

‘I loved this profound, practical, and generous book. Through the ingenious lens of the tiny experiment, Anne-Laure Le Cunff shows how we can jettison arduous and dispiriting attempts at self-improvement in favour of achievable and energizing adventures on the path to a more vibrant, accomplished, and wholehearted life’ **Oliver Burkeman, author of *Four Thousand Weeks***

‘A paradigm-shifting exploration of how to apply the techniques of science to the crazy, chaotic, and highly uncertain domain of navigating your career and life in the modern world’ **Tiago Forte, author of *Building a Second Brain***

‘The fear of failure often stands in the way of learning from trial-and-error. This is a thought-provoking guide to doing more trials and making fewer errors’ **Adam Grant, author of *Think Again***

‘Whether you’re looking to improve your health, career, or creativity, *Tiny Experiments* is a powerful guide to embracing curiosity and developing an experimental mindset. Instead of big changes, this book encourages testing small tweaks that lead to lasting growth. Perfect for anyone seeking more freedom in how they design their life’ **Ali Abdaal, author of *Feel Good Productivity***

‘In *Tiny Experiments*, Anne-Laure Le Cunff shows how to separate ambition from rigid linear goals, allowing uncertainty to bloom into possibility and a meaningful life to emerge organically. A compelling new take on a timeless concern’ **Cal Newport, author of *Deep Work***

*'Tiny Experiments* is a breath of fresh air in a world that loves to complicate things. Written by a scientist (but don't worry, no jargon here!), it's full of practical, no BS tips for anyone ready to create their own version of success. Not the version that's been handed to you with a side of shoulds and expectations, but the one you're truly curious about. This book is the nudge we all need to live a more playful, experimental life – and isn't that what we're really here for?' **Tara Schuster, author of *Buy Yourself the F\*cking Lilies* and *Glow in the F\*cking Dark***

*'Anne-Laure has the credentials of a scientist, the eye of a poet, and the heart of a child at play. *Tiny Experiments* synthesizes these qualities together into a powerful philosophy for transforming work to play. Easily one of the best productivity books that I've read. Rigorously researched, deeply delightful, and powerfully practical, it should be required reading for anyone who wants to make the most of their life'* **Ryder Carroll, author and creator of the *Bullet Journal***

*'An essential handbook for our modern era – an era defined not by linear definitions of success, but by the squiggles and swerves necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world. *Tiny Experiments* will fundamentally alter how you think about and live your life'* **Simone Stolzoff, author of *The Good Enough Job***

*'A refreshingly insightful guide to embracing life's 'messy middles'. Le Cunff provides a science-backed toolkit for embracing uncertainty as a catalyst for growth rather than a source of anxiety. This book is your permission slip to live life on your own terms, guided by curiosity and meaningful exploration'* **Melody Wilding, author of *Trust Yourself***

‘One of the first books I’ve read that goes far beyond critiquing the flaws with the modern default path of work. Instead of repeating tropes on the rat race and corporate world, she goes deeper, daring us to imagine a more expansive form of ambition – one not built on what might impress others, but what will help us build a life worth living’ **Paul Millerd, author of *The Pathless Path***

‘A compelling case for an experimental mindset, this book is a call to action for anyone ready to explore life through the lens of curiosity’ **Ana Lorena Fábrega, author of *The Learning Game***

‘In a world desirous of predictive outcomes and the comfort of knowing, Le Cunff is the gentle tap on the shoulder that suggests there is another path. Her work, rooted in firm ground of science, reveals a divergent path from how we have been conditioned, and one that invites us to quiet our cleverness and simply be present ... *Tiny Experiments* is a gift for all of those yearning to feel alive and free’ **Duke Stump, founder of Bonfire with Soul**

‘Philosophical yet deeply practical ... Offers us a perennial prescription for transforming our doubts into experiments, our uncertainty into generative adventures, our fear into curiosity, and, perhaps most valuable of all, a thoughtfully crafted permission slip to step out of our comfort zone and into the life we were born to live’ **Jonny Miller, creator of Nervous System Mastery**

