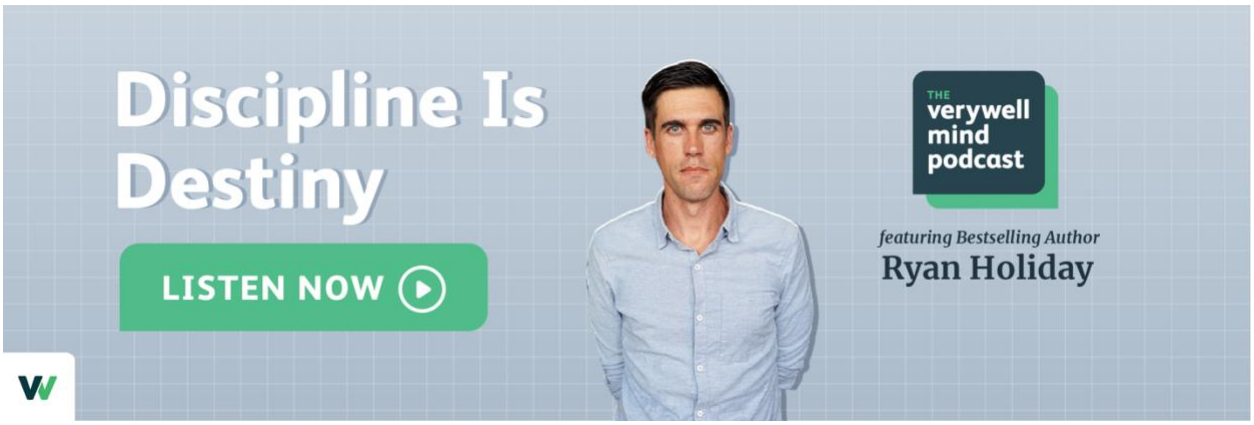


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207 — Discipline Is Destiny with Best-Selling Author Ryan Holiday

Amy Morin:

Welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!* I'm Amy Morin, the editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on Mental Strength. Every Monday, I introduce you to a mentally strong person whose story and mental strength tips can inspire you to think, feel, and do your best in life. And the fun part is, we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys! Don't forget to subscribe to the show on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week. Now let's dive into today's episode!

Do you struggle to live a disciplined life? Do you ever feel like you lack self-control? Do you associate having more discipline with having less fun? If you answered yes to any of those questions, today's episode is for you. I'm talking to best-selling author Ryan Holiday. Ryan is the author of many best-selling books, including *Ego is the Enemy, Stillness is the Key, Courage is Calling,* and *The Obstacle Is the Way.* Today we're talking about his newest book, *Discipline is Destiny.* His book is already topping the best-seller list, and I'm not surprised. It's a really good book. In it, he describes how discipline is vital to living your best life. But too often we opt for what feels good right now rather than what's best for us in the long term. Some of the things Ryan talks about today are how discipline can lead to a happier life, where to start if you need to develop more self-discipline now, and why it's important to be disciplined across all areas of your life.

Make sure to stick around until the end of the episode for The Therapist's Take. It's the part of the show where I'll give you my take on Ryan's strategies for building mental

strength. So here's Ryan Holiday on how to develop the self-discipline you need to live your best life.

Amy Morin:

Ryan Holiday, welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!*

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, thanks for having me.

Amy Morin:

I first came across your work when I read Perennial Seller, which was a really good book that came into my life probably at just the right moment. When I wrote my first book I didn't know anything about marketing a book, and when it was all done I thought, woo-hoo, it's all over. And then another author who's hit the New York Times Best Seller list was like, "Well, how are you going to market your book?" And first I was like, "No, I have a publicist at my publishing house, they're going to market the book." And he was like, "Oh Amy, it's called the best sellers list, not the best writers list.

Ryan Holiday:

Yes.

Amy Morin:

And I was like, "Oh wait, you mean there's more?"

Ryan Holiday:

Of course.

Amy Morin:

And my book didn't hit the best sellers list out of the gate, it was a disappointment. Like 50 million people read the article, and then it went on sale two days before Christmas, there wasn't a lot of sales that first week. So we had a conversation, my agent was like, "Well, that's good, but you probably won't get another book with this publisher." And it was probably a solid year before I actually hit a best sellers list, and since then it's actually sold better over the last decade every year. But you were the first person though to give me hope that it was even possible from your book, so thank you.

Ryan Holiday:

Oh, that's wonderful. Yeah, it would be wonderful, of course, if good ideas just naturally found their audience, and if everything that was great just immediately went viral, like

you're listed, but unfortunately that's not the case. And there's also, obviously, a huge difference between a list that is free and a book that costs money and takes time to consume, and so just different ideas, different things take different ways to get to the people who they are meant to get to.

