying bills manually. We read books that improve our intelligence and thus help us make our decision-making faster and more precise in future situations.

Once you’re more mindful about the leverage concept. You will start to see levers everywhere. Hence, better utilize them.

The grand goal is to create systems that are not useful just once. But such that helps you get results over a long period of time.

“When you understand why something happened or how something works, you can apply that knowledge again and again. For example: A student who learns the fundamental principles of any discipline can then easily apply that understanding in a variety of ways over time. An entrepreneur who learns what their customers really want can apply that knowledge to any number of different products and services.”

Greg McKeown

LESSON #5:

CHOOSING THE LIGHTER PATH CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE

Eve, the author's daughter, transitioned from a cheerful, energetic, always happy and laughing kid to a spurt, tired and slow.

After asking numerous doctors for their opinion, spending all-nighters reading medical journals and making tests, her condition still wasn't clear. Apparently, no one was able to prescribe a treatment.

Months went by. Sadly, Eve wasn't getting better. Even when Greg McKeown and his wife were doing the impossible to help her daughter, the situation was still unclear.

This, obviously, was not only hard for Eve and for her parents. But also for their other kids. Worry. Tiredness. Exhaustion. Uncertainty. All of these things were hanging like a stormy cloud over their household – blocking any sign of hope.

A decision had to be made, and McKeown's family decided to take the lighter path.

Instead of sacrificing their mental health by worrying all the time and camping outside the hospital, they decided to spend more time together. To do what they usually do: Laugh together. Play together. Read books together. Spend time as a family.

The medical examination didn't stop. Nor the worry disappeared from the minds of the parents. But they created an environment where their kids felt better – stress-free.

Greg McKeown reports that Eve started to get better. And that she continues to get better.

That's the last chapter of the book. It ends with a prompt to consider the options. To realize that you always have a say about how to respond to a situation.

Pressing hard. Throwing everything you have at a problem doesn't mean that you'll solve it. It often means that you'll crush your spirit and probably disconnect from others.

Conversely, choosing the lighter path can literally save your life.

Note that light doesn't mean easy. It still means doing the essential things. But doing them without the extra complication we often self-create.

Personally, I found this private story extremely moving. And incredibly important.

We often fail to see that working hard, trying to achieve the impossible, not only affects us. It affects everything around us.

Pause and consider this for a moment: If you reach success but if the price is chronic overwork and long hours away from your loved ones, is this really success? If you answer yes, then you should probably redefine your idea of success.

What's the point of reaching your goal if you're alone at the finish line? Not only that, but alone and drained.

Personally, after reading the book, I adopted this belief: Someone made it, really made it, when he/she is able to make complicated things easier. And more importantly, when we find the right balance for our essential tasks, not make them consume our whole life.

“Whatever has happened to you in life. Whatever hardship. Whatever pain.... They pale in comparison to the power you have to choose what to do now. In each moment, we have a choice: Do I choose the heavier or the lighter path?” Greg McKeown

ACTIONABLE NOTES:

- **Push downhill:** If you create a business or hold the belief that only massive effort can bring results, you'll surely reach a state of weariness – and probably even depression. Instead, we can think about “what we can push downhill?” Or in other words, how can we make things easier to do that will bring us greater results in the future? Surely this sounds unrealistic. But it does make sense to think about it. If everything you do is super complex, you'll add a lot of friction and continuously push the bolder uphill. When you invert the problem and find the simplest way to achieve the desired results, remove all the unnecessary steps, you will start to push downhill. You gain momentum and harness the power of gravity. So, instead of adding more complexity to a task, think about how to remove steps and make things simpler, easier.
- **Done of the day list:** Before, I was trying to inject writing and reading into my life in different moments of my day – the end result was horrible. Busy mind. Mediocre work. Frustration. Angry wife. Then, I decided to add structure. Now, I get up early in the morning to exercise for 15 minutes and write for 2 hours. Then, at around noon, I read between 20 and 40 pages. That's my “done of the day” list. I didn't adopt the concept from this book – I found it after years of trial and error – but the author hands us this simple strategy that can save our lives from busy unproductive work. Once you create this list, instead of trying to do everything in one day and fail and then get mad. You focus on making progress. Now, after writing for 2 hours (replace with whatever is essential for you), I know that I'm done. That I can

relax.

