

Stop Looking For Something That Works

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Sometimes things will work really well for other people, but they won't work so well for you. Sometimes things won't work out for other people, but they'll work really well for you.

Professional advertisers have a phrase for this: "Individual results may vary."

This simple fact of human experience isn't limited to services and products sold in the marketplace. It's also true in the realm of ideas, relationships, family life, physical fitness, non-profit activities, and everything else under the sun.

Every single thing that you will ever glean value from will also be the very thing that breaks someone else's heart. And every single thing that ever annoys you, angers you, or makes you sad, will also be the very thing that fills someone else's life with joy.

Whenever I hear people say "Individual results may vary", I think to myself "Wrong! Individual results MUST vary!"

When investigating a project, person, or program, we often make the mistake of looking for some kind of universal validation to make us feel like everything is going to be okay.

Will I be okay if I get involved with this project? Will I be okay if I date/marry that person? Will I be okay if I enroll in this program?

What sort of data could possibly give you that information? How in the world are you ever going to get the security of knowing you'll be okay from discovering some fact like "Celebrity X endorses it" or "Professor Y gives it two thumbs up" or "Senator Z says it's the right thing to do"?

Now let me be really clear here for all the readers who might fear that I'm belittling the process of critical thinking. I'm not saying you should dismiss the validity of background research or skeptical inquiry altogether. It's important for you to have some assurance that you're not marrying an axe-murderer posing as a stockbroker. There are situations in life that would clearly put us in danger if we turn our brains off and merely think in terms of cheesy platitudes like "follow your heart." But there's a big difference between doing background checks to ensure you're not unknowingly engaging in something that's criminal or dangerous and looking for someone to give you a guarantee that you're following a path that won't possibly fail you.

Everything can fail you. Everything. The church you choose to attend might let you down.

The university you choose to attend might disappoint you. The degree you work so hard to get might fail you in the marketplace. That conference you choose to attend might be nothing like you were hoping. That boy or girl who sweeps you off your feet might turn out to be completely incompatible with you.

As I wrote in a blog post four years ago,

If you're looking for a fool-proof approach to personal development, there isn't one. Every good piece of advice that has ever been given is fully capable of making your life worse if you aren't careful, conscious, and creative in your personal application of it.

Good self-help always begins with the self. Each person is, in the end, responsible for dealing with the variables of his own life. There is no system or teacher that can save any of us from this responsibility. The most beautiful bit of wisdom is immediately transformed into an ugly tool of destruction as soon as it is placed in the hands of someone who surrenders this responsibility to another.

How do we make decisions then? How do we figure out what the right option is? How do we separate the legit stuff from the stuff that's B.S.?

It's actually quite easy to separate the fluff from the valuable stuff when evaluating ideas and opportunities.

"Valuable Stuff" = A system, approach, or relationship that actually works for you.

"Fluff" = A system, approach, or relationship that doesn't actually work for you.

Separating the good from the bad is only hard when you're approaching the process philosophically, but relatively simple when approaching it pragmatically. If the goal is to establish some objective truth about what everyone should believe, then that's a difficult task. If the goal, however, is simply to conduct experiments for the sake of seeing what works for you, then things are far more cut and dry.

The hard part is getting to a point where you can accept what works and doesn't work for you without being too attached to any opinions about what should and shouldn't work for others.

When making decisions about your life, discovering objective facts about people, places, and projects is overrated. It matters, but not nearly as much as we assume.

Sometimes people will have good advice and good intentions, but their advice still won't apply to you. It's not enough to merely find the "right" answers, the "best" ideas, or the most "trustworthy" sources. You still have to calculate your own risks and conduct your own experiments.

Your physical body is different from everyone else's physical body. Your personal history is different from everyone else's personal history. Your style of processing emotions is different from everyone else's style of processing emotions. Your advantages and disadvantages are different from everyone else's advantages and disadvantages. Your past mistakes are different from everyone else's past mistakes. Your combination of heroes, enemies, and friends are different from everyone else's combination of heroes, enemies, and friends.

What this means is that your life is not a syllogism. You can't expect to be guaranteed a certain kind of outcome merely because your premises are correct and your rules of inference are valid. There are all sorts of variables and wildcards that make up your life. And the only way to navigate the maze of subjectivity and complexity known as "your way" is to face the uncertainty with poise and overcome the need to have a formula for everything.

Life is a journey, but that's not the only metaphor. It's also a battle and it's also an art. Some answers will have to be fought for and some answers will have to be created.

What do **you** want? What is **your** tolerance for risk? What are **you** willing to try? What are **you** willing to sacrifice? What are **you** willing to bet on? What keeps **you** awake at night? What does **your** conscience tell you?

Don't outsource your judgments and responsibilities to someone else. Your questions are your questions. Answer them for yourself.

Stop looking for something that works for everyone and start looking for something that works for you.

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