

More From How to Build a Life

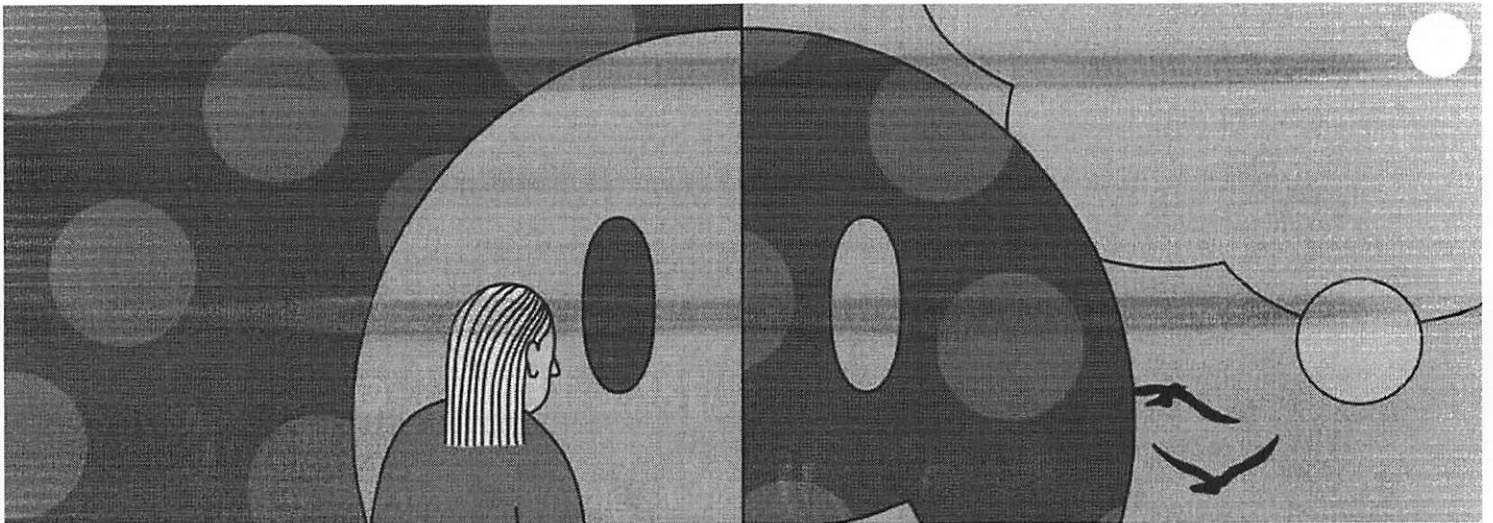
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HOW TO BUILD A LIFE

Make a To-Don't List

When you're feeling stuck, focusing on the things you hate can help.

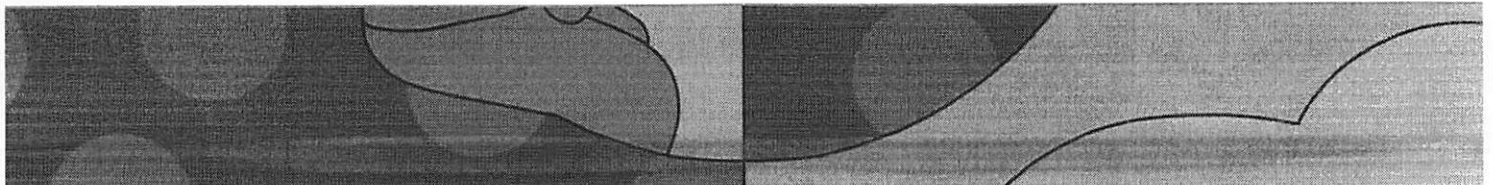
By Arthur C. Brooks



The Atlantic


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Jan Buchczik

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“How to Build a Life” is a column by Arthur Brooks, tackling questions of meaning and happiness. Click here to listen to his podcast series on all things happiness, How to Build a Happy Life.

How are your New Year’s resolutions going? Perhaps that’s a sore subject. Resolutions usually fail, sometimes even in the first few months of the year (one study found that half dissolved after three months), so odds are good that yours have too. If so, don’t feel too bad! Clearly, you’re in good company.

If your resolutions have become a statistic, let me suggest a new approach for the remainder of the year: Create a list of *anti-resolutions*. These are things you want to *not* do this year, such as spending time with particular people who don’t bring out your best, or going places you don’t enjoy. That might sound a little too, well, negative, but it’s actually an approach to life improvement based on an ancient philosophical concept known as the *via negativa*.

The *via negativa* was popularized in two ancient Christian treatises purportedly written by Dionysius the Areopagite, a fifth- or sixth-century theologian. Dionysius wrote that God could not be described with any worldly conception or name, and that he could be known only by contemplating what he is not. This paradox also

shows up in the works of Thomas Aquinas, who argued in his 13th-century *Summa Theologiae* that if you think you understand God, you don't.