Amy Morin:

Yeah, and then I learned how a lot of the best sellers list are often gamed, they're not accurate, and all those other things, which was a big disappointment. But on the other hand, as you said in your book, what's better than selling year after year as opposed to just for one week?

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, imagine, let's say it takes 10,000 copies to hit the best seller list, so you sell 10,000 copies in one week and you're a best seller, or you sell 1000 copies a week for a year, one is 5X better than the other, but only one is recognized by a list. And then what if you sell 1000 copies a week for 10 years? I think people often chase whatever the recognition, or the status symbol of a success is, and not what is actually moving the needle.

Amy Morin:

So right now let's talk about your new book. It's called Discipline is Destiny, it just came out, it's an amazing book, but I broke one of the cardinal rules, as I was reading about the fact that you should go to bed early, I stayed up late reading it. But it's really good. However, even though I write about mental strength, just seeing a book with the word discipline in the title makes my first thought think, ugh, it's going to be hard work, like I should be doing more than I already am. But there are a lot of misconceptions about discipline, let's talk about those first.

Ryan Holiday:

Sure.

Amy Morin:

What do you think are the biggest misconceptions about discipline that make us groan when we think about the fact that we should be self-disciplined?

Ryan Holiday:

Well, I'd say there's two, they're essentially the opposites of each other. So number one is when we think discipline we think of discipline as the discipline of a military unit, or something. Us exerting discipline over someone or something else, which is attractive in one sense because it means you're the boss and you're not having to do the thing. We

think of almost parental discipline, disciplining a child, or something like this. That's not discipline as a virtue, or at least the kind of discipline I'm interested in the book, which is actually about what we would call self-discipline, the rules that you exert over yourself.

So first off, I think we often think of discipline as this thing that we insist on as opposed to something that we ourselves do, and then the other is that, as you said, we think of discipline as somehow a deprivation, I don't get to do these things that I don't want, and because I'm not doing all the things I want I'm having less fun, I'm less happy, et cetera. I would say there's no one more miserable than the person who does everything they want whenever they want it. In the short term this is somewhat pleasurable, but in the long term this never is, and it's why I think for the ancient the idea of freedom, which was wonderful, had to be complimented by self-discipline.

So just because you can do anything doesn't mean you should, Seneca famously says that, "No one is fit to rule who is not first master of themselves." And the point being is if you want to do great things, if you want to be happy, if you want to be influential, et cetera, that's great, but that actually subjects you to a higher level of discipline, an interior internal discipline.

Amy Morin:

Yeah, I like all of that. Do you think it's possible for us to be too disciplined? Is that ever an issue?

Ryan Holiday:

For sure. I mean, I think you have to be disciplined about disciplined, as you do all things. So obviously not getting up off the couch, not getting after what it is that you say you want, this is a matter of discipline. Not always, but let's just say discipline is required to do things. But some of us are naturally driven, some of us do well with rules, we're always going, we have something we want to accomplish, and it's there that you have to sometimes check those impulses or taken too far they can become their own vice.

For me, I often find that wanting to work out is not the thing that I need to be disciplined about. I like doing that, I enjoy it, I get a lot of pleasure and satisfaction about it. For me, I have to be disciplined about when I can't be reasonable about that desire. So I'm not feeling well, the weather conditions are bad, I don't have time. Trying to force something that shouldn't be forced is a lack of discipline also. And we think about, what's the number one cause of injury in professional athletes? It's almost always some form of over-training, they did too much. And so it actually takes discipline to go, I'm not feeling well, I'm going to rest today.

Amy Morin:

Yeah, I like that, because there are areas of my life that are super easy to be disciplined, like exercise isn't that hard for me because I like to run, so I could go running no problem. But if I have a sore ankle or a sore knee, or something like that, it takes more work that day to say, don't do it, if you injure yourself you're not going to be able to run for two weeks.

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, or if I'm coming down from with something and I push through it because I go, oh, you're just not feeling it, these are the days that really make the difference, but then the next day I'm wrecked and I have to take several days off, that wasn't a good trade at all. That requires discipline for me, it requires discipline for me to be like, okay, are you just pushing through ordinary resistance here? Which is obviously a part of discipline, there are days when you're just not feeling it, even as a writer, there are days when you're not feeling it and you have to put your butt in the chair and just do the thing.

But then what if, to maybe get away from running and go to writing, what if the reason you're not feeling it is you haven't done the research necessary? And so it's actually not a good use of your time to sit there and unproductively stare at the monitor, you should be having a conversation with someone, you should be reading, you should be traveling. Sometimes you're just not feeling it because the underlying conditions are not right and it requires a certain amount of discernment as well as discipline to know the difference between those two things.

Amy Morin:

I think that's a really good distinction because it's hard sometimes to do all of those things that don't count. As a writer I like to know how many words I get on the page per day.

Ryan Holiday:

Yes.

