

MICHAEL ZAJACZKOWSKI

# The Owner's Manual to

**Life** In case you  
missed that  
day in school  
when they  
handed  
it out...

SIMPLE  
STRATEGIES  
TO WORRY  
LESS AND  
ENJOY LIFE  
MORE

SAMPLER

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SIMPLE STRATEGIES  
TO WORRY LESS AND  
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MICHAEL ZAJACZKOWSKI



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# Introduction

*We either make ourselves miserable, or we make ourselves strong. The amount of work is the same.*

—Carlos Castaneda

**H**ave you ever noticed how some people handle life more gracefully than others? How they seem to be more easygoing, are quick to smile and laugh, and how they're able to worry less and enjoy life more? Whenever the inevitable problem or situation comes up in their lives, they become more composed; they take their time and think about their options, talk to others who have had similar problems, and, when they're ready, they try the first solution. If that doesn't work, they have a backup plan or two in place, and they calmly go about trying another until it works. It's as if they intuitively know how to handle things, as if they had a chip installed that came with an encyclopedia of all possible scenarios, along with various answers and solutions, and they seem to possess the patience and presence of mind to try them. They also seem to know how to appreciate the things around them more. They appear more centered; they smile often and don't take things too seriously. If we used a word to describe them, we'd say they were happy and that they knew peace

and contentment. It's as though they were given an owner's manual to life a long time ago, and they studied it carefully.

And have you ever noticed other people who treat life's problems as if they were one emergency after another? Instead of coping mechanisms and problem-solving skills, these people default to states of worry or fearing the worst or self-defeating self-talk like "Why me?" or "Why does something always have to go wrong?" It's as if a lifetime of experiencing problems has conditioned them to imagine that a black cloud follows them, and them only, and that any chance at peace or contentment is slim, if possible at all. Moreover, rather than learning from the last problem or situation, each time a new one comes up, as they always do, it starts a familiar cascade of negative thinking that doesn't encourage solution finding and robs them of the calm they need to maintain the right perspective and find some peace and even humor as they move through their daily life. It's as if they missed that day in school when the teacher handed out the instruction manual to life and with that, they missed the strategies they needed to live life with more peace, joy, and contentment.

In reality, many of us fall somewhere between the two extremes above, though if we admit it, we probably spend more time in the second group than we'd like. The good news is that since we have all experienced those times when we did learn and leverage some experience from the past, when we did solve a problem without letting it drive us crazy, it means that we do have the capacity for better problem-solving, and perhaps all we need is a bit more instruction and some examples that can help us. And that's where this guide comes in handy.

*The Owner's Manual to Life* is the missing manual many of us haven't had access to before. It's the book of problem-solving that those with the most grace and patience use regularly and have memorized

to help them through the occasional storm that blows by, or for the seemingly constant minor annoyances and problems we all face. Inside, you'll find one hundred tips, strategies, and proven ways of responding to life that will instantly give you the toolkit you'll need to both adjust your perspective and handle problems and situations the way you've always wanted to. Once you learn these solutions and begin trying them in your life, what you'll find is that you'll no longer dread problems or be thrown out of whack emotionally; rather, you'll accept them for what they are: simply a natural part of living. Moreover, you'll see them for what they can be: opportunities to learn and grow and become wiser. And the wiser you are, the more you'll be able to relax and let go of things that might be making you unhappy. In addition, *The Owner's Manual to Life* is also filled with tips to help you truly enjoy life more, to remind you to stop and smell the roses, and to take in the immense beauty and joy that we tend to overlook or take for granted.

Writing this book has been a transformative experience for me. While I've been using these techniques for years, by collecting them all in one place and revisiting their usefulness in my life and in the lives of others, I've rediscovered their worth and the wisdom they hold. Midway through the writing of this book, I began observing my tendencies when out in public, and it's taught me, once again, to be more patient and much kinder toward others and to be grateful for what I have.

