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Life...

The Reader's Digest **VERSION**



Great Advice, Simply Put

Edited by **Peggy Northrop**, Global Editor-in-Chief,
and the staff of READER'S DIGEST magazine

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INTRODUCTION

Life seems to get more overwhelming every day—so much so that change is the new normal. Complexity is expected (along with 24/7 tech support), and everything happens at supersonic speed and comes in a dozen different flavors. No wonder so many people feel lost or just left behind by it all.

That's why the editors at *Reader's Digest* decided to step in and make this vast, sprawling adventure we call life a bit more manageable and lots more enjoyable. We think it's time to regain an element of control—to sit comfortably once again in the driver's seat and decide when to speed up, slow down, turn left, turn right—all while remembering to enjoy the scenery.

At *Reader's Digest* we've been sifting through the wisdom of the world for nearly a century to publish a magazine so robust yet elegantly handy that it fits into a pocket. Now we've applied that same strategy to *Life...The Reader's Digest Version*, the handbook they never distributed in school. It's the heart-to-heart talk you should have had with your mother. It's the commonsense advice you were supposed to gather along the way but didn't know where to look. It's the digested insight of seasoned men and women who've been there and done that and are now willing to share the road signs and directions to a life well lived.

On the pages that follow, you'll find succinct advice on some of the most essential facets of life, organized around ways you can **BE BETTER** and ways you can **DO BETTER**. You will discover clever workarounds, smart solutions to sticky problems, and practical approaches to everyday challenges.

...You will unearth nuggets of life-changing truths that run the gamut from health and wealth to loss and love, and from the sublime to the just plain smart.

When you're done, you'll know how to think big, score great seats, worry less, do more, find a mentor, and get a good night's sleep. You'll be able to mix a perfect martini, talk your way out of a traffic ticket, and say what's on your mind. And all while wearing the perfectly ironed white shirt!

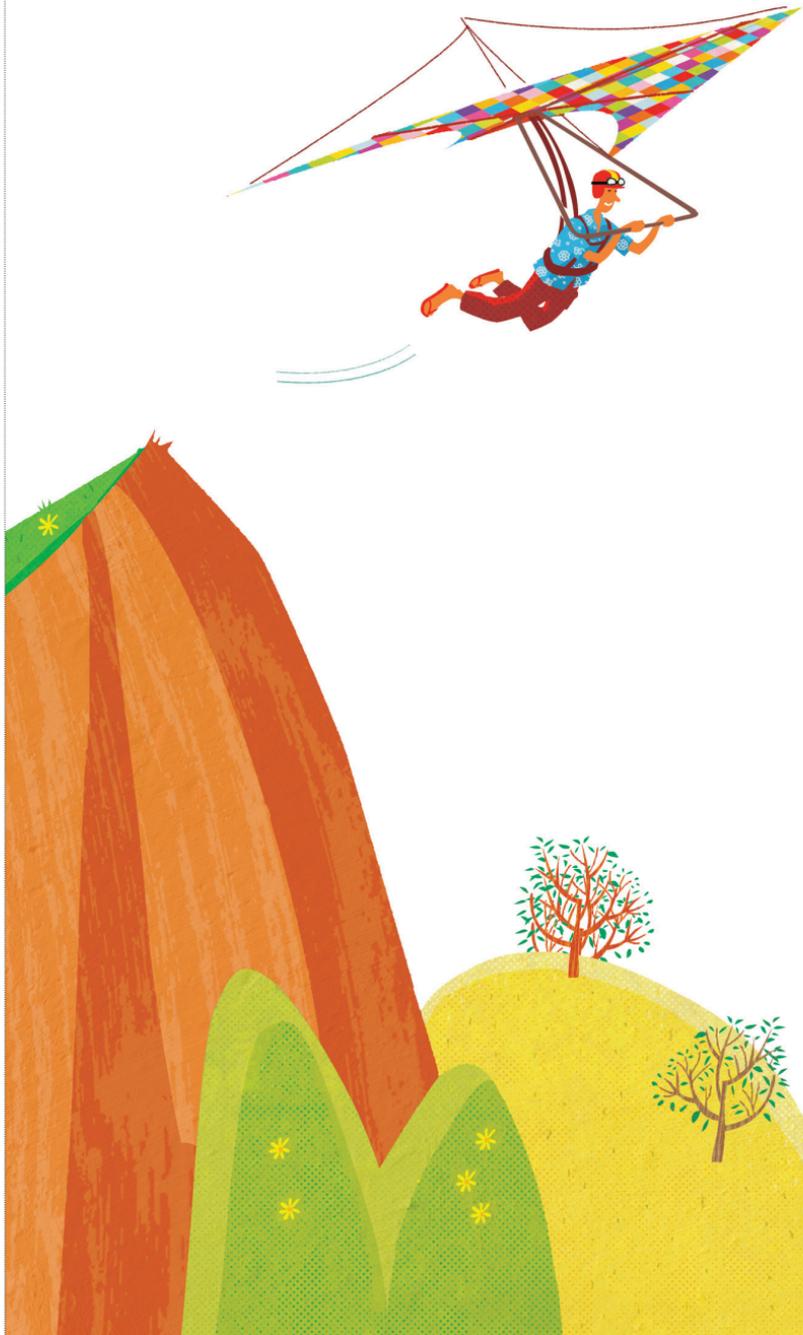
You may want to read this book straight through, or put it on a shelf and use it like a cookbook, reaching for a special recipe whenever the occasion calls for it. Either way, we invite you to scribble notes to yourself and capture memories and wisdom of your own in the margins. (Look for the write-in boxes scattered through the chapters—and think about how much fun it will be for you—and your children—to encounter your own Reader's Digest Version of life in later years.)