Amy Morin:

Doing all those other things feels like it just doesn't count, there's nothing tangible to say, did I research enough or did I talk to enough people? Or in preparing a speech, yeah, I get to deliver this speech when it's written, but the real practice comes in figuring out how you're going to deliver this speech and what you're going to say. But there's no credit for standing in front of the mirror and practicing, so I don't want to do that, I just want to have it done. I think a lot of people get those things confused, they think that being busy means they're working and therefore they must be disciplined, but they're not always busy doing the right things.

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, one of the stories I tell in the book, it's sort of one of the major breakthroughs in the NBA in the last decade, almost exactly, Gregg Popovich, the coach of the Spurs, built one of the greatest dynasties in the history of sports, makes this decision in 2012 to deliberately rest three or four of his best players in a nationally televised game against the Heat. Now the NBA doesn't say, "Hey, great thinking, You're really extending the life of these stars," they find him $250,000 because he took away their prime product from a primetime television event.

But what Popovich realizes is that these are players who have gone deep into the playoffs every year, these are players who play in the off season, usually in the Olympics or in the world finals, and they're also getting up there in age, and he realizes that if you just push these guys, if you give these guys the opportunity they'll play every night, this is what they love to do, but they'll get hurt, they'll get tired, their careers will be short. And so he pioneers what we now call load management in the NBA, which is that you don't play every player maximum minutes in maximum games.

And this was immensely controversial at the time, even with the players who were rested, but it's now an accepted and widespread practice because humans are humans, even if you're great, even if you're ambitious, even if you're driven, you can only be subjected to so much, and we have to be cognizant of the load that we're bearing, and it can take an immense amount of discipline to say, today I'm not only not going to do this thing, I'm going to deliberately rest, I'm going to invest in myself so that I can be better later when it counts. And that sense of timing when you're trying to peak, when you want to be at top form, this requires not just physical discipline, but a prioritization, which is also a form of discipline.

Amy Morin:

And speaking of sports stories that you told, let's talk about baseball. I happen to love baseball.

Ryan Holiday:

Yes.

Amy Morin:

You look at those two examples, so Lou Gehrig is somebody who's super disciplined when it came to taking care of himself and taking care of his body, everything from what he ate to what he drank. Babe Ruth was the complete opposite, he ate all those hot dogs, he drank heavily, he didn't take care of himself. So somebody might look at those two stories though and say, "Well Babe Ruth might have had a lot more fun along the way." What do you say to somebody who says that?

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, sure. Look, it's fun to eat hot dogs, but when you eat so many hot dogs and drink so much soda as Babe Ruth once famously did, that you have to go to the hospital, I'm not actually sure you're having the fun that you're claiming to have. When you look at Babe Ruth, it almost makes his accomplishments more impressive, in a weird, perverse way, you're like, what could this guy have done if he was in shape? That he could hit home runs at all, you look at his waistline and you're like, that's not what an athlete's supposed to look like, and that's because he wasn't really taking care of himself. And look, the point is not that it's only the people with monk-like discipline that are ever successful, that's preposterous. Just like we can say that ego is bad, and also stipulate there's lots of successful people with enormous egos, it's just that ego makes what they do harder, and it often holds them back from being everything that they're capable of being.

So the tragedy of Babe Ruth and of Lou Gehrig is that both of their careers are tragically cut short. Now, Lou Gehrig's is through no fault of his own, and so it makes it rather inspiring and beautiful that for every minute that he could play baseball, he played the best baseball he was capable of playing. Now Babe Ruth's career also cut short, not fully what it could have been, but that's a self-inflicted blow, and I think that makes it all the more tragic.

Amy Morin:

And I like that you talked about how Lou Gehrig eventually took himself out of the game, he knew when it was time to say, okay, enough's enough. He had Lou Gehrig's disease, as we call it now, ALS, it kicked in to the point where he wasn't able to play, but he knew, okay, today's it, I'm not going to play in the next game.

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, which of course requires an immense amount of discipline when your identity is so tied up in what you do, when your finances are tied up in what you do, and the moment that he realizes he's not what he's capable of being, it's paradoxical. He makes this out, he catches a ground ball, and the team is so enormously encouraging that he's done it, they're like, "Great job," they're patting him on the back. It's an ordinary moment, and it's the way that they celebrate it, makes him realize that he has been falling short and no one's been wanting to say anything about it, because this thing that he'd done thousands of times without acknowledgement in his career, suddenly people are throwing him a parade for, and he realizes, oh, I'm not what I once was, and he goes to the manager and he says, "Look, I'm out, you got to start somebody else."

And it's not just the self-awareness, but there's a certain amount of selflessness in this decision he made, he basically goes, he has the longest streak in the history of baseball

then, and it lasts for decades and decades after he pulls himself out, but he goes, "I'm not going to continue the streak at the expense of the team," which also requires discipline. He could have waited to get fired, he could have quiet quit, to use the modern term, and maybe he would've rounded out an entire other season. He could have gotten paid, he could have padded the stats. But as soon as he felt himself slipping he made the difficult but ultimately courageous decision.

