Twitter Thread by Rob Henderson

Rob Henderson
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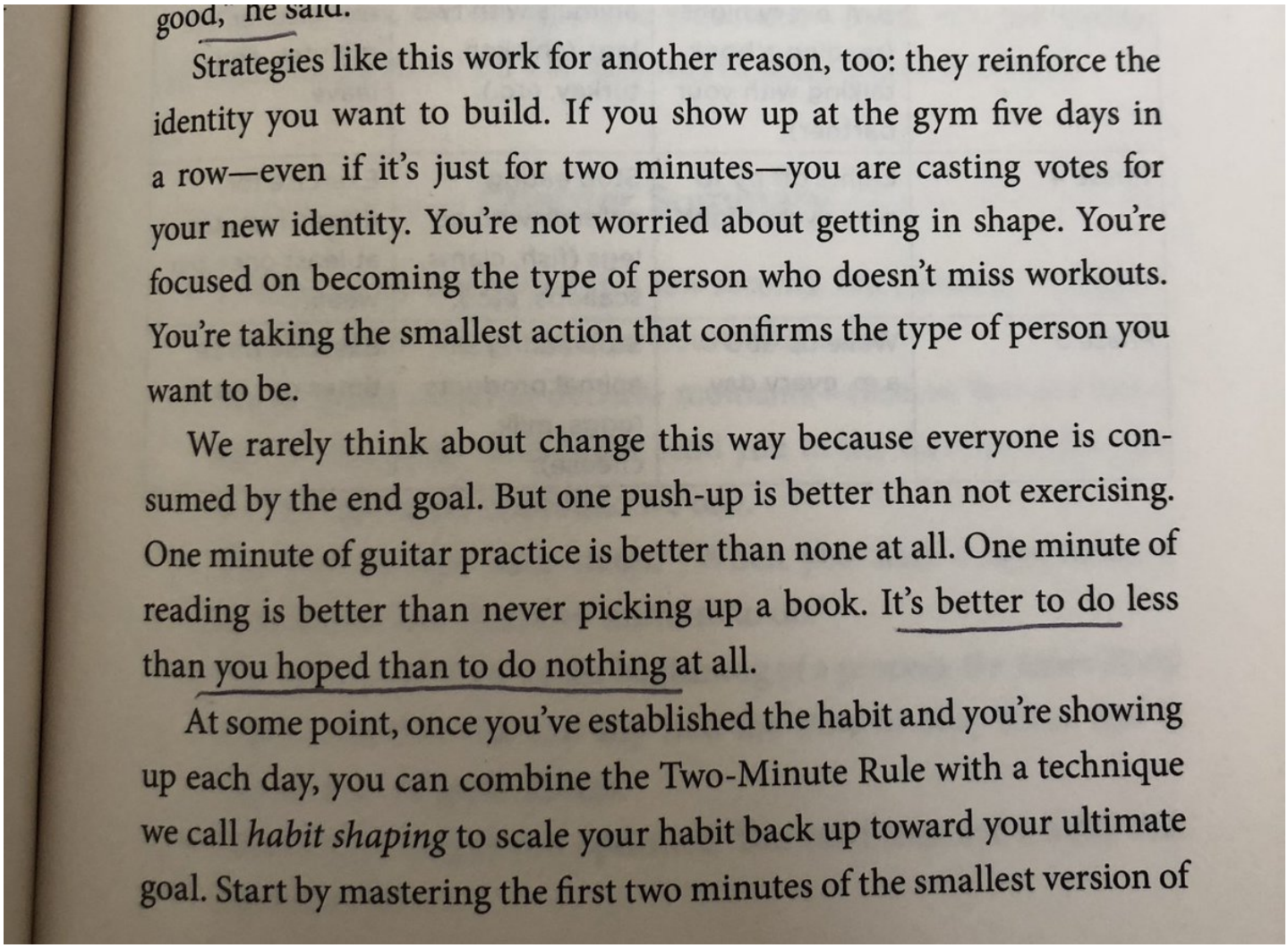
Best books I read in 2020

1. Atomic Habits by @JamesClear

"If you show up at the gym 5 days in a row—even for 2 minutes—you're casting votes for your new identity. You're not worried about getting in shape. Youre focused on becoming the type of person who doesn't miss workouts"



good," he said.

Strategies like this work for another reason, too: they reinforce the identity you want to build. If you show up at the gym five days in a row—even if it's just for two minutes—you are casting votes for your new identity. You're not worried about getting in shape. You're focused on becoming the type of person who doesn't miss workouts. You're taking the smallest action that confirms the type of person you want to be.