‘Gifts you inspiration, encouragement and permission to indulge in your curiosity and start something new. Crucially, it also gives you the tools to not get carried away and to mindfully explore, build and grow within the context of your own circumstances and ways of being. A must-read for anyone keen to keep their joy and curiosity intact as they play their way through life’ **Gemma Milne, author of *Smoke and Mirrors***

‘A supremely inspiring and practical book. Anne-Laure upends the idea of success as a sequence of linear steps and replaces it with a wildly compelling thesis: life is a series of experiments and you are the lead scientist’ **Nick Milo, founder of *Linking Your Thinking***

‘Clear, practical, inspiring. This book will change the way you design your goals and live your life’ **Nir Eyal, author of *Indistractable***

‘Not only inspiring, but also a tangible playbook to break past the status quo of our overwhelmed generation and create a unique, exciting and aligned path. Get ready to quit the unfulfilling job, make a pivot and grab the experimental reigns of your life’ **Jo Franco, creator of *Jo Club* and author of *Fluentish***

# **TINY EXPERIMENTS**

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*How to Live Freely  
in a Goal-Obsessed World*

ANNE-LAURE LE CUNFF



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*To the wise teachers who always lead me back to curiosity*



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Don't let anyone rob you of your imagination, your creativity, or your curiosity. It's your place in the world; it's your life. Go on and do all you can with it, and make it the life you want to live.

—*Mae Jemison, American engineer,  
physician, and former NASA astronaut*



## INTRODUCTION

### *Goodbye, Linear Life*

“Are you sure?” my manager asked me, with genuine concern. I was twenty-seven, living in San Francisco, and had just turned in my resignation from Google. I was voluntarily leaving what had been my dream job: amazing pay, international travel, challenging work that matched my skills, interesting colleagues, and seemingly no limit to the heights I could achieve if I continued climbing the corporate ladder. When I got this job fresh out of university, my parents were happier than I’d ever seen them. And so was I! It was a chance to be part of the heartland of the tech world.

So my manager’s question made sense. No, I wasn’t sure I was doing the right thing. But I didn’t say that. Instead I nodded confidently, gave her a hug, and thanked her for these formative years.

The question you’re probably asking is *why*.

Google’s headquarters in California was an unlikely place for me to end up. I’m French Algerian and I was raised in Paris. My mother was born in Sidi Okba, Algeria, known in ancient times as “the city of magic” because of its extraordinary

propensity to attract spiritual leaders. At the doors of the Sahara Desert, Sidi Okba was a gateway where Arabs and Bedouins met for the commerce of spices, camels, and fabrics. My father was born in the fortified French city of Dinan, which for many centuries was a strategic place to circulate between Normandy and Brittany. It is known for one of the largest medievalist events in Europe, where people gather to celebrate the city walls with annual themes such as “gates to the imagination” or “the times of builders.”

Christmas in my family meant halal turkey and champagne. I wore miniskirts to school in France and covered my hair with a veil when visiting my family in Algeria. My father, in the French didactic tradition of mathematics, would teach me about fractals and chaos theory, while my mother would share Arabic proverbs.

Although they came from different worlds, there was one point my parents agreed on: the importance of studying hard and choosing your career wisely. I was the first woman in my family to pursue higher education, encouraged by both my father, who saw it as the path to success, and my mother, who saw it as the path to survival. My curriculum—science and business—was optimized for job prospects.

As a child of the internet, I had always been fascinated with how pixels come to life. I spent my teenage years exploring my curiosity in weird and wonderful ways: maintaining a hand-coded blog whose design changed every few weeks, translating obscure Japanese songs into French, and managing an online community for young fiction writers. Every day, millions around the world came online to learn, connect, tinker, and create. There was a sense of mystery as to how it all worked, as well as a certain reverence for the magi-

cians at companies like Google weaving all those threads to produce the World Wide Web.