Amy Morin:

I think sometimes as a society we applaud people for pushing through, for keeping their businesses open despite the fact that they're really sick, or for going to work when they're really struggling to the point that they can't carry on anymore, where we think, wow, that's amazing, look at that person doing that, because it's hard sometimes to say, no, my time is up, or I'm not an asset anymore.

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, I was supposed to do a podcast with, I won't say who, because that'd be exposing. Anyways, I was supposed to do a podcast with this comedian, and five hours before we were supposed to record she said, "Hey, I'm really not feeling well, is it okay if we reschedule?" And this was an in-person thing that I was on the west coast for. And I said, "Yeah, of course, just take care of yourself, whatever. Obviously make sure you're, go get a COVID test, but see how you're doing.' And she ended up not having COVID, it was something else.

And she said something afterwards, she was like that, "Thank you for being understanding, this was hard for me." Like it was hard for her to say, "I'm not feeling well, let's cancel." And I said, "Look, if we were better at this as a society, of recognizing when we're not feeling well, when we're under the weather, when we feel something coming on, if we are better about being upfront about it and taking care of ourselves, we probably wouldn't have just gone through what we went through with the pandemic, but we'd all be healthier." Because we see it as this badge of honor, I've never taken a sick day, and the result of you not taking a sick day is that other people have to take sick days because you got them sick, and they don't want to be a jerk that gives it to other people.

Amy Morin:

Yeah, it's an interesting concept. What we look at, again, when we want to be disciplined, so we think, if I never miss a day no matter what, that somehow that makes me a disciplined person, without taking other people into consideration, or without thinking, does this really make sense, even for myself, if I drag myself here one more day and then I miss another week, was that a good decision?

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, or you think, I don't want to let the team down, so you keep doing and doing and doing, and then you burn out and you have to quit said team, who did that help? But self-care, I think, is a discipline, and requires discipline, and it weirdly feels selfish, even though when people ask you for help you're never like, what an idiot, what a jerk, you're like, you're happy to do it, right? When our friends ask us for things, we're happy to oblige, and then for some weird quirk of our thinking, we're convinced everyone will judge and resent us for asking for help.

Amy Morin:

Right? And I think sometimes we think people either have self-discipline or they don't, but sometimes it's easy to have it in certain areas of your life, and then you don't have it in others. We know that certain athletes have it when it comes to their physical condition, but on the other hand, they might struggle with other addictions, or they might have a problem off the field.

Ryan Holiday:

Sure.

Amy Morin:

Why is that? Why is it that some areas of our lives, it's just much easier than other areas?

Ryan Holiday:

Well, I think this is true for all the virtues. The book I wrote before this is about courage, and there's certainly people who have been immensely brave on the battlefield that come to hold public office and then are petrified of making the slightest controversial decision, or risking the slightest thing. They would brave enemy fire but they would never want to risk the ire of a voter. And so I think is, when we talk about these virtues, it should be in the idea of cultivating a holistic practice.

So yeah, physical discipline could be really easy for someone, meanwhile controlling their temper could be the hardest thing in the world, or conversely, someone could be very emotionally controlled, very rational, very deliberate about how they do their work, and then they're shoving their face full of Oreos. So you have to cultivate discipline holistically across your life, but I also think ideally you should be learning, as you are disciplined in one domain, ideally you're building a muscle, an ability to override impulses or desires that should be transferable elsewhere, otherwise you're probably missing the point.

Amy Morin:

And do you think it's possible, though, that in some areas of your life where you maybe lack a little bit of discipline, that it potentially gives you more joy than if you were disciplined?

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah.

Amy Morin:

And I'll out myself here with saying this, but when it comes to exercise or food, it's not really an issue for me, it's not particularly tough, but I find great joy in staying up late and not setting an alarm in the morning. I spent 35 years getting up early, having a job, going to school, and I still didn't like it, and I don't ever really want to go to bed at 9:00 PM, I want to stay up as late as I want, almost like an eight year old who finally doesn't have a bedtime maybe. But I was reading your book thinking about that and I thought, would I find going to bed earlier and giving myself a better schedule would make my life better? I've raised a little bit of an eyebrow and I thought, well, if I had an alarm, I would get up earlier, but I don't know that that would make my life better. What do you think?

Ryan Holiday:

So what I would probably say is, if you were saying to me, "I desperately need, my life is chaotic and dysfunctional, I'm not someone who's good with discipline, where should I start?" I would tell you to start with what time you're going to bed and when you wake up, because these are really easy quantifiable things to bring order to a disordered sphere or system. Now if you're someone who's managing to be disciplined in a facets of your life, you're probably disciplined enough that you can have some freedom in other places. Now me, I find I have to get up early, I have young kids, so that choice is not mine. So to be able to manages through the day not being exhausted or irritable or grouchy, I have to be disciplined about when I go to bed.

