

HABIT



Be Proactive



**I Am
the Force**

Growing up in my home was at times a big pain. Why? Because my dad always made me take responsibility for everything in my life.

Whenever I said something like “Dad, my girlfriend makes me so mad,” without fail Dad would come back with: “Now come on, Sean, no one can make you mad unless you let them. It’s your choice. You choose to be mad.”

Or if I said, “My new biology teacher is the worst. I’m never going to learn a thing,” Dad would say, “Why don’t you go to your teacher and give him some suggestions? Change teachers. Find a tutor if you have to. If you don’t learn biology, Sean, it’s your own fault, not your teacher’s.”

People are just about as happy as they make up their mind to be.



ABRAHAM LINCOLN U.S. PRESIDENT

He never let me off the hook. He was always challenging me, making sure that I never blamed someone else for the way I acted. Luckily my mom let me blame other people and things for my problems or I might have turned out psycho.

I often screamed back, “You’re wrong, Dad! I didn’t choose to be mad. She MADE, MADE, MADE me mad. Just get off my back and leave me alone.”

You see, Dad’s idea that you are responsible for your life was hard medicine for me to swallow as a teenager. But, with hindsight, I see the wisdom in what he was doing. He wanted me to learn that there are two types of people in this world—the proactive and the reactive—those who take responsibility for their lives and those who blame; those who make it happen and those who get happened to.

Habit 1, Be Proactive, is the key to unlocking all the other habits and that’s why it comes first. Habit 1 says “I am the force. I am the captain of my life. I can choose my attitude. I’m responsible for my own happiness or unhappiness. I am in the driver’s seat of my destiny, not just a passenger.”

Being proactive is the first step toward achieving the private victory. Can you imagine doing algebra before learning addition and subtraction? Not gonna happen. The same goes for the 7 Habits. You can’t do Habits 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 before doing Habit 1. That’s because until you feel you are in charge of your own life, nothing else is really possible, now, is it?

Hmmmm . . .

Proactive or Reactive . . . the Choice Is Yours

Each day you and I get about 100 chances to choose whether to be proactive or reactive. In any given day, the weather is bad, you get a mean text, you can't find a job, your sister steals your hoodie, you lose an election at school, your friend talks behind your back, someone graffiti's your locker, your parents don't let you take the car (for no reason), you get a parking ticket, and you flunk a test. So what're you going to do about it? Are you in the habit of reacting to these kinds of everyday things, or are you proactive? The choice is yours. It really is. You don't have to respond the way everyone else does, or the way people think you should.

How many times have you been driving down the road when suddenly somebody cuts in front of you, making you hit the brakes? What do you do? Scream at them? Swear? Flip them the bird? Let it ruin your day? Or do you just let it go? Laugh about it. Move on.

The choice is yours.



Reactive people make choices based on impulse. They are like a can of soda pop. When life shakes them up a bit, the pressure builds and they suddenly explode.

"Hey, you stupid jerk! Get out of my lane!"

Proactive people make choices based on values. They *think* before they act. They recognize they can't control everything that happens to them, but they can control *what they do about it*. Unlike reactive people who are full of carbonation, proactive people are like water. Shake them up all you want, take off the lid, and nothing. No fizzing, no bubbling, no pressure. They stay calm, cool, and in control.

"I'm not going to let that guy get me upset and ruin my day."

The best way to understand the proactive mind-set is to compare proactive and reactive responses to situations that happen all the time.

Scene One

You see pictures on Facebook of your best friend at a party the night she said she was too busy to hang out with you. She doesn't know you saw the photos. Just five minutes ago, this same friend was sweet-talking you right to your face. You feel hurt and betrayed.

Reactive choices

- Chew her out. Shove past her as you storm off.
- Go into a deep depression because you feel so bad about her leaving you out.
- Decide that she's a two-faced liar and give her the silent treatment.
- Go out of your way to exclude her. After all, she did it to you.

Proactive choices

- Forgive her and give her a second chance.
- Confront her and share how you feel that she lied to you.
- Realize that she has weaknesses just like you and that occasionally you don't include her in things without really meaning any harm.

Scene Two

You've been working at your retail job for a while now and have been completely committed and dependable. Recently, a new employee joined the crew and he gets the coveted Saturday afternoon shift—the shift you were hoping for.

Reactive choices

- Spend half your waking hours complaining to everyone and their dog about how unfair this decision was.
- Scrutinize the new employee and find his every weakness.
- Text your boss messages asking why he doesn't like you.
- Begin to slack off while working your shift.