We believe that a happy, successful life isn't hard to pull off. All that's needed are clear, practical, well-thought-out instructions and the ability to take a few minutes to pay attention to them. *Life...The Reader's Digest Version* is your GPS. It tells you where you are and lets you know whether to turn, back up, or keep on going straight ahead. It's simple, reliable, and ready for immediate use.

May it make your journey a little easier, brighter, and more fun along the way.

PEGGY NORTHROP
GLOBAL EDITOR-IN-CHIEF





Be better..

Teach someone to fish and you feed her for a lifetime. Teach her how to unearth a long-buried dream to scuba dive among the manta rays and her soul may be sated for just as long. The intangible things we wish we had aren't always skills; they're often qualities, like self-awareness, kindness, gratitude, moxie. How would our lives be different if we had what it takes to **BE BETTER**—think bigger, act nicer, seem smarter, feel calmer? If each day we made ourselves and those around us that much happier to be here? In this section, you'll learn everything from how to find yourself, to how to forgive, to how to leave the planet better than you found it. Scuba mask optional.



Think **big**

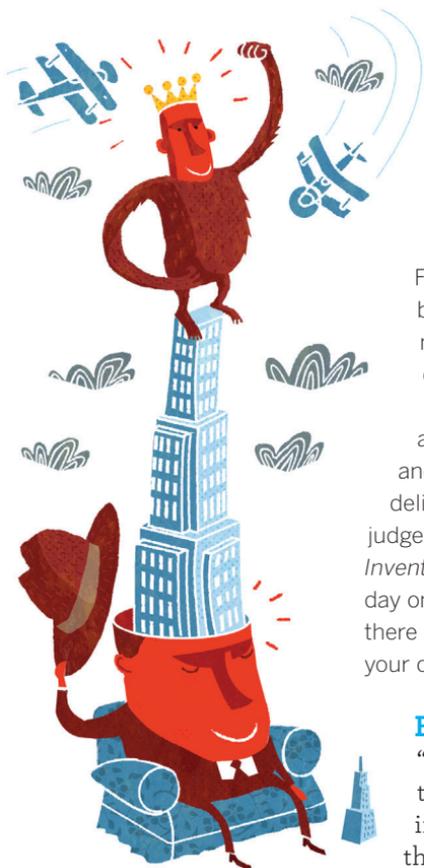
How do you reach a goal, change your life, realize a dream? If you delve into the backstories of successful people, a common theme emerges: They think big. Take former corporate executive Mary Lou Quinlan, who took time off in 1998 to ponder what she really wanted to do. She put up a

folding screen in her home office and tacked index cards on which she'd written her goals at the top of each panel. What was she looking for? She wanted her own business, she wanted to be a paid public speaker, she wanted to write books, and she wanted to be on television.

For the next few months, she brainstormed with friends, clipped news articles, showed up at conferences, and shook hands. In 1999, she launched Just Ask a Woman, a marketing company, and has since written several books, delivered hundreds of lectures, and judged the TV competition *American Inventor*. "I didn't do everything from day one," she says. "But the picture was there 12 years ago." Here's how to turn your own dreams into big-time success.