But that's because from one constraint created the need. There's no law that says, hey, if you want to not yell at your kids unnecessarily you should get a certain amount of sleep, or if you want to be awake while you're writing and be at your best form, there's no law mandating it but I have to enforce that on myself because of the reality of the situation that I have. So I don't think it's necessarily a hard and fast rule, and what I try to do when I write these books is here's the overall virtue, and then I want to give little slices, little sections of what that discipline can look like in practice, or courage looks like in practice, or stillness looks like in practice.

Not all of them are going to work for everyone, I'll give you an example, what if you're someone who has to get up early for work or you get fired? Well, are you really that disciplined for getting up early for work? Probably not, you have a gun to your head, so to speak. So different lifestyles, different situations are going to affect it, but I would say

I'm less talking, if I recall correctly of the chapter, I'm less talking about the need to go to bed at a certain time than I am about being disciplined about getting enough sleep. Those are slightly different things. If you had to wake up at 6:00 AM, and you also enjoyed staying up as late as possible, that's not a good combination, but if you can wake up whenever you want and you enjoy the freedom of your life of not having to get up at a certain time, well that can work, provided you're not walking around a zombie.

Amy Morin:

Right? And I like the part in your book where you're talking about the discipline it takes to push ourselves to go to bed. We're probably all guilty of that. We're sitting on the couch and we're watching TV, and it feels like a lot of effort to get ready for bed, so you put it off as long as you can, as if it's going to get easier. And then 20 minutes later it feels like it's twice the effort, yet we still sit there because we don't want to get up, and it takes self-discipline to put ourselves to bed, yet we don't do it. And then we say, "I'm going to go to bed earlier tonight," and then you don't do it.

And these are the things that I struggled with when I was a therapist in Maine. My first client of the day was at 7:00 AM, and it was a half hour drive, so I had to get up early, and on the nights I had to work the next day I would just push myself to go to bed early, but I never enjoyed it. So now I say, I'm just going to enjoy the freedom of staying up as late as I want, and I find great joy in that.

Ryan Holiday:

No, I totally relate to it. For me, obviously I understand, in the military, the purpose of the sharp creases, and the shiny shoes, and the perfect posture, and all of this. I also chose this line of work because I don't like people telling me what I have to wear and I don't getting dressed up. So when I have to put on a suit, I feel like I screwed up. There's the Thoreau quote of, "Beware of any enterprise that requires new clothes." I don't like anything that forces me to adhere to a dress code, let's say.

So for me, I understand that as a discipline in the abstract and then personally it doesn't apply, and yet it also does apply. I could wake up and write in my bathrobe every day, but I wake up and I shower and I shave and I go through a morning routine to at least treat the work seriously enough that I don't show up as a slop. I'm able to wear comfortable clothing of my own choice and I don't really have to care what anyone thinks, but I know that if I just roll out of bed and I walk to the computer like I'm some unemployed person in my mother's basement, that's not treating the workspace or the work with enough respect.

Amy Morin:

Yeah, I'm glad that you said that too, because when I got to the chapter about dressing for success I thought, oh dear, because I live in the Florida Keys where we wear flip flops and rarely dress up when we do anything.

Ryan Holiday:

Yes, different dress code for different climates, yes.

Amy Morin:

Right, exactly. And I probably won't wear a business suit at home when I'm typing a book, but I will just choose to wear something comfortable. And as tempting as it is to be a complete slob some days, there's definitely a difference between the days that I put on at least some real clothes, as opposed to if I were sitting in my pajamas and type all day, it definitely feels different.

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, and look, when you go to give a TED Talk, you understand that that has a certain dress code. I mean, there isn't a certain dress code, you can wear whatever you want, but if you're trying to accomplish a certain thing, like when I go do a television spot or something, I understand that the choices I'm making represent the ideas. They say don't judge a book by its cover, but that's why books have covers. And so in the book I tell the story of Angela Merkel, who is a brilliant physicist or chemist, or something, and she is a person of ideas, not a person of superficial appearances, but when she runs for office she has to figure out, in her own way, how to play this game, because the Chancellor of Germany is on television a lot, and people use the medium to judge whether the person is worth voting for or not. You do have to figure out the environment you're in and then practice that discipline, within reasonable bounds.

Amy Morin:

And people do treat us differently, right? Depending on how we're dressed and how we look, whether we like it or not.

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, although I feel like, again, one of the benefits of being an author is you get to do whatever you want and people like that you do whatever you want, you know what I mean? There are also, I think, there's a certain amount of discipline, is picking the profession that's suited to the lifestyle that you want, the way that you want to live, and not just doing something because everyone else is doing.