Proactive choices

- Talk with your supervisor about why the new employee got the better shift, or if you and he can alternate.
- Continue to be a hard-working employee so you get the next promotion.
- Learn what you can do to improve your performance.
- If you determine you are in a dead-end job, begin looking for a new one.

• **LISTEN TO YOUR LANGUAGE**

You can usually tell the difference between proactive and reactive people by the language they use. Reactive language usually sounds like this:

“That's me. That's just the way I am.” What they're really saying is, I'm not responsible for the way I act. I can't change. I was predetermined to be this way.

“If my chem teacher wasn't such a jerk, things would be different.” What they're really saying is, School is the cause of all my problems, not me.



“Thanks a lot. You just ruined my day.” What they’re really saying is, *I’m not in control of my own moods. You are.*

“If only I went to a different school, had better friends, had cooler parents, had a boyfriend . . . then I’d be happy.” What they’re really saying is, *I’m not in control of my own happiness, “things” are. I must have things to be happy.*

Notice that reactive language takes power away from you and gives it to something or someone else. As my friend John Bytheway explains in his book *What I Wish I’d Known in High School*, when you’re reactive it’s like giving someone else the remote control to your life and saying, “Here, change my mood anytime you wish.” Proactive language, on the other hand, puts the remote control back into your own hands. You’re free to choose which channel you want to be on.

REACTIVE LANGUAGE

PROACTIVE LANGUAGE

I’ll try

I’ll do it

That’s just the way I am

I can do better than that

There’s nothing I can do

Let’s look at all our options

I have to

I choose to

I can’t

There’s gotta be a way

You ruined my day

I’m not going to let your bad mood rub off on me

• THE VICTIMITIS VIRUS

Some people suffer from a contagious virus I call “victimitis.” Perhaps you’ve seen it. People infected with victimitis believe that everyone has it in for them and that the world owes them something . . . which isn’t the case at all. I like the way author Mark Twain put it: “Don’t go around saying the world owes you a living. The world owes you nothing. It was here first.”

I played college football with a guy who had a bad case of victimitis. His comments drove me crazy:

“I would be starting, but the coaches have something against me.”

“I was about to intercept the ball, but somebody cut me off.”

“I would have got a better 40-yard-dash time, but my shoes came loose.”

“Yeah, right,” I always felt like saying. “And I’d be President if my dad weren’t bald.” To me, it was obvious why he never played. In his mind, the problem was always “out there.” He never considered that perhaps *his* attitude was the problem.

Adreana, an honor student from Chicago, grew up in a home where feeling victimized caused a lot of tension:

I’m black and proud of it. Color has not stood in my way and I learn so much from white and black teachers and counselors alike. But in my own home it’s a different thing. My mother, who dominates the family, is fifty years old, came from the South, and still acts as though slavery was just abolished. She sees my doing good in school as a threat, as if I am joining the “white folks.” She still uses language like “the man is keeping us from doing this and that. He is keeping us boxed up and won’t let us do anything.”

I always rebut with “No man is keeping you from doing anything, only yourself, because you keep thinking the way you think.” Even my boyfriend falls into the white-man-is-holding-me-back attitude. When he was recently trying to purchase a car and the sale didn’t go through, he remarked with frustration, “The white man doesn’t want us to get anything.” I almost lost it and confronted him with how silly that kind of thinking was. But it only resulted in him feeling that I was taking the side of the white man.

I remain convinced that the only person who can hold you back is yourself.

Besides feeling like victims, reactive people:

- Are easily offended
- Blame others
- Get angry and say things they later regret
- Criticize and complain
- Wait for things to happen to them
- Change only when they have to

• IT PAYS TO BE PROACTIVE

Proactive people are a different breed. Proactive people:

- Can brush things off without getting offended
- Take responsibility for their choices
- Think before they act
- Bounce back when something bad happens
- Always find a way to move forward
- Focus on things they can do something about, and don’t worry about things they can’t

I remember starting a new job and working with a guy named Randy. I don’t know what his problem was, but for some reason he didn’t like me—and he wanted me to know it. He’d say rude things to me daily. I mean, like, *all the time*. Once I returned from vacation and a

friend told me, "Boy, Sean, if you only knew what Randy has been saying about you. You'd better watch your back."

Having a nemesis is a drag. There were times I wanted to pound the guy, but I somehow managed to keep my cool and ignore him. Whenever he insulted me, I made it a personal challenge to treat him well in return. I had faith that things would work out in the end if I acted this way.