I got my Google interview in a fluke, after nerding out about the future of technology with a stranger sitting next to me on a flight to San Francisco. I went through their intense hiring process and landed the job—the perfect job. I arrived on campus feeling lucky, along with a dash of impostor syndrome.

Google is famously data-driven, so each project assigned to me had clear objectives. Career success was also codified around two tangible concepts: the ladder for your role and the level for your seniority. The promotion process was based on a rubric telling you exactly what skills you need to have demonstrated to graduate to the next level. No need to guess. No need to tinker. It was all in there, clearly mapped out.

Inspired by my peers, cheered on by my parents and my friends back in France, I set out to diligently climb the ladder. I scheduled my days in thirty-minute increments, promptly replied to all emails, volunteered for extra projects, and even found time to arrange one-to-one meetings with mentors who helped me plot the next steps in my Google career. I was flown all around the world for conferences and trade shows. I got promoted and took on a global role in the digital health team. I sometimes had to cancel social plans to work late hours on presentations, but believed it was worth the sacrifice. My journey was mapped out before me; all I had to do was keep climbing.

## FROM ONE LADDER TO ANOTHER

American psychiatrist Irvin Yalom wrote about awakening experiences—events that shake us from default routines, crack our defensive barriers, and open new possibilities. Some of them can be major, such as the loss of a loved one, divorce, war, and illness. Others can be referred to as “a sort of petite existential shock therapy”—sobering thoughts that lead you to reconsider how you are really living. It took a combination of both to reawaken my consciousness.

One morning as I was getting ready for work, I noticed my arm had turned purple. I went to the Google infirmary, where I was sent to the Stanford hospital. The doctors found a blood clot that threatened to travel to my lungs. Surgery was required to remove it. I was so worried about derailing my team’s ongoing projects that I asked to delay the operation so that I could time it when everyone would be off work for a company retreat. My manager would have been furious if she knew I had done this, so I didn’t tell her.

When they picked me up at the hospital after the surgery, my friends snapped a group picture. I was in the middle, in a wheelchair, smiling and holding a bouquet of flowers. My face looked the same as before the surgery, but already I could feel that something had shifted in me. I recovered quickly and went back to work, kept hitting my targets and supporting my team, but my efforts felt mechanical.

Not long after, I went home to France for Christmas, my first time back in a year. I was surrounded by friends and family I hadn’t seen in ages. Someone asked, “How’s life?” Such a trivial question, and yet . . . When I automatically replied that work-is-great-and-San-Francisco-is-nice-thank-you, I noticed for the first time how inert my voice sounded.

How *was* life, really?

I hadn't ever asked myself this. I was too busy, always focused on finishing the next deliverable or hitting a bigger target. And I was living the dream—so of course everything must be great.

Separated from San Francisco by thousands of miles, I finally let myself honestly confront the question. Life wasn't terrible, but it wasn't great, either. I was likely burned out, but that was only a symptom of the problem. I was so consumed by the routine, the rubric, and the next rung on the ladder that I had lost the ability to notice anything else. I stopped asking what I wanted out of my day or even out of my future.

And despite this relentless grind, I was also finding myself getting bored. While I had spent my younger life guided by a genuine yearning to learn and grow, I was now following a prescribed path trodden by so many colleagues before me.

Realizing how I felt was like an electric shock. Many people are able to build a rewarding, balanced life on the foundation of a job at Google. I was not one of them. On my first day back in the office after the holiday, I quit.

In hindsight, I could have used a reflective pause after quitting, but I wasn't able to sit with the fear and anxiety of having gone from celebrated employee to unemployed nobody. My mom was already worried I was headed for the homeless shelter. So I immediately threw myself into the next socially sanctified adventure: after working at a Big Tech company to grow your professional network and save up some money, break off the golden handcuffs to build a company of your own.

I moved back to Europe and founded a tech startup.

