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# Four Simple Practices That Help Create Our Best Life

By **Regina V. Cates**



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It may seem simplistic to say that to create our best life, we must bring the best of ourselves to life. Yet I find this statement to be true. There are countless benefits derived from striving to be our best in all we do. They include deep and fulfilling relationships, self-confidence, and having genuine gratitude for simply being alive.

Being our best is not always easy. But I believe it is a good goal, and one that is possible to achieve when we develop daily practices to help us.

Here are four specific behaviors that have helped me, and I believe they will help you, also: Develop a love for reading, cultivate a passion for lifelong learning, develop strong interpersonal skills, and be courteous.

## 1. Develop a love for reading.

Research shows that regular reading offers numerous benefits, from strengthening our brain connectivity to empowering us to empathize with other people. Here's how.

- When reading a book, we have to maintain our focus on the characters, setting, and story development over a period of time (unless we power through it in one sitting). This, in turn, heightens our ability to concentrate and improves memory function. The more we read, the sharper we become.
- Books inspire us! Whether we're reading a novel or memoir, when the protagonist faces a huge problem, don't we root for them to win? And when they do, we can often reflect on the lessons learned and apply them to our own lives.
- Reading broadens our knowledge of the world. In both fiction and non-fiction, we learn facts we may not have been familiar with, such as the workings of the justice system, creatures under the sea, or the type of meals people eat in foreign lands. The more widely we read, the more knowledgeable we become. Added benefit: We're better conversationalists.
- Books that take us out of our own experience and into another's help us develop empathy. As the author uses a variety of circumstances

to reveal the characters' thoughts and feelings, we're drawn more deeply into their story. We begin to gain an understanding of their experience in ways we might never have been able to before. This makes us better human beings.

- Reading can be an excellent stress reducer. A book transports us into another world, usually one far removed from our own. As we sink into the story and worries about our own life subside, we may find our heart rate has slowed and our blood pressure lowered. Reading before bed is a good idea too, as it helps calm the mind and signal the brain that it's time to slow down. Just be sure the book is printed, not digital, as blue light from the phone or computer screen hinders sleep.

## 2. Cultivate an appreciation for lifelong learning.

Often we think of learning as formal: it's done in a school, college, or university setting. While formal education can provide a great foundation for success in a career by teaching us about a variety of subjects, as human beings we have a natural curiosity about ourselves, other people, and the natural world. We are innate learners, so our learning does not stop when a formal education ends. Here are some of the benefits gained from lifelong learning.

- We get personal fulfillment and grow skills from learning about activities we're interested in, such as cooking, gardening, sewing, computer programming, or bird watching. The list of enjoyable things we can do by continuing to learn and grow is endless.
- We receive great satisfaction through self-taught study, online or in person. Regardless of what method we choose, continuing education expands our knowledge base. We grow when we learn a new language, start an informational blog or podcast, participate in a new sport, or dive deep into a topic of worthwhile interest, like animals, climate science, or financial planning.
- Sometimes we get stuck in a daily rut of work, cleaning, or child care, all of which are necessary but often leave us feeling

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unfulfilled. Devoting time each day to expand ourselves through learning provides great satisfaction in just knowing we really can do the things in life we want to do, and not just the things we have to do.

- By approaching lifelong learning as a positive addition to a well-balanced life, we reduce boredom and make daily life more interesting.
- When we pursue a new learning opportunity, we sharpen the skills we already have or identify skills that can use improvement. These may include problem-solving, developing creativity, improving interpersonal communication, honing critical thinking, and even becoming adaptable to change.
- Lifelong learning helps improve self-confidence in both our personal and professional lives by providing a sense of accomplishment.

### 3. Develop strong interpersonal skills.

As the term “interpersonal” implies, this is about the face-to-face exchange of thoughts, ideas, feelings, experiences, and emotions between two or more people. All healthy relationships are based on good interpersonal skills between the people involved. No matter if it is a parent and child, partners and spouses, neighbors, school peers, or co-workers, interpersonal skills are critical to building and maintaining good relationships. Here are a number of ways to develop those skills.

- Be an active listener. During a conversation, keep eye contact with the person. Do not interrupt people when they are speaking. Learn to listen to understand, rather than just to respond. When you are engaged in conversation, do not take a telephone call or text without saying, “Excuse me, I must take this call.” And when people ask how you are, tell them. Then ask them how they are and listen with compassion and caring. In addition, when you make a phone call, introduce yourself first and then ask if you can speak with the person you are calling.
- When interacting with people face to face, put your phone down. The people you are with are more important in the moment than whoever is on the phone. This means turn your phone off and make eye contact when talking to the cashier at the restaurant or the grocery store, or with colleagues in a work meeting. Be mindful of your surroundings. If you are in a public place — post office, coffee shop, grocery store, etc. — and need to make a phone call, go outside, control your own volume, and respect other people. If you can’t take a call because you’re not in a situation where you can speak, send a text message asking the person to text or call you after a certain period of time.
- Ask questions to gather information. This includes thinking of the right questions, clearly expressing what you want to know, and communicating effectively. Interpersonal communication requires learning the thoughts, ideas, and preferences of other people, no matter if that person is a boss, a friend, a child, or a partner. There are no stupid questions when the goal is to learn. Sharing information builds trust and confidence.
- Seek constructive feedback. Often we think our way is the best way. Maybe it is. And many times when we ask for and listen to the observations of other people, we learn ways we can improve. Accepting constructive criticism with grace, no matter if it is from a family member, friend, or during a performance review at work, allows you to take in what is being communicated without becoming resentful.
- Be of help and support other people as we want to be helped and supported. Maybe it’s taking on a little extra work to help an overwhelmed co-worker. Or cleaning the table after a meal. Or running an errand for a friend. Support other people as you want to be supported. Being helpful is a sign of compassion and is highly respected within society.
- Give genuine compliments. There is a saying, “If you cannot find something good to say,

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don't say anything at all." Be generous with sincere words of praise, warm greetings, sympathy, or whatever is appropriate to the occasion. Never comment on other people's physical characteristics, even if it's a compliment, as it might be misconstrued. Never embarrass another person. That's bullying.