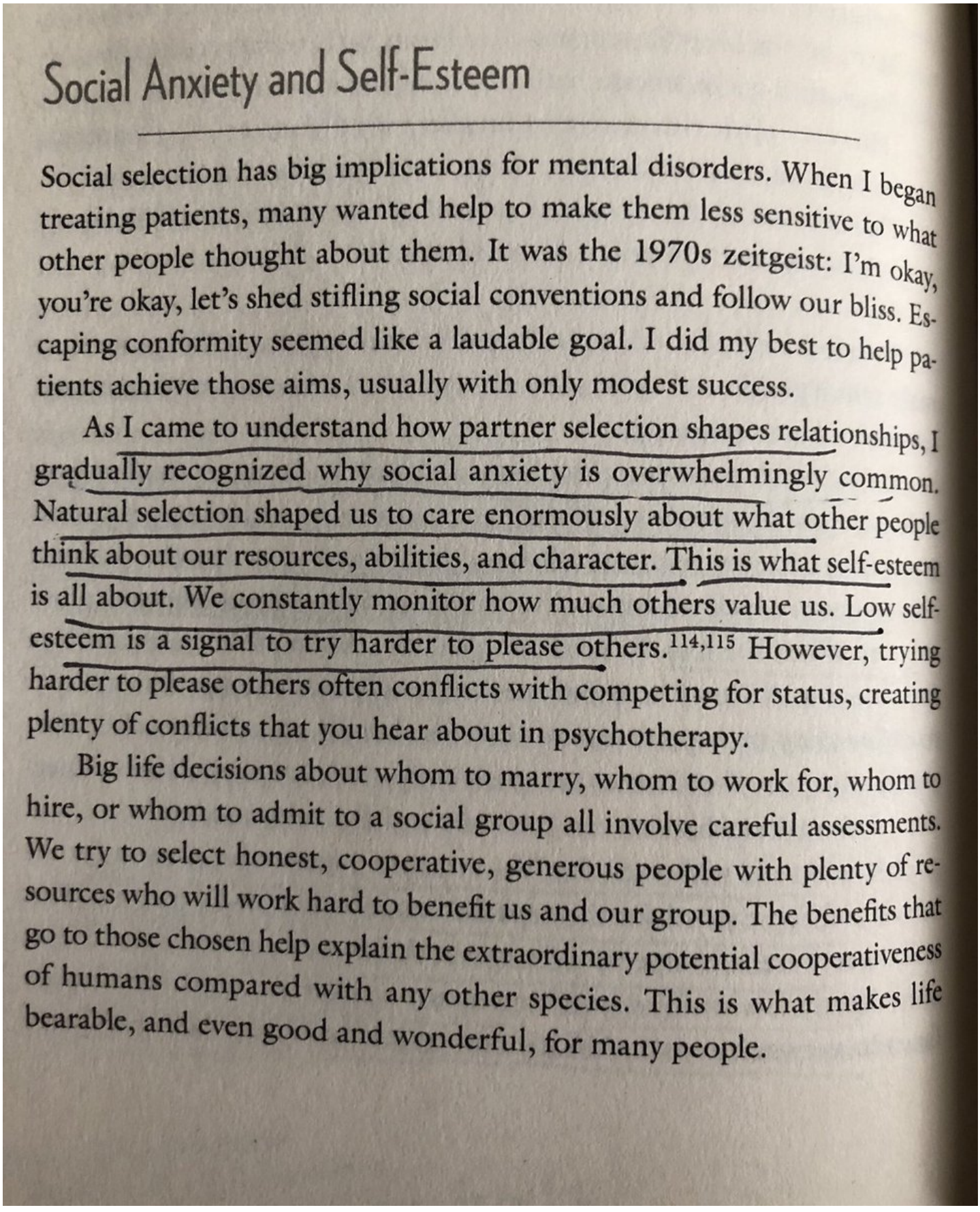
We rarely think about change this way because everyone is consumed by the end goal. But one push-up is better than not exercising. One minute of guitar practice is better than none at all. One minute of reading is better than never picking up a book. It's better to do less than you hoped than to do nothing at all.