In a matter of a few months things began to change. Randy could see that I wasn't going to play his game and began to lighten up. He even told me one time, "I've tried to offend you, but you won't take offense." After being at the company for about a year, we became friends and gained respect for each other. Had I reacted to his attacks, which was my gut instinct, I'm certain we wouldn't be friends today. (I'm also certain that at least one of us would've wound up missing a few teeth.) Often all it takes is one person to create a friendship.

Mary Beth discovered for herself the benefits of being proactive:

I'd taken a class at school where we'd talked about proactivity, and I'd wondered about how to really apply it. One day as I was checking groceries for a guy, he suddenly told me that the groceries I had just rung up weren't his. My first reaction was to say, "You idiot," then put the bar down between the other customer's groceries. "Why didn't you stop me sooner?" So I have to delete it all and call to get the changes approved by a supervisor while he just stands there and thinks it's funny. Meanwhile the air is rising and I'm getting real irritated. To top it off he then has the nerve to question the price I charged him for the broccoli.

Be Proactive...

To my horror, I discovered that he was right. I had put the wrong code numbers in the register for the broccoli. Now I was extra irritated and so tempted to lash out at him to cover for my own mistake. But then this idea popped into my mind: "Be Proactive."

So I said, "You're right, sir. It's completely my fault. I'll correct the pricing. It will just take a couple of seconds." I also remembered that being proactive doesn't mean you're a doormat, so I reminded him nicely that to avoid this kind of thing in the future he would need to always put the bar down that separates orders.

It felt so good. I had apologized, but I had also said what I wanted to say. It was such a simple little thing, but it gave me such inner conversion and confidence in this habit.

At this point you're probably ready to shoot me and say, "Now come on, Sean. It's not that easy." I won't argue with you. Being reactive is way, way easier. It's easy to lose your cool. That doesn't take any control. And it's easy to whine and complain. Without question, though, being proactive is the higher road and one that will take you much farther in the not-so-long run.

But, remember, you don't have to be perfect. In reality, you and I aren't either completely proactive or reactive but probably somewhere in between. The key then is to get in the habit of being proactive so you can run on autopilot and not even have to think about it. If you're choosing to be proactive 20 out of 100 times on average each day, try doing it 30 out of 100 times. Then 40. Never underestimate the huge difference small changes can make.

• WE CAN CONTROL ONLY ONE THING

The fact is, we can't control everything that happens to us. We can't control where our

ancestors came from, who will win the Superbowl, how much tuition will be next fall, or how others might treat us. But there is one thing we *can* control: *how we respond to what happens to us*. And that is what counts! This is why we need to stop worrying about things we can't control and start worrying about things we *can*.

Picture two circles. The inner circle is our circle of control. It includes things we have control over—ourselves, our attitudes, our choices, our response to whatever happens to us. Surrounding the circle of control is the circle of no control. It includes the thousands of things we can't do anything about.

Now, what will happen if we spend our time and energy worrying about things we can't control, like a rude comment, a past mistake, or the fact that it's raining on a good hair day? You guessed it! We'll feel even more out of control, as if we were victims. For instance, if your sister annoys you and you're always complaining about her weaknesses (something you have control over), that won't do anything to fix the problem. It'll only cause you to blame your problems on her and lose power yourself. Ignore the rude comment, avoid making the mistake next time, and get an umbrella for the rain. You are the star of your own life. Focus on what you can influence.



Renatha told me a story that illustrates this point. A week before her upcoming volleyball game, she learned that the mother of a player on the opposing team had made fun of Renatha's volleyball skills. Instead of ignoring the comments, Renatha became angry and spent the rest of the week stewing. When the game arrived, her only goal was to prove to this woman that she was a good player. To make a long story short, Renatha played poorly, spent much of her time on the bench, and her team lost the game. She was so focused on something she couldn't control (a stranger's opinion of her) that she lost control of the only thing she could control, herself.

Proactive people, on the other hand, focus elsewhere . . . on the things they *can* control. By doing so they experience inner peace and are primed for whatever comes their way. They learn to live with the many things they can't do anything about, even to smile and laugh about them. They may not like them, but they know it's no use worrying.