Within a year, the young company was highlighted as one of “the healthcare startups you need to know about” in



*WIRED* magazine. I broke up with my first cofounder but then was accepted into a prestigious startup accelerator, where I met a new cofounder. We spent an inordinate amount of time building pitch decks and meeting with potential business partners. I was so busy, I didn't notice I had jumped from one kind of hyperfocused, outcome-driven pursuit to another.

Only when we failed to advance to the next stage of the accelerator and had to shut down the company did I allow myself to sit still for a moment. In truth, I had no choice. There was no obvious next step. After years of hustling, I finally went to a place I had never allowed my adult self to go to before: I admitted that I was lost.

And that was the most liberating thought I'd ever had.

## ON THE DOORSTEP OF CHANGE

You might be familiar with the Hero's Journey, a narrative pattern first described by mythologist Joseph Campbell in his influential book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, one found in stories across cultures and time. We face challenges, descend into the abyss of the unknown, and must find the resources to break a path and reemerge transformed. Just like in the myths, life is made of cycles of being lost and finding ourselves again.

Feeling lost and free, I started thinking about my in-between time not as a dead end to escape, but as a space worth exploring. And with that mindset, I quickly became reacquainted with an old friend and ally: curiosity.

Not having a clear playbook to follow opened a world of possibility. I paid attention to the conversations that ener-

gized me and the topics that drew me in. I took online courses. I attended workshops. I bought books for pure pleasure. All the while, I freelanced to maintain a source of income. I felt like my old self again, and I loved her. I wasn't falling off a cliff. Rather, I was living in my own Choose Your Own Adventure novel.

My curiosity kept leading me back to the human brain. Why do we think the way we think and feel the way we feel? The more books I read, the more intrigued I became, until I eventually decided to return to school to study neuroscience. This time, I didn't have a grand plan. I just wanted to explore, learn, and grow. I was wholeheartedly stepping into the unknown.

Although I was in a formal program, I didn't want my curiosity to stop flowing. Inspired by the experimental mindset taught in scientific training, I asked myself: *What experiment could I run on my own life that would bring me an intrinsic sense of fulfillment, whatever the outcome?*

I love writing, so I made a pact with myself to write and share 100 articles in 100 workdays, drawing on my university studies and personal readings. I wrote about mental health at work, creativity, and mindful productivity.

Sharing my work daily was terrifying at first. I felt naked. I was admitting to the world that I was a work in progress, as was everything I wrote. My only anchor was the pact itself. I resisted the urge to clarify my end goal and solely focused on showing up. It wasn't always easy to do, so I leaned into self-reflection. I took notes and journaled. I watched for signs of burnout and played with various formats—such as shorter articles for when life got busy.

Slowly, a path emerged. I finished the 100 articles and decided to keep going. My newsletter grew steadily to one

hundred thousand readers. I called it Ness Labs, a combination of the suffix *-ness*, which describes the quality of being (which you find in words such as *awareness*, *consciousness*, *mindfulness*), and *labs*, as I wanted it to be a laboratory for personal experimentation. People wrote emails to thank me for helping them turn chaos into creativity, for sharing tools to reduce their anxiety, and for opening doors to parts of their minds they had been afraid of exploring. Others asked if I would ever create a course or write a book.

I kept on with my studies, and today, as a neuroscientist, I investigate how different brains learn differently using technologies such as electroencephalography and eye-tracking. Ness Labs has turned into a thriving small business with an amazing team. I get to speak and write about topics I care about.

The uncertainty of my future isn't gone, and yet each day I wake up excited to discover what new crossroads life will present to me. I'm always on the lookout for new experiments. I'm not rushing to get to a specific destination. I'm playing a different game: a game of noticing, questioning, and adapting.

## TOOLS FOR THE IN-BETWEENS

Uncertainty has so much to teach us. We experience it not just in big life transitions, but in lesser moments of ambiguity, such as the “messy middle” of a project, when we'd like to throw in the towel. When we find ourselves in these precarious moments, our automatic response is too often fear or anxiety. And so we rush toward a defined outcome to escape it, as I did with my startup.