At some point, once you've established the habit and you're showing up each day, you can combine the Two-Minute Rule with a technique we call *habit shaping* to scale your habit back up toward your ultimate goal. Start by mastering the first two minutes of the smallest version of

Good Reasons for Bad Feelings

https://t.co/KZDqte19nG

2. “social anxiety is overwhelmingly common. Natural selection shaped us to care enormously what other people think..We constantly monitor how much others value us..Low self-esteem is a signal to try harder to please others”



Social Anxiety and Self-Esteem

Social selection has big implications for mental disorders. When I began treating patients, many wanted help to make them less sensitive to what other people thought about them. It was the 1970s zeitgeist: I'm okay, you're okay, let's shed stifling social conventions and follow our bliss. Escaping conformity seemed like a laudable goal. I did my best to help patients achieve those aims, usually with only modest success.

As I came to understand how partner selection shapes relationships, I gradually recognized why social anxiety is overwhelmingly common. Natural selection shaped us to care enormously about what other people think about our resources, abilities, and character. This is what self-esteem is all about. We constantly monitor how much others value us. Low self-esteem is a signal to try harder to please others.[114,115] However, trying harder to please others often conflicts with competing for status, creating plenty of conflicts that you hear about in psychotherapy.

Big life decisions about whom to marry, whom to work for, whom to hire, or whom to admit to a social group all involve careful assessments. We try to select honest, cooperative, generous people with plenty of resources who will work hard to benefit us and our group. The benefits that go to those chosen help explain the extraordinary potential cooperativeness of humans compared with any other species. This is what makes life bearable, and even good and wonderful, for many people.

The True Believer by Eric Hoffer

https://t.co/uZT4kdhzvZ

“Hatred is the most accessible and comprehensive of all unifying agents...Mass movements can rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without a believe in a devil.”

XIV

Unifying Agents

HATRED

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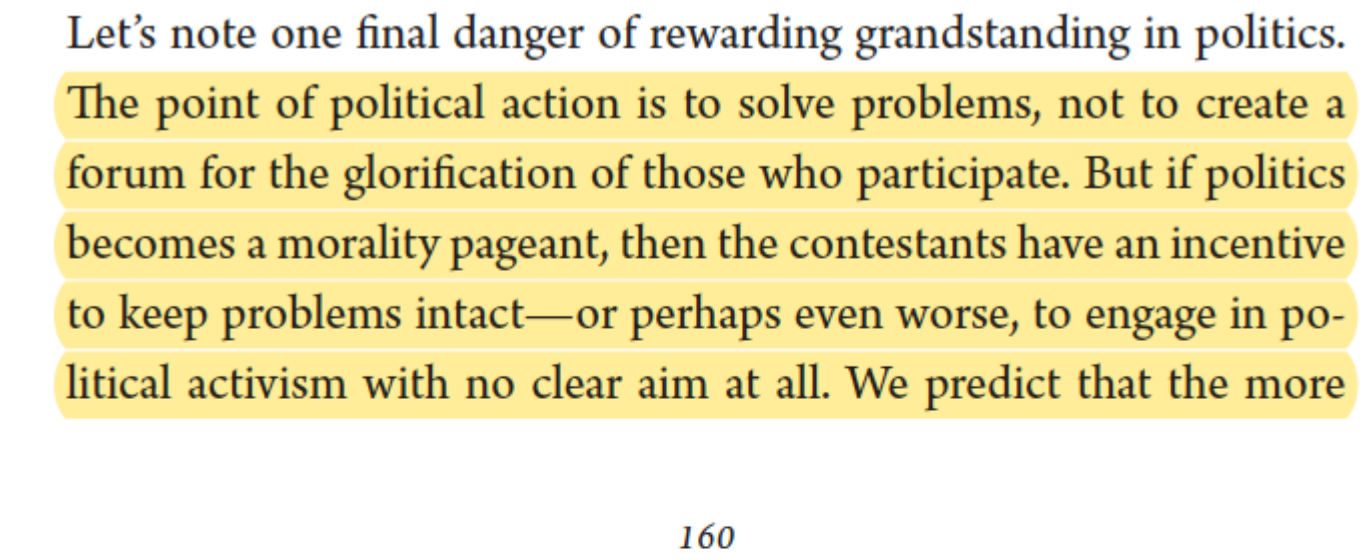
Hatred is the most accessible and comprehensive of all unifying agents. It pulls and whirls the individual away from his own self, makes him oblivious of his weal and future, frees him of jealousies and self-seeking. He becomes an anonymous particle quivering with a craving to fuse and coalesce with his like into one flaming mass. Heine suggests that what Christian love cannot do is effected by a common hatred.[1]