• TURNING SETBACKS INTO TRIUMPHS

Life often deals us a bad hand but it's up to you to think to yourself: "I've got this. I can get through it." By the way, think of how boring you'd be if nothing challenging ever happened to you—you'd never learn, and then you'd never change! Every setback is an opportunity for us to turn it into a triumph, as this account by Brad Lemley from *Parade* magazine illustrates:

"It's not what happens to you in life, it's what you do about it," says W. Mitchell, a self-made millionaire, a sought-after speaker, a former mayor, a river rafter, and skydiver. And he accomplished all this after his accidents.

If you saw Mitchell you'd find this hard to believe. You see, this guy's face is a patchwork of multicolored skin grafts, the fingers of both his hands are either missing or mere stubs, and his paralyzed legs lie thin and useless under his slacks. Mitchell says sometimes people try to guess how he was injured. A car wreck? Vietnam? The real story is more astounding than one could ever imagine. On June 19, 1971, he was on top of the world—young, healthy, and popular. The day before, he had bought a beautiful new motorcycle. That morning, he soloed in an airplane for the first time.

"That afternoon, I got on that motorcycle to ride to work," he recalls, "and at an intersection, a laundry truck and I collided. The bike went down, crushed my elbow and fractured my pelvis, and the gas can popped open on the motorcycle. The gas poured out, the heat of the engine ignited it, and I got burned over 65 percent of my body." Fortunately, a quick-thinking man in a nearby car lot doused Mitchell with a fire extinguisher and saved his life.

Even so, Mitchell's face had been burned off, his fingers were black, charred, and twisted, his legs were nothing but raw, red flesh. It was common for first-time visitors to look at him and faint. He was unconscious for two weeks, and then he awakened.

Over four months, he had 13 transfusions, 16 skin-graft operations, and several other surgeries. Four years later, after spending months in rehabilitation and years learning to adapt to his new handicaps, the unthinkable happened. Mitchell was involved in a freak airplane crash, and was paralyzed from the waist down. "When I tell people there were two separate accidents," he says, "they can hardly stand it."

After his paralyzing plane crash accident, Mitchell recalls meeting a nineteen-year-old patient in the hospital's gymnasium. "This guy had also been paralyzed. He had been a mountain climber, a skier, an active outdoors person, and he was convinced his life was over. Finally, I went over to this guy and said, 'You know something? Before all this happened to me, there were 10,000 things I could do. Now there are 9,000. I could spend the rest of my life dwelling on the 1,000 that I lost, but I choose to focus on the 9,000 that are left.' "

Mitchell says his secret is twofold. First is the love and encouragement of friends and family, and second is a personal philosophy he has gleaned from various sources. He realized he did not have to buy into society's notion that one must be handsome and healthy to be happy. "I am in charge of my own spaceship," he states emphatically. "It is my up, my down. I could choose to see this situation as a setback or a starting point."

I like how Helen Keller put it, "So much has been given to me. I have no time to ponder that which has been denied."

Although most of our setbacks won't be as severe as Mitchell's, all of us will have our fair share. You might get dumped, you may lose an election at school, you may get beaten up,

you may not get accepted to the school of your choice, you may become seriously ill. I hope and believe that you will be proactive and strong in these defining moments.

I remember a major setback of my own. Two years after I had become the starting quarterback in college, I seriously injured my knee, had surgery, fell behind, and subsequently lost my position. Coach called me into his office just before the season began and told me they were handing the starting job to someone else.



I felt sick. I'd worked my whole life to get to this position. It was my senior year. This *wasn't* supposed to happen.

As a backup, I had a choice to make. I could complain, bad-mouth the new guy, and feel sorry for myself. Or . . . I could make the most of the situation.

Luckily, I decided to deal with it. I was no longer throwing touchdowns, but I could help in other ways. So I swallowed my pride and kept supporting the team, working hard and preparing for each game as if I were the starter. I chose to keep my chin up.

Was it easy? Not at *all*. I often felt like a failure. Sitting out every game after being the starter was humiliating. Keeping a good attitude was a constant struggle.

Was it the right choice, though? Definitely. I wore out my bum on the bench all year but I contributed to the team in other ways by supporting the new guy and helping to prepare our defense each week for the opposing team's offense. Most important, I took responsibility for my attitude. I cannot begin to tell you what a positive difference this singular decision made in my life.

• **RIISING ABOVE ABUSE**

One of the most intense and difficult setbacks of all is coping with abuse. I'll never forget the morning I spent with a group of teens—mostly young women, but also some young men—who had been sexually abused as children, were victims of date rape, or were otherwise abused emotionally or physically.

Heather told me this story: