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Creating impeccable structure for your life.

Leo Babauta on why we resist structure, how to build it anyway, and how to practise with the uncertainty that's left.

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, and run to distraction and comforts. It creates tremendous uncertainty for us.

But we resist sticking to structure and routine. We want great order in 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.

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.

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 practise 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 practise 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 go a day or a week without it, we can be perfectly okay.

Two reasons to create structure.

There are two major (and related) effects 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 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 that we should recognise the effects this messiness has on us.

2 **A 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 going into business with someone whose office and life were a huge mess, or 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 partners, friends and loved ones, our colleagues and bosses, and 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 a reason to freak out or beat yourself up. It's just bringing awareness to the effects of a lack of structure, and maybe resolving to create more impeccable structure over time.

Creating impeccable structure.

Once we've resolved to create structure in our lives, it's important to recognise that this is a process, not a destination. You never do it and then you're done with it. It's ongoing. Here's what I do:

1 **Recognise when a part of my life is messy and could use more structure.**

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 me a feeling of trust.**

For example, if you are not staying on top of your email, your structure could be 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 that would give you a sense of trust that your email would be taken care of, it's a good structure. Take a little time, disconnected and in solitude, to contemplate it.

3 **Write out the structure, and put it somewhere I'll see it.**

Once you've given it some thought, actually write it down, on paper or in a 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. Test the structure by using it. See if it works, and if it gives you a sense of trust. See where the flaws are, and adjust as needed. Do it not as a chore, but as a practice, seeing if you can relax into it and surrender to it.

5 Revisit and revise regularly.

Even if the structure is good, you're not done. Like a machine humming along, it will eventually break, and it needs maintenance. You need to adjust it as your life changes and you change. Every month or two, revisit and revise it. At the very least, revisit it every six months (set a reminder in your calendar).

Examples of structure.

Here are 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 rigid. You might have something simple: a morning routine, a block for important tasks, email, more important tasks, admin, email again, a work closing routine, exercise, meditation and an evening routine. Some people need more detail, some less, and some a different structure on different days.
- **Financial structure.** How do you stay on top of your finances? Create a system to track your spending regularly, and have a plan for how to spend.
- **Communication.** How are you handling email and messages? You might carve out regular time so you stay on top of them, without being overwhelmed or doing it all day long.
- **Relationships.** How are you working on your relationship? Do you have regular dates, or time together each day? If you're not in a relationship, how do you stay in touch with your closest friends and family, and stay close to them or go even deeper?
- **Health.** How will you stay active? What will you eat to give yourself a healthy, thriving life? How will you stay on top of both?
- **Household and personal maintenance.** How does the laundry get done? The groceries and menu? Cleaning the house? Taking care of yourself?
- **Physical surroundings.** How messy is your house, or your office? Is it cluttered? How does that affect your state of mind?

Wherever you'd like to feel more trust and order, that's a place to contemplate and write out some structure.

Practising with uncertainty, in and out of structure.

Once you've created the structure, there are two ways to practise with it.

Resistance to having structure

When you set up a structure for yourself, it might sound nice, but when it comes time to actually do it, you might feel constricted. You might feel uncertain about whether you can do it, whether it's the right structure, or whether you should be doing something else.

This is actually perfect. Instead of eliminating uncertainty from your life, the structure gives you a space to practise with it. Instead of flopping all over the place, 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. Open up to the feeling and be mindful of it in your body. 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 yourself to do. Instead of running from the structure, relax into it. It's an amazing practice.

Uncertainty when you're not in the structure

What happens when you can't use your structure? Visitors come over, you travel, there's a crisis at work or at home, or social functions disrupt your schedule.

This is also perfect. It's an opportunity to practise letting go of the need for structure, be present in the moment, and decide what's needed next. You might be travelling, with your structure 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 do a little work before you head out. You find a window at lunchtime to catch up on messages, and another before bed to do some writing. You are flowing, but not just letting everything go. You're finding focus and purpose in the middle of chaos.

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

Adjusting and learning with structure.

Setting up structure once isn't "set and forget". You will learn as you work with it whether it works for you, whether you have needs it doesn't meet, and whether you forgot to include things. For example:

- One client created a schedule, then discovered he was very tired because it didn't include enough time for rest. He could add a sign-off time to make sure he gets enough sleep, or build in an afternoon nap.
- Another client found she was overloaded with too much on her task list, and learned it's better to pare back her expectations of how much she can get done.
- I've found that the landscape of my day is constantly changing. So I have a structure for a wide-open day with only one or two meetings, and otherwise I create a structure at the start of the day depending on what's on, or figure things out on the fly.

You might need to move something to the morning to give it more focus, 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. With some care and attention, you can make it better and better, and more and more impeccable.

Structure is worth the effort, because you can learn to relax into it.

The people around you can trust you more, and relax into your structure as well. And the structure becomes a way to practise with the uncertainty, resistance and discomfort that inevitably arise in your life.

I didn't write this, but I thought you would like it.

I don't create all of the great knowledge in the world. I often come across information that I think is valuable and useful, and this is one of those articles. To be clear, I didn't write it, but I believe the information is valid and of benefit to anyone trying to do great things in the world.

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