Mass movements can rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without belief in a devil. Usually the strength of a mass movement is proportionate to the vividness and tangibility of its devil. When Hitler was asked whether he thought the Jew must be destroyed, he answered: "No. . . . We should have then to invent him. It is essential to have a tangible enemy, not merely an abstract one."[2] F. A. Voigt tells of a Japanese mission that arrived in Berlin in 1932 to study the National Socialist movement. Voigt asked a member of the mission what he thought of the movement. He replied: "It is magnificent. I wish we could have something like it in Japan, only we can't, because we haven't got any Jews."[3] It is perhaps true that the insight and shrewdness of the men who know how to set

https://t.co/4Of58AZUj8

"if politics becomes a morality pageant, then the contestants have an incentive to keep problems intact...politics becomes a forum to show off moral qualities...people will be dedicated to activism for its own sake, as a vehicle to preen"



Let's note one final danger of rewarding grandstanding in politics. The point of political action is to solve problems, not to create a forum for the glorification of those who participate. But if politics becomes a morality pageant, then the contestants have an incentive to keep problems intact—or perhaps even worse, to engage in political activism with no clear aim at all. We predict that the more

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politics becomes a forum to show off your moral qualities, the more people will be dedicated to activism for its own sake, simply as a vehicle to preen.

Warriors and Worriers by Joyce Benenson

https://t.co/yLC4eGHEd4

"Across diverse cultures, a man who lives in the house with another man's children is about 60 times more likely than the biological father to kill those children."

about who they are marrying. A woman needs to be sure that a man will help, and not hurt, her and her children. Across diverse cultures, a man who lives in the house with another man's children is 60 times more likely than the biological father to kill those children [103, 156]. Generally a man is more interested in whether a woman can have and take care of his children [157]. Unsurprisingly, men are more likely to get divorced when they have been married longer, whereas the opposite is true for women [158]. This is true in hunter-gatherer communities too [22]. A man married for a long

Meditations on Violence

https://t.co/m2pQ60U06t

"In this ritual, members of a group compete for status and show their loyalty by how vicious they can be to an 'outsider.' Pleading, fighting, passivity will be interpreted as proof of 'otherness' and justification to escalate."

> The Group Monkey Dance (GMD) is another dominance game. In this ritual, members of a group compete for status and to show their loyalty to the group by showing how vicious they can be to someone perceived as an "outsider." It is purely a contest to prove who is more a part of the group by who can do the most violence to the outsider.
>
> To someone who has never seen, investigated, or been involved in the GMD, it is hard to describe. It is hard to explain how completely inconsequential the victim is. Once the dance starts, the victim is literally a non-person. Any action—pleading, fighting, passivity—will be interpreted by the group as proof of "otherness" and further justification to escalate.