Be persistent

"People who are successful know themselves, and that means knowing what their talents are, knowing their ambition and their capacity for



work,” says Quinlan. Fear of failure? Big thinkers know nothing about it. Stubbornness? Big thinkers know a lot about that. “You’re going to stumble; you’re going to run out of money; people are going to try to talk you out of what you want to do,” says Quinlan. “And you have to be willing to push through.”

Tell the world

Write down your goals, then say them out loud to yourself and to anyone else who’ll listen. “That makes it harder to back out,” says Quinlan. Making it public also increases the chances that you’ll find other people who can help you make your big idea a big reality.

Prepare to be uncomfortable

High achievers think they can do anything. No matter what task you put in front of them, the response is, “How hard can this be?” They assume they can climb Everest when they’ve never even gone on a hike. “I don’t think I ever thought twice about failing,” says Quinlan. Nevertheless, she adds, “you have to be humble enough to know what kind of help you need, to get where you want to go. When I joined a writers group, I had already run an ad agency, but here I was, sitting around a table with people who had successfully published books. It was like being in first grade again.”

Know when to listen

“When you have a big idea, 99 percent of the people you encounter will tell you why it’s a bad one,” says Victoria R. Brown, founder of bigthink.com, a global ideas forum. Sometimes it *is* a bad idea. The trick, says Quinlan, is to know the difference between those who are jealous of your drive and those who wish you well and truly want to help by pointing out the pitfalls. “Mostly, people are just throwing their own fears on you,” says Quinlan. Immunize yourself against naysayers by doing your homework. See who else has succeeded in your area of interest.

What did they learn along the way? Do you yearn to be an entrepreneur? Before you invest a lot of time or money, make sure that the product or service you have in mind isn't already on the market. Then, once you're sure your big idea is also a great one, roll up your sleeves and get to work.

BIG IDEAS—BIG RETURN These three big thinkers went from a “eureka!” moment to changing the world.

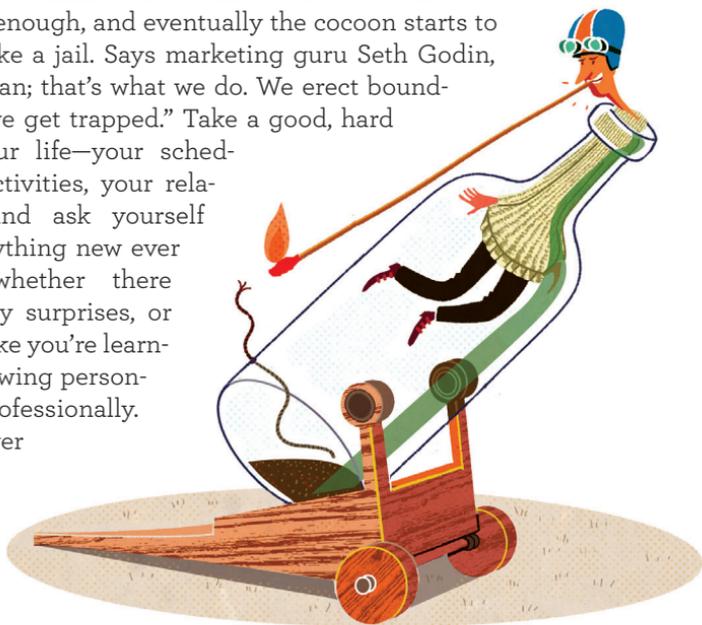
- ▶ **Starting a revolution:** After seeing her friend gunned down by the security forces of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, 26-year-old Asmaa Mahfouz posted a video of herself on Facebook imploring her countrymen to protest against the government. It went viral, and thousands came to Tahrir Square. Mahfouz's vlog was the spark that lit the Egyptian revolution.
- ▶ **Saving the planet:** The artificial trees created by geophysicist Klaus Lackner, which resemble giant fly swatters, absorb carbon from emissions sources such as vehicles and residences. The Institution of Mechanical Engineers estimated that a forest of 100,000 such trees could mop up half the United Kingdom's carbon emissions, making the forest thousands of times more effective than its natural counterparts.
- ▶ **Feeding the hungry:** In 2009, Rhode Island entrepreneur Navyn Salem got tired of news stories about childhood hunger and malnutrition around the world always ending the same way—with the problem getting worse instead of better. Believing the challenge could be met by applying business strategies, she established Edesia, a nonprofit company, to mass-produce a nut paste that can stop malnutrition in young children. She hired 16 employees, many of them refugees, and within one year, she'd received a \$2 million federal grant to produce more than 660,000 pounds of the food supplement, enough for more than 100,000 children.