Amy Morin:

Yes, I think during COVID probably a lot of people thought, okay, now that I work from home, how does this change things, and what do I do? When your living room becomes your office, life gets weird. That's easy for me to say, of course, because my boat is also a podcast studio, but things get weird when you have shared spaces, right?

Ryan Holiday:

Yes.

Amy Morin:

And how do you be disciplined when you're working from home if it's from your living room? You talk a lot about that, sometimes we blame ourselves for not being disciplined enough, and I'll hear from people who say, "Our attention spans have gotten really short," but in reality our cell phones are beeping and our emails open, we have 50 tabs open on our computer, and we don't take the time to do the work. And you talk in your book a lot about saying no to things, to turning things off and setting ourselves up in an environment that makes it easier to be disciplined.

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, I'll give you an example of that exactly, I got an email last night, late last night, I'm planning this trip with my two young kids, we're going to take them to Disneyland for the first time. So we already agree on the dates and the plans, and an opportunity to do a talk came up on one of those days. Now, as you know, with speaking or any offer, suddenly now there's an opportunity cost. What was going to be a trip that cost X now cost X plus the income that I am not earning by saying yes to this thing.

Now it logistically was difficult anyway, and it wasn't the full fee, and whatever. But there was this huge part of me that wanted to say yes, and another part of me that knew, one, that per my priorities I needed to say no, and so I needed to say no immediately, not think about it, not put it off until later, not try to give it to my wife to let her make the decision, but a quick hard and fast no. First off, this is my fee, so I don't say yes to things beneath the fee or that's not really your fee, they call this "integrity," as in the business, but second, not to let my less disciplined part of my mind convince me, or insidiously take me off the path, and that I needed to say no in a hard and fast way.

And actually, I have a picture next to my desk that a sports psychologist named Jonathan Fader gave me, and it's a picture of Oliver Sacks, the great doctor and writer, and it's Oliver Sacks' office, and Oliver Sacks is on the phone and there's a giant sign behind him and it just says NO, and it was his reminder that you just needed to say no a lot. And I don't know about you, but again, during COVID I found, since wasn't being asked to do things, or I could not do certain things, I was suddenly so much better at other things, and again, it was an illustration of the other opportunity costs. So when you get an offer to do something you think, oh, this is going to cost me X, it's harder for you

to quantify what is a memory with your child worth, or what is a beautiful trip to the beach worth, or whatever that is.

And so you have to say no a lot, you have to say no quickly, and you have to have rules that help you from second guessing or undermining that willpower to do what deep down you know you should do.

Amy Morin:

I like that because it's really easy sometimes to say, oh, let me think about that, and then it weighs you down, it's in the back of your mind. And the person follows up and says, "Hey, did you think more about that?" And they maybe even sweeten the deal a little bit. And then you start thinking, oh, should I or shouldn't I? So I like the idea of having some rules and then just saying no.

Ryan Holiday:

Yes.

Amy Morin:

Because for people who are in business or self-employed, or if you're an author, you get a million things that come into your inbox and 99% of them are stuff that you're probably not going to do. People want you to build a course, or they want to help you with your marketing. Some things are just never done, right?

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah.

Amy Morin:

I could be on social media eight hours a day if I wanted, but how do you figure out what you're going to say no to versus which opportunities to say yes to?

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, it's like what's the main thing? And one of the tests I do is what are the things that only I can do? So I can pay someone to schedule things for me, I can pay someone to cook food for me, I really can't pay someone to write for me. There are such a thing as ghost writers, of course, but this is what I do, I can't outsource the main thing. And so asking yourself, what are the things that only you can do? And so we sometimes have, I think about this more of a male stereotype, but they're like, "Oh, well I can't have someone mow my lawn, it's too expensive," or, "I can't have someone mow my lawn, they don't do it right." And it's like, okay, but while you are mowing your lawn somebody else is doing something for you, or that thing is not getting done.

So I was writing about this recently, I do this email called Daily Dad, and I'm not judging people's childcare choices, I understand obviously certain people have to do certain things, but how quick we are to pay someone to watch our kids, but won't let someone change the oil in our car. The interestingness with which we outsource very essential things, and then refuse to delegate very inessential things. So for me as a writer, I know that the whole engine of my career and my work is, do I have hours in the morning to sit down at a screen and write? No one can do that for me, and I have to prioritize that, I have to say no to things that are not that, and then the things that I have to do that are not that I need to figure out how to effectively delegate or systematize or organize in a way that makes them impede on that creative time as little as possible.

Amy Morin:

But then how do you decide the things that you're going to do? I know from Instagram that you pick up trash at the end of your street, or you go to the beach and you'll pick up trash. You could pay somebody to do that.

Ryan Holiday:

Sure.

Amy Morin:

What makes you say, hey, I'm actually going to do this myself?