Our Kids by Robert Putnam

Children born to unmarried mothers

Upper class in 1977: 5%
Working class in 1977: 22%

Upper class in 2007: 10%
Working class in 2007: 65%

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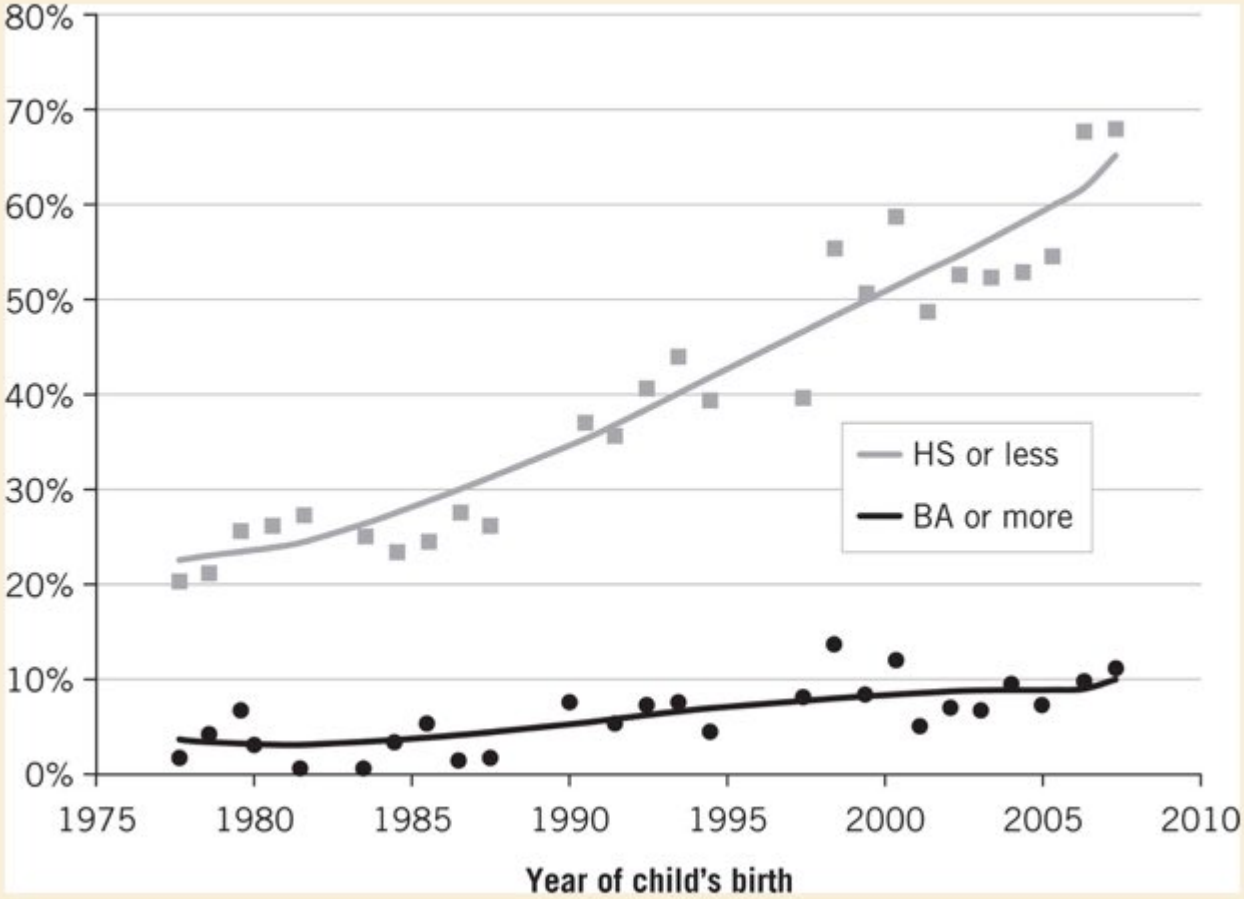
Figure 2.3: Births to unmarried mothers by education, 1977–2007



Source: National Surveys of Family Growth, Centers for Disease Control.

The Gulag Archipelago

Soviet authorities purged those who were "too independent, too influential, along with those who were too well-to-do, too intelligent, too noteworthy...Thus the population was shaken up, forced into silence, left without any possible leaders of resistance"

the people? And who noticed the thirty thousand Czechs who in 1939 fled from occupied Czechoslovakia to their Slavic kinfolk in the U.S.S.R.? It was impossible to guarantee that a single one of them was not a spy. They sent them all off to northern camps. And was it not, indeed, in 1939 that we reached out our helping hands to the West Ukrainians and the West Byelorussians, and, in 1940, to the Baltic states and to the Moldavians? It turned out that our brothers badly needed to be purged, and from them, too, flowed waves of *social prophylaxis*. They took those who were too independent, too influential, along with those who were too well-to-do, too intelligent, too noteworthy; they took, particularly, many Poles from former Polish provinces. They arrested officers everywhere. Thus the population was shaken up, forced into silence, and left without any possible leaders of resistance. Thus it was that wisdom was instilled, that former ties and former friendships were cut off.

Finland ceded its isthmus to us with zero population. Nevertheless, the removal and resettlement of all persons with Finnish blood took place throughout Soviet Karelia and in Leningrad in 1940. We didn't notice that wavelet: we have no Finnish blood.

In the Finnish War we undertook our first experiment in convicting our war prisoners as traitors to the Motherland. The first such experiment in human history;

"All organisms are shaped to behave in ways that increase fitness even if that decreases health and happiness...Our emotions benefit our genes far more than they do us."
https://t.co/ZCYOj8b3m9

petitions get more mates and have more offspring.

The costs are not, however, only for men. Females also sacrifice health for reproduction, just not as much as men do. All organisms are shaped to behave in ways that increase fitness even if that decreases health and happiness. Did you ever desperately want to have sex with someone even though you knew that could lead to disaster? Most people have, with sometimes dire consequences. Then there are the rest of our desires and the inevitable suffering because they cannot all be fulfilled. We want so badly to be important, rich, loved, admired, attractive, and powerful. For what? The good feelings from succeeding are just about balanced by the bad feelings from failure. Our emotions benefit our genes far more than they do us.

6. *Defensive Responses*

People seek help mainly for symptoms, not diseases. Pain, fever, malaise, cough, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea are protective responses. So are anxiety, jealousy, anger, and low mood. They are set off when something bad is happening. They are unpleasant but useful. If you have pneumonia, you had better hope that your cough reflex works well; otherwise you are likely to die. You had also better hope that your doctor knows that cough is useful and does not prescribe too much medication that blocks your cough excessively.