Get out of a rut

“**W**hen you’re finished changing,” Benjamin Franklin once said, “you’re finished.” But how do you know when you’re running in place? Here’s a hint: Every day looks the same as the one before it and the one to follow, and you can move through the paces of your daily life with your eyes closed. That hairstyle—haven’t you had it since college? And isn’t that sweater you bought a dead ringer for the five already in your closet? It’s time to shake it up. Find out what you’ve been missing.

Take stock of things

Doing the same thing the same way day in and day out can feel safe and familiar and comfortable—but follow the script long enough, and eventually the cocoon starts to feel more like a jail. Says marketing guru Seth Godin, “We’re human; that’s what we do. We erect boundaries, and we get trapped.” Take a good, hard look at your life—your schedule, your activities, your relationships—and ask yourself whether anything new ever happens, whether there are ever any surprises, or if you feel like you’re learning and growing personally and professionally. If the answer is no, you’re in a rut.



Take it easy

You don't have to give yourself a whole life makeover to get unstuck, and you certainly don't have to do so all at once. Quitting your job, putting your house up for sale, and dumping your significant other in the same week will certainly throw all your cards in the air, but it won't necessarily refresh your perspective. The changes you make can be minute—small but meaningful steps in a brand-new direction—but still end up packing a powerful, rut-busting punch.

Take a different route

Sometimes the best way to change gears is simply by varying your routine. Skip the highway and follow the back roads to work. Go see a movie that's in a language you've never heard before. If you usually head to the gym each Wednesday for a madly energetic spin class, go for a long, thoughtful walk instead. Move everything out of your living room, and put it back in an entirely different arrangement—or switch out half of it with stuff from elsewhere in your house. Pretend to be a tourist in your own hometown; go to restaurants, shops, or museums that aren't your usual haunts. The idea is to see the world through new eyes.

Take a leap

If little tweaks aren't moving you forward, maybe you need to try a new career, pull the plug on that stagnant relationship, or relocate to another city. Sure, the shock may take your breath away at first, but that's the point. As Godin says, just “deal with the pain, and then run forward. Fast.”

Of course, if your goal isn't to dye your hair a new shade of blond but rather to shave it off, move to Tibet, and join a Zen monastery, you might want to talk about it first with people you know and trust and then map out a concrete plan. Think about

how you might test-drive your experience. Taking a two-week leave from work to live in Barcelona or to do a volunteer stint on a kibbutz may be all you need to feel engaged in your life again. And if you're still feeling restless? Go ahead and take the swan dive from the 10-meter platform. After all, as novelist Ellen Glasgow once said, "The only difference between a rut and a grave are the dimensions."

Finding that spark

Christian Parsons works in a field (advertising) where ruts are a professional liability. On his blog ideadrunk.com, he lists 40 ways to jump-start anyone stalled in the same old, same old. Here are 10.

1. *Show up to work an hour earlier.*
2. *Talk to an 8-year-old.*
3. *Talk to an 80-year-old.*
4. *Build something with your hands.*
5. *Dance.*
6. *Call the smartest person you know and ask him or her to lunch.*
7. *Write a letter—with a pen.*
8. *Tour an art gallery.*
9. *Spend an afternoon at Toys "R" Us. Buy LEGOs.*
10. *Eat a pint of blackberries.*

Have you ever taken a "leap"?



Do better..

There are skills that few ever master—like negotiating peace in the Middle East. But then, unless you're secretary of state, who really has the need? It's those other talents we could make excellent use of if only we had them. Talents like making a memorable toast, getting a kite aloft, or fending off an onerous task with finesse. Nothing monumental, but how much sweeter would life be if we could do better at any of them? The following compendium of tips is aimed at showing how easy it is to **DO BETTER** at life's small challenges—and how big the payoffs can be.





Tell a great bedtime story

You raise a reader by reading to her—and who doesn't cherish memories of being lulled to sleep by the words of *Snow White* or *Peter Pan*? Even better, though, are stories Mom and Dad seem to create from thin air, as a fairy godmother does a pair of glass slippers. Knowing how to dream up a story that keeps them on the edge of their bunk beds will make you the Great Oz, Harry Potter, and Hannah Montana all rolled into one. Here's how to create a memorable nighttime fable.

Start it off right

The first few words are what grab little listeners' often wandering attention. There are a million ways to go, but if you're stuck, the classic fairy tale approach usually does the trick: "Once upon a time..." "A long, long time ago..." "In a far-off land, there was once..."