Ryan Holiday:

Well, that's a little different, that is I take my kids for this long walk in the morning, that's one thing I always do when I'm at home, and we live out in the country, and one of the benefits of living out in the country is you can do whatever you want, one of the downsides is that other people do whatever they want, which for some reason includes throwing beer cans and bottles out their window when they're driving, and we just pick them up. So it's not like I just have this hobby where I spend hours and hours in the afternoon doing unpaid labor, but the point is, when I'm doing something and I see an opportunity to make some small positive difference in the world, I also try to take that thing.

But I think your overall question is a good one, which is how do you decide what to spend time on and what not to spend time on? And I think a lot of that comes with knowing who you are, what's important to you, what your priorities are, or where you're trying to end up, and I think the problem is a lot of times we don't do that, and then we just end up defaulting to A, what other people do, or B, what pays the most money. And those can be helpful in the short term, but it's like having a compass that's off by even a few degrees can take you very far from where you ultimately want to end up.

So for you, if your ideal life is I wake up on my sailboat, and I don't have a wake up call, and I don't have anyone telling me what I have to do today, well if somebody comes to you with a lucrative consulting opportunity that involves you being in New York City every day for three months, that might be well paid, but it's taking you away from what you actually want your life to be. And so you have to have this North Star, this clear sense of what do you want your life to be? What are you trying to do? And then this lets you evaluate the incoming things and be disciplined about, in the right way, about what you say yes to and what you say no to, because it's not disciplined, as we were talking about, to just take on every opportunity that comes before you. That's a good way to do a lot of things not very well.

Amy Morin:

And one of the most powerful parts of your book, I thought, was when you talk about when you say yes to something, you also have to take a look at what you're giving up to do that.

Ryan Holiday:

Sure.

Amy Morin:

But also when we have something that's super pleasurable and we think that we love it, well there's a cost to that too, right?

Ryan Holiday:

Yes.

Amy Morin:

We usually don't look at that kind of stuff, the flip side of, is this costing me to have this bad habit? Or what is this costing me to say yes to these things that I don't really want to do?

Ryan Holiday:

We think about whether it would be fun to stay out drinking with our friends, the answer is yes, but we conveniently obscure the hangover the next day. Or we think it would taste good to eat X, Y, or Z, and we're forgetting the feeling that we're going to feel six months from now when we look in the mirror and we go, where did this come from? So the ability to anticipate future consequences from present actions is really, I think, the essence of discipline. And conversely, the ability to anticipate future gains from current labors is the same thing. One of the stoics talks about how when you do hard work the good remains, but when you do something bad the shame remains. And realizing,

flashing forward to the consequences, to the hangover, to the refractory period after is really, really important.

Amy Morin:

And I also appreciated that you talked about a bad habit that we might have, and if you knew then what you know now, would you still do it?

Ryan Holiday:

Yes.

Amy Morin:

So would you still pick up that first cigarette if you knew what it was going to be like 15 years later? But for some reason we think that we can't quit a bad habit right now.

Ryan Holiday:

Well yeah, you think about the intense reaction that there's been to vaping, that this could have this negative effect, and it's bad, and it's tricking children, et cetera, all of which is true. But if they invented alcohol today, they would definitely ban it. It would be much more regulated. The fact that something that has existed, or you've done a thing for a long time, is not a reason to continue doing it.

And sometimes stepping back and looking at it in perspective, I mean, this is a hard one, but I feel no compunction to join, to actually have TikTok. I mean, because of what I do I have a TikTok, and people post on it for me, but I'm lucky in that I'm too old for TikTok. You know what I mean? But just because I'm on Facebook and Instagram and Twitter, and have been for a long time, is not a reason to continue using them. Do you know what I mean? And so if you knew what downloading this thing would do to your screen time, you probably would not download it. And so if you can look now at what you were spending that should help, if you would not start it if it came today, is a very clear, should be a very deciding factor as to whether you continue doing said thing.

Amy Morin:

And yet we rarely do that, right? And if we looked at that, we asked ourselves that question, there are plenty of things we'd say, well no, and then for whatever reason we forget, well I can still give that thing up now.

Ryan Holiday:

Of course. That's not to say it's easy, but you can.

Amy Morin:

Right. Okay, one last question for you. For somebody who's listening and says, okay, I struggle with discipline, what advice would you have for them about where to start so that they can develop better self-discipline?

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, where would I start? Well, we already talked about getting up, and all of those things. So what would be a great starting point for discipline? George Washington, as a young man he sees this play, it's the Hamilton of its day, no pun intended, and it's called Cato by Joseph Addison, and it's a play about one of the famous stoics. And one of the most famous lines in the play has to do with Cato saying that he looks at everything through the calm and mild light of philosophy, meaning he has this worldview, this frame of reference, this idea of virtue, and that before he does or says anything he looks at the world through that lens.