I was at a matinee movie the other day with my wife, for example, and there was an older couple at the concession stand in front of us. They were in their eighties, and the husband, who was using a walker, ordered and moved at a glacial pace. We had arrived late, and my first impulse was to try to hurry them along, or at the very least

cast an impatient stare their way. But I remembered the quote I had just written that day, “Be kind, everyone you meet is fighting a great battle,” the one about practicing patience and understanding. In that moment, I was able to rein in my hurried tendency and instead shift my attention to having empathy for what others are going through. As I did, I observed what a tremendous struggle it was for them to just order a popcorn, soda, and nachos and how difficult it was for them to carry these into the movie theater (he was experienced with this as he set them all on the seat of his walker and slowly steered them into the theater).

By just taking a couple of deep breaths, I slowed down and got to a place of gratitude for my own life. I looked at my naturally patient wife, and she smiled up at me, and in that moment, I shifted my attention, and a new appreciation washed over me. Here I was, in the middle of a Tuesday afternoon, at a movie with my wife, a true luxury in itself. And, of course, we had plenty of time to catch the final trailer and start enjoying our popcorn and sodas. I thought about that brief experience, and I realized that, yet again, the wisdom in these simple strategies is always available to me, and they will always make my life better when I remember to use them.

This is what I hope you receive from this book: new tools and tips to live your life with less stress, and instead, to live it more gracefully, more mindfully, with an increased awareness of and appreciation for the joy that is available to you whenever you slow down to see it. I also hope the wisdom in this book inspires you to do more than just read it; I hope it encourages you to interact with it, to dog-ear your favorite passages or highlight quotes in the table of contents so you can return to them again and again. I resisted the urge to categorize the material because I wanted the book to be new and fresh each time

you open it. That way, a forgotten passage might speak to you and offer you the tip or strategy just when you need it most.

Life truly is rich and full of wondrous presents, and, as one of the sayings reminds us, it's up to us to untie the ribbons of these gifts each day. Having this owner's manual with you as you go through life's journey will help smooth out the bumps in the road you encounter, and, hopefully, the peaks and valleys you may experience now will soon become gentle rolling hills instead.



“Happiness is pretty simple—  
someone to love, something to do,  
something to look forward to.”

—Rita Mae Brown

This is one of my favorite quotes because of its simplicity and the depth of its wisdom. *Someone to love* reminds me that I am happiest when I have someone else to think about and to care for. In addition to the powerful gift love gives us both, the reason this allows me to feel happiness is that when I’m focused on others, I’m not thinking about myself. And the less I’m thinking about myself—my problems, or the things I don’t have or won’t get, etc., the more peace and contentment I have.

The second part—*something to do*—reminds me of a quote by Mark Twain: “To be busy is man’s only happiness.” I don’t know about you, but if I wake up on a Saturday with a list of activities or a plan for the day, I wake up energized with a purpose. On the other hand, if I have nothing to do, I tend to be lethargic, unfocused, and my mind tends to find things to worry about. It’s like what works with kids: structure always provides security and comfort. Every day, I make sure I have a plan—or at least options—even if that plan is to read and nap on the couch in the afternoon.

This leads to the third part—*something to look forward to*. Whether it's the weekend, your next vacation, or your kid's school play, having something to look forward to helps give meaning and payoff to the work and responsibilities we all have. This is why I always have a trip (even if it's just a three-day weekend) planned and placed in the calendar. I think about it and look forward to the break. My wife and I talk about and enjoy planning it weeks in advance. Something to look forward to breaks up the monotony our daily grind can become and makes life enjoyable and worthwhile.

So, if you're not feeling happy or motivated these days, just review this simple recipe for happiness. Consider what you can add or change in your life. Any of these three ingredients will make an immediate impact on your level of happiness and contentment.

*“Each day comes bearing its own gifts. Untie the ribbons.”*

—Ruth Ann Schabacker

**M**y older brother has an interesting way of describing vacations. He calls the experience “clicking the kaleidoscope.” He says that as soon as you go to a new place, everything seems as if it has shifted, and you’re instantly able to see even routine things as if they were new, colorful, and exciting. The wonder of life returns.