Nonetheless, doctors routinely prescribe drugs to block normal defense responses. Thank goodness! Blocking unnecessary pain, nausea, cough, and fever makes life much better. However, there is a mystery here. If defenses are useful responses shaped by natural selection, you would expect that blocking them would usually make people sicker. Why don't people die like flies after taking medications that block normal defenses?

I thought about this for several years before finally finding a solution—the Smoke Detector Principle.[64,65] Most of

"when a chimpanzee learns an effective way to crack nuts open as a member of one group and then switches to a new group that uses a less effective strategy, it will avoid using the superior nut cracking method just to blend in with the rest of

the chimps" https://t.co/rHqCFPsvnr

in their heart

Asch ran this experiment many times and in many different ways. What he discovered was that as the number of actors increased, so did the conformity of the subject. If it was just the subject and one actor, then there was no effect on the person's choice. They just assumed they were in the room with a dummy. When two actors were in the room with the subject, there was still little impact. But as the number of people increased to three actors and four and all the way to eight, the subject became more likely to second-guess themselves. By the end of the experiment, nearly 75 percent of the subjects had agreed with the group answer even though it was obviously incorrect.

Whenever we are unsure how to act, we look to the group to guide our behavior. We are constantly scanning our environment and wondering, "What is everyone else doing?" We check reviews on Amazon or Yelp or TripAdvisor because we want to imitate the "best" buying, eating, and travel habits. It's usually a smart strategy. There is evidence in numbers.

But there can be a downside.

The normal behavior of the tribe often overpowers the desired behavior of the individual. For example, one study found that when a chimpanzee learns an effective way to crack nuts open as a member of one group and then switches to a new group that uses a less effective strategy, it will avoid using the superior nut cracking method just to blend in with the rest of the chimps.

Humans are similar. There is tremendous internal pressure to comply with the norms of the group. The reward of being accepted is often

The Evolution of Desire by @ProfDavidBuss

“Roughly 30 percent of men on the Tinder app, which is widely regarded as a short-term mating app, are married.”

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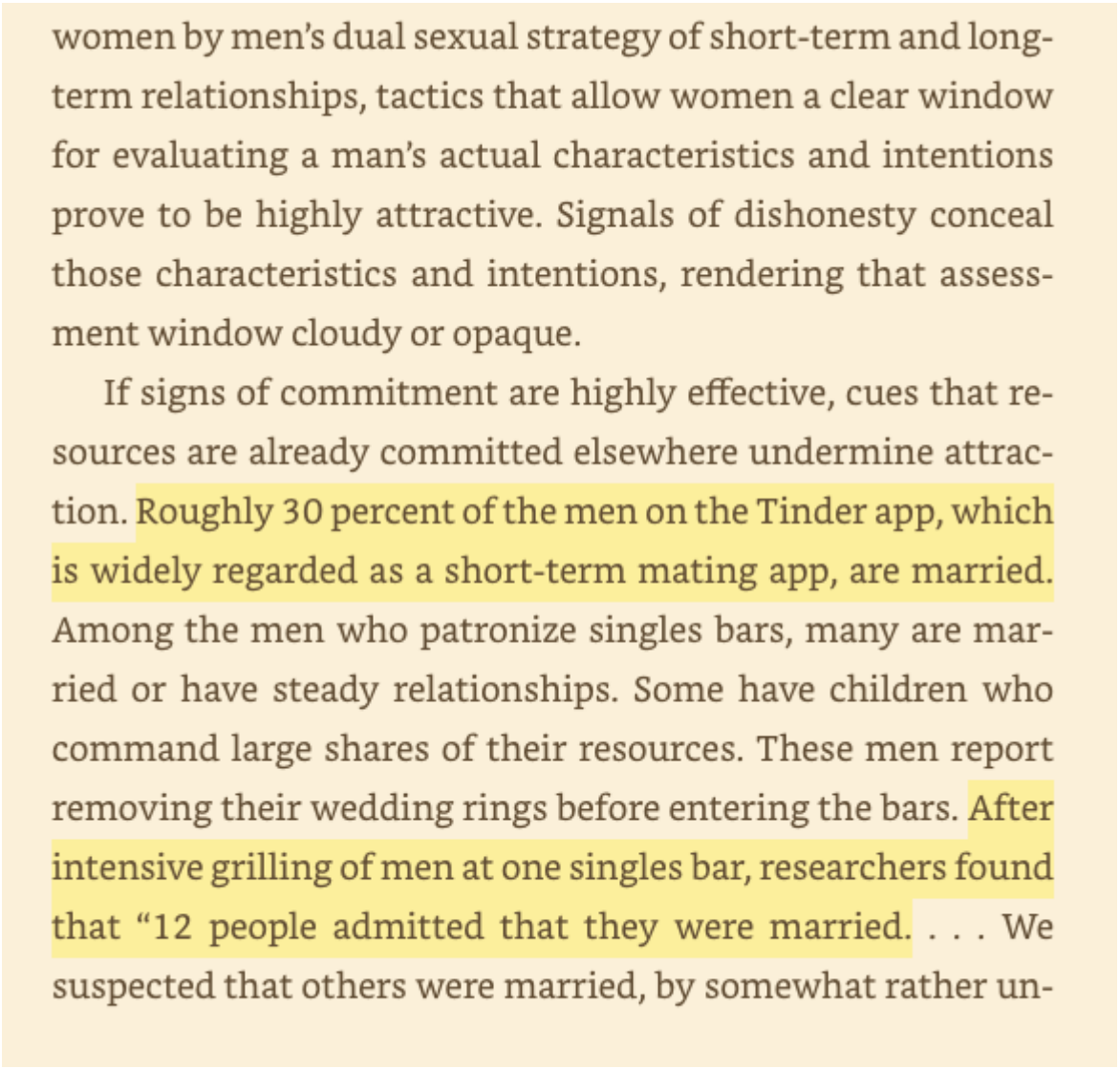