And this is a philosophy that Washington takes from this play, it's his favorite quote, he says it all the time. His point was it wasn't that George Washington wasn't emotional, that he didn't have a strong temper, that he wasn't passionate, you don't become George Washington if you don't have that. But what Washington does, he strives to look at everything through this calm and mild life.

And the stoics talk about putting every impression to the test, they say, "You should be like a money changer, who's able to tell counterfeit from real." And so I think this practice of just filtering everything, when you feel compelled to do something, being able to stop for just a second go, why do I feel compelled to do this? What is my motivation here? When you think, oh, it would be so fun to have this, or it would be so nice to buy this, being able to stop and go, is that really true? Would it actually be nice? And this practice of a pause, an ability to reflect and examine and put our impressions or inclinations up into the test, to me that's what the essence of stoic philosophy is.

I'm not saying that this is easy, I'm saying it takes as much discipline as being the kind of person who gets up and runs 15 miles in the morning, but it's the most important form of discipline that you can have. As we said, a lot of people are in great shape, can lift heavy things, but then they get stuck in traffic for five minutes and they lose control of themselves. And so to me, that would be the practice to start with, or the practice to aspire to, let's say.

Amy Morin:

I think obviously as a therapist I'd say that all of that is very true, and sometimes managing our own response to stuff is the toughest thing. And learning about it, recognizing it, and figuring it out, it's like, okay, this is my job, my job is to control how I respond to something, not to control the things that happened to me.

Ryan Holiday:

Totally, yeah. I was just going to say, I wrote this line in Obstacle Is the Way, "Just because it's simple doesn't mean that it's easy." Everything in your list of 13, on all of them, are very simple and very straightforward, but if they were easy everyone would do them all the time. And that's the work of one's life, is to get even just a little bit more consistent doing these things in the moment that it counts.

Amy Morin:

I appreciate that you talked about in your book too that it's okay to sweat the small stuff.

Ryan Holiday:

Of course.

Amy Morin:

Paying attention to those little things can make a big difference, so I appreciate it. Thank you for being on the show, Ryan.

Ryan Holiday:

Yeah, thanks for having me.

Amy Morin:

Welcome to The Therapist's Take! This is the part of the show where I'll give you my take on Ryan's strategies for developing discipline, and I'll share how you can apply them to your own life. Here are three of my favorite strategies that Ryan shared.

Number one: know your priorities. Ryan talks a lot about the importance of knowing what your priorities are in life. If you don't, it's hard to know what to say yes to and what to say no to. Sometimes people who are really busy don't feel productive because they're not doing the things that matter most. They're saying yes to way too many things and aren't focused on their goals. I like that Ryan talked about how being a good dad is important to him. So part of his disciplined life is about carving time out to be with his family. Being really disciplined isn't always about accomplishing more. It's about having the discipline to devote to the things that are really important to you.

Number two: look at what you're giving up. I appreciated that Ryan talked about the importance of looking at things in terms of what you're giving up because everything you say yes to means you're saying no to something else. I also like that he encourages people to ask themselves whether they'd start a habit now knowing what they know now. Would you still pick up a cigarette if you knew how addictive it was going to be? Or would you still download an app if you knew how much time you were going to spend using it? If the answer is no, take it as a sign that you should give that thing up. Just

because you've been smoking for a decade, or you've been using an app for two years, doesn't mean you should keep going.

And number three: start with one area of your life and spread to others. People don't either have complete discipline or none at all. We waiver in how much discipline that we have sometimes based on our environment. It's easy to avoid drugs when you're in rehab, but much harder to do that once you go home. It's also easier to be disciplined in some areas rather than others. You might find it easy to save money, but hard to motivate yourself to exercise. Keep in mind that everyone has room for improvement, and there are many small steps that you can take to start becoming more disciplined.

So I like that Ryan talked about developing discipline in one area of your life to get going, like going to sleep at a certain time and then waking up at a certain time. It's important to develop some confidence in your ability to have self-control. So start small and then work on expanding discipline to other areas of your life. Keep in mind that a lack of discipline in just one area can wreak havoc on your life. If you're great with money, but you can't manage your health, you probably won't live your best life. So it's important to imagine the kind of life you want to live and then work on the discipline plan that you're going to need to make it happen.

So those are three of Ryan's tips that I highly recommend: know your priorities, ask yourself what you're giving up each time you say yes, and take small steps toward developing discipline in different areas of your life. If you want to hear more about what Ryan has to say on the subject of discipline, check out his newest book, *Discipline is Destiny.*

And if you know somebody who could benefit from hearing this message, share this message with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.

Do you want free access to my online course? It's called “10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential.” To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We'll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and for listening to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!* And as always, a big thank you to my show's producer (who has the discipline to avoid Key lime pie even when I try to peer pressure him into it), Nick Valentin.