But there is another way: the experimental way.

I've spent the past years at Ness Labs developing tools that help us live lives of joyful experimentation. My pact of 100 articles was the beginning of a new approach to growth—distilled in this book—based on research and what I learned teaching thousands of people how to implement its principles. Through empirical study and personal experience, I have isolated a set of practices that are an antidote to burnout and boredom alike—a counterforce to the fear, overwhelm, confusion, and loneliness many people I know are feeling as they try to apply old notions of success to the world we're living in today.

This book isn't a step-by-step recipe for accomplishing a specific goal. Rather, it offers a set of tools you can adapt to discover and achieve your own goals—especially if these goals fall outside the well-defined ambitions suggested by society.

Together, these tools will enrich your life with systematic curiosity—a conscious commitment to inhabit the space between what you know and what you don't, not with fear and anxiety but with interest and openness. Systematic curiosity provides an unshakable certitude in your ability to grow even when the exact path forward is uncertain, with the knowledge that your actions can align with your most authentic ambitions.

In the following four parts of the book, you will learn how to:

- Get started by committing to curiosity.
- Keep going by practicing mindful productivity.
- Stay flexible by collaborating with uncertainty.
- Dream bigger by growing with the world.

You are about to replace an old linear model of success with an experimental model of personal and professional growth. In this new model, your goals will be discovered, pursued, and adapted—not in a vacuum, but in conversation with the larger world. You will ask big questions and design tiny experiments to find the answers. You will become comfortable with following a nonlinear path, where each crossroads is a call for adventure.

This way of life is based on ancestral wisdom and backed by modern scientific knowledge. It shows that when you lean into your curiosity, uncertainty can be a state of expanded possibility, a space for metamorphosis. It's a way to turn challenges into triggers for self-discovery and doubt into a source of opportunity. Get ready for an exciting new era: your experimental life.

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# PACT

*Commit to Curiosity*

## ② *Why Goal Setting Is Broken*

It was raining as the woman climbed out of her plane, her legs shaky from the long flight. She looked around, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings, unsure of where she was. She had landed in a big field with a beautiful view of woodland and water. This definitely didn't look like Paris, her intended destination. But she didn't have much time to enjoy the panorama; soon her plane was surrounded by hundreds of locals, curious to meet the famous Miss Amelia Earhart. When a farmer asked her, "Have you flown far?" she replied: "From America."

Yes, she had done it: though technical issues with her plane and bad weather had forced her to land in Northern Ireland, she had become the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic.

Amelia Earhart is renowned for this incredible feat, but few people know that she had made the same trip less than five years prior, albeit in very different circumstances. Then unable to make a living as a pilot, she was working as a social worker for low-income immigrants when she received a

strange phone call: She could be the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, but she would not be allowed to pilot the plane—she was to be a mere passenger. The female passenger who was initially supposed to fly with them had deemed the journey too risky.

Earhart was already an experienced aviator; she could have turned down the offer and waited for a better opportunity. But she said yes and negotiated to be in charge of the logbook so she would at least have an active role. It was this first experience that allowed her to unlock the necessary resources to try to cross the Atlantic again, this time with her own plane.

Even less known are the myriad of other experiments she performed outside of aviation. Flying was expensive, so Earhart worked as a clerk for a telephone company. She ventured into portrait photography with a friend, and when that project failed, she launched a trucking business with another friend. After she became a celebrity, she designed a functional clothing line providing comfortable yet elegant pants “for the woman who lives actively.” She worked as a consultant at Purdue University to support women in pursuing traditionally male careers. She also experimented in her personal life. When she married publisher George Palmer Putnam, she told him she would not be bound by “any medieval code of faithfulness” and openly took fellow aviator Gene Vidal as a lover.

And those notes she captured during her first transatlantic flight? She published them as her first book.