- Always apologize when you do something wrong. Even if it is an accident, apologize when you cause physical or emotional pain to someone. When you make a mistake, try to make amends. Take responsibility. Saying "I'm sorry" and meaning it is courageous and shows that you value being honest with yourself and others about your behavior.
- Give to others as you want to be given to. Don't just take from other people. Give, as well. It can be as simple as a compliment, a thank you, a word of support, or a smile. Often the best gifts aren't those that are bought, but those that only require a little piece of the heart.
- Be grateful and say thank you. It may seem like common sense, but many people forget to say thank you or don't say it with sincerity. Show gratitude often by making sure people know you appreciate them and their actions. Give encouragement to show you value other people's contributions that make your life better.
- Be reliable. Do what you say you will do when you say you will do it. Follow through on your commitments and responsibilities. Keep your word. Make task lists or reminders, if needed, and avoid distractions that make it easy to lose sight of deadlines. No matter if the obligation is with children, a spouse, friend, or co-worker, being dependable will earn you the respect of other people when they know they can count on you.
- Be a safe driver. We're not usually face to face with other people on the road, but we still must engage with them. Be wise, courteous, and safe in vehicles. They weigh tons and easily become deadly. Each day in cities across the world, being distracted while

driving, riding a bike or skateboard, or even walking across a street results in fatal and life-changing accidents. Most of these are avoidable when we pay attention to our surroundings and what we are doing, and we actively strive to protect ourselves and others. We can't ignore this real danger by thinking nothing will ever happen to us.

## 4. Be courteous.

Having good manners and respect for ourselves and other people is something that is valued by all who are truly successful in life. Being courteous is being polite. Whether it is the words we speak, or the way we listen, or how we behave toward others, being courteous shows that we respect ourselves and have respect for others, too. Here are a few ways we can be courteous.

- Learn people's names. In a professional situation, such as interacting with a supervisor, you may use their title; i.e., Dr., Ms., or Mr. In a casual setting with a friend or peer, you may use their first name.
- Take time and care how you present yourself, both in appearance and manners.
- In any online meeting, always mute your mic and camera unless asked to do otherwise.
- Remember, what you post on the internet and social media can remain there forever.
- No gossip, slander, or character assassination. Bullying is not moral, ethical, or acceptable. No matter who is engaging in trolling or hate speech, it is not appropriate.
- When refusing an invitation, be kind and honest. You cannot attend every function, so sometimes you will need to politely decline, and that's okay.
- Similarly, if you've made plans with someone and something comes up that prevents you from meeting with them, contact the person/people involved immediately. Be honest, because lying about why you can't come is not okay.

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- If you make an appointment with a professional, such as a physician or dentist, and have to cancel, do so as soon as you know. Their time, like yours, is extremely valuable.
- Say excuse me, please, and thank you.
- When you receive a gift, write a thank-you note or follow up with a phone call or text.
- Respect others in public. Do not talk obnoxiously or loudly. Be aware of your surroundings and the people in the vicinity. Use your phone in a private place.
- Lower the radio/music volume when you're sitting in your car in a parking lot or on a street. Do this as well when you're watching a video, playing music, or playing a game on your phone in a public place. When appropriate and safe, use headphones.
- When using someone else's phone or computer, don't go through their stuff.
- Respect and treat the property and possessions of other people like they were your own.
- If you lose or ruin an object that belongs to someone else, fix or replace it.
- Clean up after yourself at home, at work, or when visiting at a relative's or friend's house.
- When taking a ride-share, be prompt and don't make the person wait for you.
- Be polite to wait staff. Leave a good tip at a restaurant or when you take a taxi or ride-share. When you stay in a hotel, leave a tip of at least 10 percent of the bill or nightly room charge.
- When traveling away from home or school, always let someone know where you are and when you will return.
- Each time you ask for and receive help, make sure to express your gratitude.
- Dispose of trash responsibly.
- Use good table manners. Put the napkin in your lap, keep your elbows off the table, chew with your mouth closed, and never talk with food in your mouth.
- When eating, don't use your fingers unless it's finger food.
- Use your napkin, not your shirt, and don't lick your fingers.
- Speak up if you see someone being bullied or abused.
- Treat everyone with respect, no matter if they are a peer, an elder, or someone who is living on the streets.
- Be a good sport. Win without gloating. Lose without pouting.
- People are not interested in what we dislike. Keep negative opinions to yourself.
- Look for the positive in yourself, other people, and life in general.
- When you finish grocery shopping, put the cart in the return area.
- Don't park in spots reserved for those with physical disabilities or women who are pregnant.
  - When waiting to board an airplane, don't block the walkway.
- When boarding an airplane, find your seat as soon as possible and don't block the aisle.
- Same goes for getting onto an elevator. Let people off before you get on.
- Say I'm sorry when you accidentally step on your dog or cat's paw.
- Treat animals and the natural world with kindness and work to make the world a better place for all that call earth home.

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