

Creating Impeccable Structure for Your Life

There's a strange contradiction in most of our lives:

We deeply feel the messiness of our lives. We feel it in all areas of our lives, which stresses us out and causes us to shut down, feel overwhelmed, run to distraction and comforts. It creates tremendous uncertainty for us.

But ...

We resist sticking to structure and routine. We want to have a great order to our lives, but when it comes to actually following it, we struggle. It feels too rigid, too constricting. So we immediately toss the plan aside and start free-forming it, answering messages and going to distractions and reading or watching things online. This creates even more uncertainty, not being able to stick to structure.

This contradiction might not be universal, but it's present for a lot of people. I would guess that a majority of people reading this feel a struggle between these two things.

Now, I don't think you can get control and order over everything in your life — life is inherently messy and uncertain, and all attempts to make it ordered and certain are fundamentally futile. **It's often more helpful to practice mindfully with the uncertainty rather than try to control it.**

That said, this is not an all-or-nothing choice. We can create structure *and* practice with uncertainty. We can even create structure for our uncertainty practice. And we can learn to be unattached to the structure, so that if we have to do a day or week without it, we can be perfectly OK.

Two Reasons to Create Structure

There are two major (interrelated) effects that we feel from this struggle with structure and messiness:

1. **The messiness of our lives causes us to be messy.** When we have a huge mess around us, it's hard to be impeccable. It's hard to be focused. It's hard to really put our best effort into our meaningful work. We are greatly affected by everything around us, and by any kind of messiness in our lives. That doesn't mean we should strive for perfection, but instead that we should recognize the effects of this messiness on us.
2. **Lack of structure creates a lack of trustability.** When our lives are completely unstructured and messy, it's hard for others to trust us. If you were to go into business with someone whose office and life were a huge mess, vs. someone whose office and

life seemed to be in impeccable order ... all other things being equal, who would you choose? This messiness is felt by our spouses or partners, felt by friends and other loved ones, felt by our colleagues and bosses, felt by our clients, even if they can't completely see it. And *we feel it ourselves*, and it erodes our trust in ourselves.

None of this is reason to freak out or beat yourself up. It's just bringing awareness to the effects of lack of structure. And maybe resolving to create more impeccable structure with time.

Creating Impeccable Structure

Once we've resolved to create structure in our lives, it's important to recognize that this is a process, not a destination. You never do it and then are done with it — it's an ongoing process.

What does that process look like? Here's what I do:

1. **Recognize when a part of my life is messy and could use more structure.** I list some of those areas below, but the important thing is to notice the feeling of messiness in an area, and resolve to try to create better structure.
2. **Contemplate a structure that would give you a feeling of trust.** For example, if you are not staying on top of your emails, you could create a structure as simple as, "Check email at 10am, 1pm and 5pm only, and process each email out of the inbox to empty, or as close to empty as possible in 20 minutes." If this would make you feel a sense of trust that emails would be taken care of, it's a good structure. You may need to test it out (see below). Take a little time, disconnected and in solitude, to contemplate this structure.
3. **Write out the structure, then put it somewhere you'll see it.** Once you've give it some contemplation, actually write it down — either on paper or in a text document. Make sure it's somewhere you'll see it when you need it. If you write it down and then forget it, it's of no use.
4. **Put it into action, as a practice.** This is the key step — actually test out the structure by using it. See if it works. See if it makes you feel a sense of trust. See where the flaws are, and adjust as needed. Do this structure not as a chore, but as a practice, seeing if you can relax into it, surrender to it.
5. **Revisit and revise on a regular basis.** Even if the structure is good, you're not done. It's like a machine, humming along — eventually it will break. It needs maintenance. You need to adjust as your life changes and you change. You'll need to make it more impeccable when your life demands it. Every month or two, revisit and revise. At the very least, revisit every 6 months (set reminders in your calendar).

I'm constantly revisiting my structures, and revising them, especially when I feel it's

needed.