women by men's dual sexual strategy of short-term and long-term relationships, tactics that allow women a clear window for evaluating a man's actual characteristics and intentions prove to be highly attractive. Signals of dishonesty conceal those characteristics and intentions, rendering that assessment window cloudy or opaque.

If signs of commitment are highly effective, cues that resources are already committed elsewhere undermine attraction. Roughly 30 percent of the men on the Tinder app, which is widely regarded as a short-term mating app, are married. Among the men who patronize singles bars, many are married or have steady relationships. Some have children who command large shares of their resources. These men report removing their wedding rings before entering the bars. After intensive grilling of men at one singles bar, researchers found that "12 people admitted that they were married. . . . We suspected that others were married, by somewhat rather un-

“Researchers studied polygynous households in more than 50 different cultures..co-wives engage in some of the most intense violence that occurs between women..A woman and her children do better when she is in a strong monogamous relationship with a man” https://t.co/yLC4eGHEd4

Researchers have studied polygynous households in more than 50 different cultures. They have indeed found that, instead of helping each other, co-wives compete fiercely. They fight to put the interests of their own children first, and they fight over sexual and emotional access to their husband [127]. As I described in chapter 5, open fighting occurs most frequently and most viciously between fertile unrelated co-wives. Not only are they not sympathetic and helpful, but co-wives engage in some of the most intense violence that occurs between women.

This competition takes a

“habits form based on frequency, not time. One common question is ‘How long does it take to build a new habit?’ But what people should be asking is ‘How many does it take to form a new habit?’ That is, how many repetitions are required?” https://t.co/rHqCFPsvnr