When my wife and I lived on the West Coast, Hawaii was a frequent vacation spot for us. I loved going to the Starbucks each morning for a venti Pike Place and then heading to the beach to sit on the sand and listen to the waves lapping the shore. I gazed with amazement as the sun slowly rose over Diamond Head, its rays blazing in all directions, and watched the early morning surfers paddle to greet the rolling waves in the bay. I’d sip my coffee and breathe in the salty sea air. I could feel the gifts the day offered me. I look forward to vacations to help me regain this fresh perspective on the world and to be reminded of the gifts that are literally around me all the time. Unfortunately, the vacation experience fades once I return home, and a different reality takes its place.

Almost as soon as I put the suitcases down, the responsibilities and routines of life take over and off I go. There’s laundry to do,

things around the house to attend to, and then the impending reality of Monday morning and work. Wrapped up in the business of our lives, it's too easy to forget the gifts and instead get buried in the familiar minutiae. We tend to put our heads down and go through the motions: another quick breakfast, the same commute to work, eight hours at the desk, and then home to the chores and little challenges of family relationships. On the weekends, we use what little time we have to run errands, take care of bigger chores, and try to enjoy what downtime we have left. Monday looms in the background, and soon we start the new week the way we ended the last, immersed in our routines. Life through the lens of routine seems monotone, and the click of the kaleidoscope is but a distant memory. Luckily, there are easy ways to re-click it, without having to wait for the next vacation.

A helpful habit to develop is to search for and discover the many gifts, the joys, the beauty, and the surprises that each day offers. While it is easy to get into a rut, it's also easy to get out of it and to renew our perspective in simple ways: We can take a different route to work, observing the new scenery and maybe even trying a new coffee shop along the way. At work, we can choose to eat outside and see how many birds we can spot; we can go to lunch with a different coworker or try a new restaurant, or even order something different at the regular lunch spot. Mixing up our evening routines is rewarding as well: we can take the family out to an early dinner and movie, try bowling one Thursday night, or take our spouse on an unexpected date night.

Each variation in your routine is like clicking the kaleidoscope of your life. These clicks help you recognize the gifts you have and remind you that you don't have to wait for your next vacation to untie the ribbons and rediscover the wonder each day holds.

## Transform your interactions: practice courtesy and kindness.

In today's world of communicating through texting, memes, and hashtags, we've lost the warmth and underlying decency that make our everyday interactions enjoyable and respectful. Though we're sometimes not aware of our tone and demeanor, other people do feel its impact, and they react to it as well. A few years back, my wife and I were on vacation in Venice, Italy, and we were having trouble navigating our way back to St. Mark's Square. I was a little harried, and I approached a local who was sitting by a fountain. Abruptly, I asked, "Where is St. Mark's Square?"

He looked up at me, not smiling, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "I don't know."

I knew he did, so I said, "Sure you do. How do I get there?"

He paused, stared at me, and said, "If you're going to ask me like that, then I don't know."

At this point, I stopped to consider what he meant, and it occurred to me that I was being another rude tourist. In that instant, I knew what was wrong—and I knew how to correct it. "Let's start this again, okay?" I then walked away, turned, and approached him again. I said, "Good afternoon, how are you?"

His face brightened, and we exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes, and then I asked politely for the directions to St. Mark's

Square. He not only showed me which path to take, but he carefully explained where to turn and what to look for along the way. When he was done, he shook my hand and wished me a good trip.