Examples of Structure

Some areas of your life that might be messy and in need of structure:

- **Daily structure.** How do you want to structure your day? It doesn't have to be super planned out and rigid, but you might have something simple ... for example: a simple morning routine, then a block for important tasks in the morning, email, important tasks, admin tasks, email, work closing routine, exercise, meditation, evening routine. For others, a more detailed structure might be important. For others, an even looser structure might be better. Or one that is different on different days.
- **Financial structure.** How do you stay on top of your finances? Create a system so that you are tracking your spending on a regular basis, and have a plan for how to spend it.
- **Communication.** How are you handling email and messages? You might carve out time in your regular schedule so that you're on top of email and messages, without being overwhelmed by it or doing it all day long.
- **Relationship(s).** How are you working on your relationship? Do you have regular dates or time you spend each day together? Do you have counseling or getaways to focus on you as a couple? Maybe you're not in a relationship — how do you stay in touch with your closest friends and family? How do you make sure you stay close to them, or go even deeper?
- **Health.** How will you stay active? What will you eat to give yourself a thriving healthy life? How will you stay on top of both of these areas?
- **Household & personal maintenance.** How does the laundry get done? Groceries and menu? Cleaning the house? Taking care of yourself (grooming, etc.)?
- **Physical surroundings.** How messy is your house, your office? Is it cluttered? How does all of this affect your mental state?

These are some important examples, but you might have other areas in your life that feel messy. Wherever you'd like to feel more trust and order, that's a place to contemplate & write out some structure.

Practicing with Uncertainty Within and Without the Structure

Once we've created the structure, there are two ways to practice with it:

1. **Working with the uncertainty & resistance of having structure.** If you feel yourself rebelling against having structure, you can practice with the uncertainty of that.
2. **Working with the uncertainty when we're not in the structure.** You won't always be able to stay within your structure — some days will go sideways, other things will

come up. In those times, you can practice with the uncertainty of not being in your structure.

Let's first talk about working with resistance to having structure.

Resistance to having structure: When you set up a structure for yourself, it might sound nice ... but then when it comes time to actually doing it, you might feel constricted. You might feel uncertainty about whether you can do it or if it's the right structure. Or if you should be doing something else instead. This is uncertainty & resistance of having the structure itself.

This is actually perfect! The structure, instead of eliminating uncertainty from your life, gives you a space to practice with the uncertainty. Instead of letting yourself flop all over the place (without structure), you're asking yourself to courageously confront your discomfort and uncertainty.

The practice is to stay in the discomfort of having structure, and play with it. Feel the resistance, but don't run. Let yourself open up to the feeling, be immersed in it, be mindful of it in your body. And find a way to appreciate this space, be curious about it, grateful and even joyful in the middle of it. Then play with whatever you have set for yourself to do! Instead of running from the structure, relax into it. It's an amazing practice.

Uncertainty when we're not in the structure: If you are used to having structure, what happens when you can't use it? For example, maybe visitors come over and you can't do your regular routine? Or you travel, have a crisis at work, have a crisis at home, or have social functions to go to that disrupt your regular schedule and structure?

This is also perfect! It's an opportunity to practice letting go of the need for structure, and be present in the moment, deciding what's needed next.

For example, you might be traveling, and your structure is out the window ... but you wake up and decide you still want to meditate, so you meditate for a few minutes in your hotel room. Then you decide you need to do a little work, and you do that before you head out for the day. You find a window at lunch time to catch up on messages. Before you go to bed, you find a window to do some writing. You are flowing, but not just letting everything go, you're finding focus and purpose in the middle of chaos.

The same could apply if you are in a crisis, have visitors, etc.

This doesn't mean it's better to have no structure — for most people, a default structure is going to be helpful, but it's not helpful to only be able to work and function when you have structure.

Adjusting & Learning with Structure

All of the above is great, but setting up structure once isn't a "set it and forget it" type of deal. You are going to work with this structure on an ongoing basis.

You will learn as you work with the structure whether it works for you, whether you have needs that aren't met by the structure, whether you forgot to include things.

For example:

- A client created a schedule for himself but then discovered that he was very tired, because his structure didn't include enough time for rest. So he could adjust it so that he has a sign-off time to ensure he gets enough sleep. Or he could build an afternoon nap period into the structure.
- Another client discovered that she was overloaded with too much on her task list. So she learned that it's better to pare down her expectations of how much she can get done.
- I personally have found that the landscape of my day is constantly changing, not always very consistent. So I have a structure for when I have a wide-open day with only one or two meetings, but otherwise I create a structure at the beginning of the day depending on what I have going on that day ... or I figure things out on the fly if my day is shifting during the day.
- You might find that you need to move something to the morning to give it more focus. Or move exercise to the afternoon to conserve energy. Or have a different structure for different days.

The point is, you learn and adjust. It's an ongoing refinement. You can make it better and better, and more and more impeccable, with some care and attention.

Structure is worth the effort, because you can learn to relax into the structure. The people around you can trust you more, and relax into your structure as well. And the structure becomes a way to practice with the uncertainty, resistance and discomfort that inevitably arises in your life.