This is a bit of a mind-bender, I know. But stay with me here. The *via negativa*, at its core, is about recognizing that when you don't know the *right* way forward, you might succeed by focusing on what you know to be *wrong* instead. If you have been feeling stuck—in, say, your job or relationship—but don't know exactly what to do to make things better, the *via negativa* might be exactly what you need.

P EOPLE CASUALLY USE a secular version of the *via negativa* all the time without realizing it. For example, after a weekend at the beach with your family, you can probably list the irritations far more easily than the pleasant aspects, even if on balance the trip was all right.

This isn't (necessarily) because you're a negative person. Everyone has what psychologists call "negativity bias," a propensity to notice the details you dislike over those you like in any situation. This bias probably evolved in humans for self-protection: In times past, missing a potential threat (for example, an angry face) could cost you your life, while missing a small delight (for example, someone's sweet smile) was not so risky. Negativity bias also helps explain what some psychologists have called the "positivity ratio"—in order to classify an experience as positive, we generally need to feel more good emotions than bad ones.

The negativity bias might seem regrettable, but it is extremely useful if we harness it properly using the *via negativa*. As the mathematician Nassim Nicholas Taleb argues in his 2012 book, *Antifragile: Things That Gain From Disorder*, the *via negativa* gives us “subtractive knowledge” that is specific and targeted, and if we pay careful attention, can tangibly improve our situation.

Take the beach weekend as an example. When you get home, you’ll have a list of things you experienced, and you can easily name the ones you didn’t like and don’t want to repeat next time (for example, bringing your brother-in-law). In contrast, the things you might add (such as a different guest, who, you hope, won’t get arrested) are hypothetical. Subtractive knowledge is practically guaranteed to lead to improvement, but additive knowledge is often just a guess.

TO USE THE *via negativa* to improve your life, start by making a *to-don’t* list to go along with your to-do list. Write down the things you do out of habit or obligation, even though they lower your spirits. Perhaps you’ll resolve to avoid a few toxic friends. Maybe you will delete your social-media accounts because they eat up your time and make you feel lonely.

This strategy works in many other areas of life. Because of the nature of my research, many people reach out to me for advice about retirement, and I always start with the *via negativa*. I ask them to list the parts of their professional and social lives they most dislike. For many of them, it's the feeling of being constantly in a rush: They can't take their time in a conversation, at lunch, or at the gym, because they have to get to the next thing. Then I ask them to imagine a daily and weekly routine without these obligations. Retirement, I tell them, is not inactivity; it is simply getting rid of the parts of your schedule that prevent you from lingering over the things you are enjoying. The best retirement plans start with a to-don't list, which leads to a ventilation of your schedule that will reliably increase your happiness with zero boredom.

Similarly, when I speak with students or friends who have just ended a bad relationship, many of them ask how to avoid making the mistakes that led to the recent breakup. The answer is the *via negativa*. After a relationship ends, write down a list of all the dimensions of your romance that were problematic, and that you should avoid in the future if possible. Be very specific, such as "Do not get a pet together" or "Do not move into his van." Make sure you look at your to-don't list when you start to date again, so the neurochemical flush of new love doesn't overwhelm your brain's negativity bias.

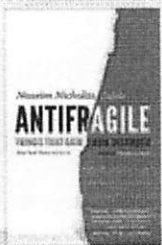
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The *via negativa* is also useful for reviving an existing romance that isn't going so well. If that's the case for you and your beloved, sit down together and ask yourselves, "What are we doing that is making us unhappy?" Then resolve together to chip away the detritus harming your relationship and find a much better one within the old shell.

THE *VIA NEGATIVA* can solve a lot of practical problems. But more important, it has the potential to give us self-knowledge we cannot attain in any other way. Many traditions teach that there is a true self in each of us that is hard to see clearly. Hinduism, for example, offers the concept of Atman, which is the true self. Atman is difficult to comprehend, though, because it is obscured by *upādāna*—attachments—in the form of vanities, baubles, and distractions. For example, if you always introduce yourself in terms of your job, you are offering others a symbol of yourself instead of your true self—and you probably do this in your own mind as well, which leads to a spiritual emptiness.

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The solution is not to try to see through the cloud of your attachments, but rather to undertake a process encapsulated in the Sanskrit expression *neti-neti*, which means "not this, not this." It is to eliminate the things that are not truly you—for example, your career, your money, your looks, your social-media following. Write down the items on that list. Each day, recite all of the things you are *not*, such as "I am not my job title." You might just find that this *via negativa* has introduced you to yourself.



Antifragile - Things That Gain From Disorder

By Nassim Nicholas Taleb

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