I still think back to that interaction, and it reminds me of how important it is to greet and treat others the way I'd like to be treated. The easiest way to do this is to remember to be courteous and kind toward others. Throughout our day, we have many opportunities to practice this, and the people in service positions—whether they answer phones as customer service reps or in stores—offer us endless chances to practice being kind and interested in others. A good habit to develop whenever you have to call a service center of any kind—from your cell phone provider to the cable company to your health-insurance agent—is to make note of the person's name and ask how their day is going. They take hundreds of calls a day, usually from unhappy customers, and when you open the call with kindness in your voice, it's nice listening to their tone instantly brighten and change. For the most part, they become much more willing to help you, and your interaction almost always ends better for you both.

Being understanding and aware of what someone else is dealing with also goes a long way to creating a smoother and more pleasant experience. I was at Best Buy recently to return an item. There was just one woman behind the counter dealing with an unhappy couple, and there were three of us in line waiting for her. By the time it was my turn, she was ready for another fight, so I opened by saying, "Wow, you're busy today! Looks like a tough day so far."

She immediately looked up, took a big breath, and said, "Yeah, I'm all alone here, and it's already been a long day." Having overheard her tell the person in front of me that you can only return an opened item during the first fourteen days if you have the receipt, I offered

her my receipt and my item and said, “I’ll make this easy on you. . . .” By the time we finished the interaction, she offered me the first smile I had seen from her, and she wished me a good day. It didn’t take much to have a positive effect on another person, and I left the store with a smile as well.

If you want to transform your interactions with other people, and therefore your day-to-day experience, simply consider what other people might be going through, and be kind to them. Saying please and thank you still mean a lot, and by taking the time to truly connect with someone, asking them how they are doing, or taking a moment to empathize with them, you’ll be able to brighten someone else’s day—and yours, too.



## Share a memory with someone you love.

Too often, too much time goes by before we sincerely pay someone we love a compliment, tell them how much they mean to us, or how much we love them. One of the reasons I hear for this is that people don't know how to stop and share their feelings honestly without becoming embarrassed or without making the other person feel obligated to respond in kind. "They know I love them," they say, "I tell them all the time." Saying the obligatory "I love you" can lose its impact over the years, and when we hear it ourselves, it often doesn't register. There is, however, one easy way to connect with someone, and that is by sharing a special memory you have together.

An example is a memory my sister and I share. While we live on opposite sides of the country now, we still text and speak a few times a month, and we generally know what's happening in each other's lives. But what gets lost in these surface communications is the depth of our shared history and experience. All of that can quickly be revived, though, by sharing one simple story. When I was much younger, right after my sister moved into her own apartment, she invited me over for dinner. Her signature meal was a tuna casserole, and she had spent the afternoon preparing it. Her apartment smelled wonderful when I got there, and several hours later we sat down to eat.

After a few bites, my sister looked up and said, “I don’t know, it just doesn’t taste the same.” I had the same thought, and after she poked around at the casserole, she raised her eyebrows, started laughing, and said, “I forgot the tuna!” We both had a long belly laugh over that one, and the giggles bubbled up throughout the evening. Even now, years later, relating that story brings back not only the hilarity of that moment but also the closeness we shared during those years. It was a unique snippet in time, and in a way, it defined our youth, our love, and our history together.

Memories like this—and hundreds of others—have an incredible power to unite us, to inspire us, and to help us share deep feelings of love and belonging. We all have them, and not just with family members. When I want to connect with a dear friend I haven’t spoken to in a while, I can call and leave a message letting her know I was thinking about the wonderful times we’d hiked Mt. Rainier together and that I miss her. Or I can leave a quick message for another friend about the time his old, white VW Scirocco almost died in the line at the Mexican border crossing and how worried we both were but how much we laughed about it later. When you begin thinking about these memories, you’ll find you have many opportunities to connect with those you love and how much people will gain by hearing from you.

Today, think of someone who hasn’t heard from you in a while, think of a cherished memory, and then call or visit them or send them an email or text, and share that memory. Your friend or loved one will be pleasantly surprised, and you’ll be able to share your love and appreciation for them in a warm and memorable way. It’ll make their day—and yours, too.

It all works out in the end.  
If it hasn't worked out yet,  
it's not the end.