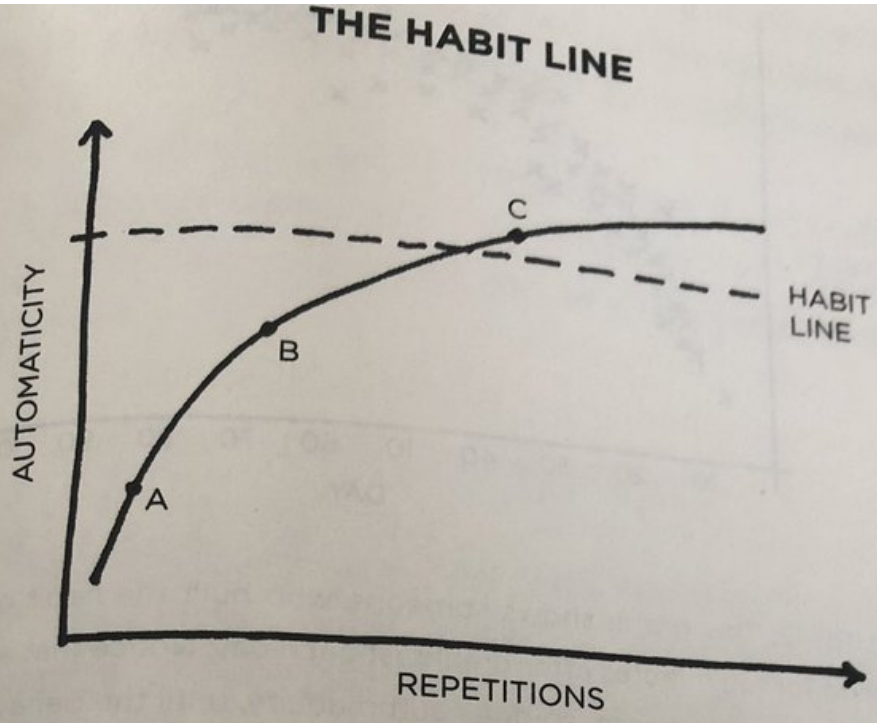

FIGURE 11: In the beginning (point A), a habit requires a good deal of effort and concentration to perform. After a few repetitions (point B), it gets easier, but still requires some conscious attention. With enough practice (point C), the habit becomes more automatic than conscious. Beyond this threshold—*the habit line*—the behavior can be done more or less without thinking. A new habit has been formed.

On the following page, you'll see what it looks like when researchers track the level of automaticity for an actual habit like walking for ten minutes each day. The shape of these charts, which scientists call *learning curves*, reveals an important truth about behavior change: habits form based on frequency, not time.

Suicide by @sociologyWV

https://t.co/FITh22fWCv

"those who lost jobs were more likely to kill themselves in the subsequent year than those who had not lost jobs...effect was particularly strong for men: those who lost jobs were 2-3 times more likely to have killed themselves"

study of all Finnish men between 1981 and 1985 found that those who lost their jobs were nearly twice as likely to commit suicide by the end of the study period. Notably, this study controlled for several background factors such as age, marital status, mental health, physical health, and socioeconomic status prior to unemployment, providing evidence that the relationship is not simply a matter of those factors predisposing people to be both suicidal and unemployable (Martikainen 1990; see also Moser, Fox, and Jones 1984). A longitudinal study of over 400,000 individuals in the United States revealed a similar relationship: among both men and women, those who lost jobs were more likely to kill themselves in the subsequent year than those who had not lost jobs. The effect was particularly strong for men: those who lost jobs were two to three times more likely to have killed themselves by the two-year follow-up survey (Kposowa 2001). The effect was also stronger immediately after the loss, suggesting that downward mobility is more dangerous than simply having a low social elevation. A cohort study of over two million New Zealanders likewise found that unemployment more than doubled the risk of suicide (Blakely, Collings, and Atkinson 2003; com-

“The standard way to tell it a drug will be an effective antidepressant is to see if it makes an animal persist in useless efforts. The Porsolt test measures how long a rat swims when dropped in a beaker of water. Rats on Prozac swim longer.” https://t.co/9OPv2ynLVj

nected to their boat by a chain. The wind [illegible] capped, the chain could not be cut, and both boats went down. My great-grandmother was helpless onshore, holding her newborn daughter as her husband drowned. Optimism and boldness are often worthwhile, but occasionally they are fatal. The perils of risk-taking in a harsh environment may help to explain why my great-grandfather's surviving descendants have tendencies to anxiety and pessimism.

Making decisions about foraging or fishing remains central to the lives of many people, but most of us now pursue long-term social goals in complex webs of relationships that confront us with difficult decisions about whether to continue big efforts that may be futile. Some competitions offer huge payoffs for a few winners and years of useless efforts for everyone else. Making it as a professional football player is fabulous, but 999 out of 1,000 who try will fail. The rewards for even successful novelists pale by comparison, but even more people try writing fiction. Career pursuits offer easy examples, but mood also guides more personal goals: trying to lose weight, find a job, get along with a cranky boss or spouse, or cope with everyday life despite crippling arthritis. Progress speeds and slows, and mood rises and falls, as we pursue the projects that make up our lives.

This brings us back to the crucial question posed by the Marginal Value Theorem: When is it best to give up on a major life goal? Early in my career, I always encouraged patients to keep trying, keep trying, don't let your depression symptoms fool you into thinking you can't succeed. Often that was good advice. Some applicants get into medical school the fourth time they apply. Some singers land a gig with the Grand Ole Opry after their fifth year in Nashville. But more become increasingly despondent

"Luck is the grand equalizer..If ppl were rewarded strictly according to abilities, things would still be unfair—ppl don't choose their abilities. Randomness has the beneficial effect of shuffling society's cards, knocking down the big guy" https://t.co/l8xMNxlK9k