- **Figure out the universal principles:** We all know that if we put fuel in our car it will run. But when we figure out how exactly the fuel is used by the mechanics of the car, only then we'll understand how exactly the car runs. Sadly, we often skip a step. We read a success story of a person where he mentions something about achieving phenomenon results, but that's usually just a surface explanation. To understand the real reason people succeed or fail, we need to understand the fundamental principles. For instance, we're used to hearing that reading books is super helpful. But why? There are a couple of core reasons: We learn what others have already figured out; We grow our knowledge; We become more patient and focused... etc. So, when facing a task, a problem, or you simply want to make something work, spend more time thinking to uncover the core principles – what makes something function. Then, build your knowledge from there.
- **Make one decision to remove thousands:** Flying a plane is hard. It requires a lot of training and concentration. And, as you've surely noticed from the movies on TV, a lot of buttons to press. How do pilots know what exact button to press and in what order? They have a secret. Something extremely simple, yet very effective. They have a checklist. An easy guide to follow to be sure that they've checked everything before taking off. This one decision eliminates 100 decisions for the pilot. Instead of trying to remember all the combinations. They eliminate this burden with a simple to-do style list. But the idea goes beyond simply the checklist. If you decide to wear only black clothes, for example. This simple decision removes all the rest. You now have more mental power for other things.

- **Dare to try:** All good design starts with bad design. And you don't have to be a designer to take advantage of this concept. Think for a moment. Usually, people don't start businesses or don't think about changing careers because they aim to be perfect. From the get-go, we aim for flawless work. But how can you expect perfect work if you're just getting started? In the book, the author shares that the company Pfizer has a program called "Dare to Try". Plainly, this is to encourage people to try different things without judgment. Try it yourself. No matter how bad your idea might sound, criticism should be avoided. Embrace your rubbish ideas. Go even further. Create a budget for trying different concepts. Embracing your mistakes will make you better. It will help you progress faster.

COMMENTARY

How to move from "this is extremely difficult and hard" to "this is easy and enjoyable"?

After writing a best-seller focusing on the essential things in life, Greg McKeown asked himself this question, too. Apparently, simply listing the important things in life and focusing on them doesn't work. You also need to figure out how to make these essential activities effortless. Yet, I don't fully agree with everything suggested.

This is how I feel about Effortless...

McKeown's first book, *Essentialism*, was like finding a hidden

treasure in an impossible-to-navigate dungeon full of obstacles and life-changing moments. Effortless, is like returning home and trying to write a story about your life after the journey, but the story kind of sucks.

Theoretically, the structure of the book makes sense. Greg McKeown shares his concept about the Effortless Way and how you can reach this blissful state of mind where hard tasks are easy.

There are actionable tips. Stories that can help the reader get the idea. And even highlights from the authors' life.

Still, it's all kind of blunt. Repetitive. And unoriginal. Besides, a lot of time we *do* need to hustle, sprint, go crazy about the things we need to do if we want improvements.

The book Effortless boils down to making things simpler.

Our lives are already too hard. Too chaotic. We should do all possible to avoid making them harder.

Key Takeaway:

Don't strive for adding more things to do. Think about how you can do the things you're already doing easier. Effortless. That's the key to a happy life.

NOTABLE QUOTES:

“When you focus on what you lack, you lose what you have. When you focus on what you have, you get what you lack.” Greg McKeown

“There is no mastery without mistakes. And there is no learning later without the courage to be rubbish.” Greg McKeown

“Perfectionism makes essential projects hard to start, self-doubt makes them hard to finish, and trying to do too much, too fast, makes it hard to sustain momentum.” Greg McKeown

WORKSHEET

Reading alone won't help you understand the actionable notes. You need to engage with the content. Answer the question below to plan your next steps:

1/ What in your life is hard? Think about how you can make it easier?

2/ Create a “done of the day” list and track your progress:

3/ List the basic principles, rules, laws of your work. How you can master them?

4/ What one decision can help you eliminate thousands of other decisions?

5/ Dare to try new things. List activities you are too afraid to do but dream of doing:

THANKS FOR READING!

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