There's a saying in life that "time heals all," and while I have found this to be generally true, when we're going through something difficult, it's easy to lose this perspective. Small problems or inconveniences or even temporary setbacks can sometimes seem insurmountable, and many of us have a tendency to blow them out of proportion. If something carries on for a few days or weeks or, heaven forbid, a few months, it can be easy to think the issue is never going to be resolved. As soon as we bring in the perspective of time, however, isn't it interesting how things we thought were never going to get settled, were never going to work out, have indeed been resolved? Just think back—can you remember what you were worried about a year or two ago? I'll bet most, if not all, of your so-called problems worked out sooner than you thought they would.

In order to prove this to myself, I started a habit years ago, during my journaling in the morning. What I do is make a list of the things I'm currently worrying about—issues, problems, setbacks that aren't resolved yet. I make two columns: the first is to list the actual problem or concern, and the second I leave blank so I can record the date and what happened with the issue or problem later. What's so empowering about this is that very few items remain unresolved for more than a month or two. Often, in fact, over the course of a week, more than

half the items are no longer problems at all. Having them in a journal allows me to review the evidence, as it were, and to verify that time is indeed the great healer. I've found that if something hasn't worked out yet, all I have to do is give it more time.

Even the bigger issues in life: unresolved relationships, health issues, major career challenges, and so on, also tend to work out, although they can take a little more time to do so. In addition to taking more time, what's important to remember is that sometimes the way these things work out might not be the exact way we hoped for or imagined they would. There have been some close personal relationships in my life that drifted apart, and I waited years for them to mend. What I found is that, in the end, while these relationships may not have been resolved in the way I thought they would, something else happened: they changed in unexpected ways. Some toned down, and contact became less frequent, less intimate, yet we still had the core connection we had built up over the years. Other relationships became more distant as both of us had changed and moved in different ways. In each instance, however, and with the perspective of time, I saw that each of these relationships had worked out the way they should—for now.

That part, “for now,” is important to remember because with any unresolved issues in our lives, it's usually not the end yet. So much in life is fluid, people and situations constantly change, and with changes come solutions and resolutions we often can't predict. When I go back to my many lists of so-called problems, I can tell you that more than 98 percent of them worked out in the end, and the other 2 percent are in the process of working out right now. What I need to do is maintain the perspective of time and think back to my actual experience of how things tend to resolve themselves, and then remind myself that if I'm still worrying about something not working out, then it's probably not the end yet.

But that day is coming.

“We either make ourselves miserable, or we make ourselves strong. The amount of work is the same.”

—Carlos Castaneda

**H**ave you ever wanted a book that would not only teach you how to handle problems better but would also give you simple ways to slow down and enjoy life more? If so, then this book is for you. In it, you'll learn 100 time-tested strategies and techniques to help you go through life more confidently, and that will enable you to discover the sense of peace and happiness you've been looking for. Turn to any page in *The Owner's Manual to Life*, and you'll discover a new way of dealing with problematic people and situations, and you'll also learn how to appreciate the wonder and joy that is all around you. You'll find practical quotes like, *I don't have a rewind button in my life, but I do have a pause*; and insightful quotes like, *Happiness is pretty simple—someone to love, something to do, something to look forward to* (Rita Mae Brown); and dozens of inspirational quotes like, *Don't let what you can't do stop you from what you can do* (John Wooden). Whether you need a quick dose of motivation, or proven solutions for dealing with life more gracefully, you'll find them in this invaluable life manual.

**MICHAEL ZAJACZKOWSKI** earned his master's degree in marriage and family counseling from Antioch University, Los Angeles. He runs an international business coaching and sales training company and uses his experience from counseling and coaching to help his clients set and achieve goals while helping them identify and engage in activities that give their lives the most meaning. He and his wife are avid pickleball players, and they live and play in and around Raleigh, NC. To see his other titles, visit: [www.MichaelZbooks.com](http://www.MichaelZbooks.com)

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