Create a hero

Kids like familiar characters and tales that build on what's gone before. Try telling a different story each night about Spike, the family dog; his imaginary girlfriend Petunia; and their many misadventures around the neighborhood. Or have your child be the protagonist. Be sure to establish some character traits that can help set up a familiar theme: "Billy always liked to be the first one in line." Or "Sean was always grumpy in the morning until he had his bowl of ice cream."

Now what happens?

The action should begin with a single event, such as a package arriving in the mail. Then weave your child's favorite things, activities, and colors into your story. "Sally opened the door,

and there was a purple alien named Violet on the front step!” Somewhere in the middle, there needs to be a surprise, problem, or crisis. “Sally got a letter saying that the FBI was coming to take Violet away!” The rest of the story is then about how that problem gets solved.

Make it crackle

Classic story lines involve journeys, quests, mysteries, or contests—and give you plenty of opportunities to add plot twists and details. Dazzle them with vivid imagery, detailed descriptions, and the most evocative words you can think of. Don’t just use verbs; use smash-bam-pow action verbs. Don’t just give the heroine dark hair; give her hair the color of midnight on a moonless night.

Wrap it up

Before you reach the end, begin to wind the story down, then wrap it up with a happy resolution. Speak more slowly and quietly as you near the conclusion so your child can leave the excitement behind and smoothly drift off into dreamland. Visions of sugarplums are strictly optional.

ADVICE FROM A MASTER Best-selling author Lemony Snicket shares his tips for telling a great bedtime story:

- ▶▶ “Ask your child what the title should be. This stalls for time and spreads the blame if the story’s no good.”
- ▶▶ “Name the villains after people who wronged you in high school.”
- ▶▶ “When you get stuck, remember Raymond Chandler’s advice: ‘When in doubt, have two guys come through the door with guns.’ The bedtime equivalent is a clumsy talking animal holding a tray of cream pies.”

Give a toast

It's going to happen. One day you will have to stand up, glass in hand, and clear your throat or knock some cutlery against the side of a champagne flute. Maybe you'll have had time to memorize every syllable, but more likely, you won't have a clue it's going to happen until someone hands you a mic. Either way, follow these steps and you'll acquit yourself nicely.

Find a friendly face

God willing, this will be the person or couple you're toasting. Raise your glass, and shoot them a smile. This little gift is from you to them. If there happen to be 250 other people in the room eavesdropping, so be it.

Know the room

People wince when you get things wrong, and when you get something wrong in a toast, they really wince. Remember, the toast at the bachelor party isn't the same as the toast at the wedding—in tone, language, or content—and the audience isn't the same, either. If you're toasting at the latter, don't mention ex-girlfriends, recount insane frat parties, or forget to mention the bride.

Introduce yourself

Ever been to an event where someone gets up and just starts talking? "Can you believe Linda and Larry have been married for half a century? I remember when they first joined our bowling team...blah, blah, blah." No one cares whatever what's-her-name is saying. They're all too busy asking each other, Who the heck is she? So before you utter your first word, introduce yourself and tell everyone how you know the honoree(s).

Be funny

We don't mean a-chimp-and-a-donkey-walk-into-a-bar funny. Chances are, if you've been asked to make a toast, you know the toastees fairly well. Make it relevant-to-the-occasion amusing. Pick a short anecdote that illustrates something about their personalities. For example: "I knew Stacey and Todd were made for each other when Stacey told me they both always dreamed of a road trip to Dollywood."

Then leave them misty-eyed

Funny is fine, but it's also important to lend some gravitas to the occasion. The best way is to speak from the heart and be specific. A few words packed with genuine emotion go a long way. A retirement dinner? Talk about what a difference the honoree has made in the lives of those in the room. A bat mitzvah? Predict what kind of woman she'll become. A wedding? Choose one detail to end on. "I'm sure your honeymoon in Dollywood will be great, but here's to the wild and wonderful roller-coaster ride of marriage that begins right now."

MEMORABLE MOVIE TOASTS

- ▶▶ "A toast to my big brother George. The richest man in town."
—Todd Karns in *It's a Wonderful Life*

- ▶▶ "Here's looking at you, kid."
—Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*

- ▶▶ "Never lie, steal, cheat, or drink. But if you must lie, lie in the arms of the one you love. If you must steal, steal away from bad company. If you must cheat, cheat death. And if you must drink, drink in the moments that take your breath away."
—Will Smith in *Hitch*