We are told that success is the result of extraordinary gifts or exceptional grit. But rather than some innate quality or the single-minded pursuit of a big dream, endless curiosity is what enabled Amelia Earhart to discover her path. She saw



“liking to experiment” as a common thread driving her actions in life—“the something inside me that has always liked to try new things.” She was sometimes scared of failing, but she embraced her fears. She was ambitious, and yet she cared about having a positive impact. She was driven, and yet she did not focus on an end goal. She considered adventure to be worthwhile in itself. All those other facets of her life—a life of fertile uncertainty—are rarely mentioned in history books, and yet it is precisely the fact that Earhart swerved many times in the course of becoming an aviator that makes her life so extraordinary. She consistently reinvented her career, questioned the status quo, and sought to elevate others as she forged her own path.

We were all born with this sense of adventure. It’s in children’s nature to experiment and explore the unknown. They learn first and foremost through movement, which is considered the foundational skill for developing emotional, cognitive, and social skills. Children collect and connect information by constantly scouting their environment. They try activities beyond their capabilities, they attempt to predict the effects of their actions, and they keep asking “Why?”—in fact, children ask more than a hundred questions per hour on average. By failing fast and often, they learn from every experience to propel themselves forward. Children are insatiable adventurers.

But then something changes. We are taught to perform, in both meanings of the word: to achieve specific targets whether in school or at work, but also to present ourselves in a way that conforms with societal expectations. While some manage to preserve an attitude of childlike adventure, keeping their options open, always on the lookout for hints of what

may be coming, most of us cling to what we know. When we consider our professional future, we seek a legible story, one that provides the appearance of stability, with a cohesive narrative and clear steps to success. If everything goes well, we get hired to provide answers based on our expertise—not questions based on our curiosity. We begin caring about what people think of us and we project an image of confidence, focusing on self-packaging over self-improvement. We welcome anything that provides the perception of control—whether it’s a productivity tool, a time management method, or a goal-setting framework.

This common shift from boundless curiosity to narrow determination is at the heart of why the traditional approach to goals keeps on letting us down; it impedes our creativity and prevents us from seeing and seizing new opportunities.

## THE TRAP OF LINEAR GOALS

Philosophers were already discussing goal setting more than two thousand years ago. “Let all your efforts be directed to something, let it keep that end in view,” advised Seneca. For Epictetus, goal setting was a matter of clarity and determination: “First say to yourself what you would be, and then do what you have to do.”

In the 1960s, American psychologist Edwin Locke was inspired by the work of those ancient philosophers. His goal-setting theory set off a flurry of research into the relationship between goals and performance. One of those goal-setting frameworks, devised in the early 1980s, advocated for specific, measurable, assignable, realistic, and timely goals—which

you may have heard of as SMART goals.\* This framework is still used to this day by thousands of companies around the world and has escaped the sphere of management to permeate the sphere of personal development.

All these approaches to goal setting are based on linear goals: they were created for controlled environments that lend to readily measurable outcomes with predictable timelines.

The linear way is wildly out of sync with the lives we live today. The challenges we're facing and the dreams we're pursuing are increasingly hard to define, measure, and pin to a set schedule. In fact, a common challenge for many people these days is feeling stuck when it comes to their next steps: instead of providing a motivating force, the idea of setting a well-defined goal is paralyzing. When the future is uncertain, the neat parameters of rigid goal-setting frameworks are of little help; it feels like throwing darts without a target to aim at.

This lack of clarity in a world that keeps on changing has led to a widespread ambivalence toward goals. As journalist Amil Niazi put it: "No goals, just vibes." Some have even proclaimed the end of ambition, a new era where the concept of job satisfaction has become a paradox.

But ambition isn't broken. It is still what it has always been: the innate human desire for growth, a desire that is both universal and highly personal. People aren't broken, either. They still crave creativity and connection. It's the way we set goals that's broken.

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\* Alternatives to these words have been proposed over time, and you might be familiar with a different version that contains, for example, *achievable* and *relevant*, or *attainable* and *resourced*.

Notice the vocabulary we use. Goals drive us *forward*, we *set out* to achieve our goals, we make progress *toward* a goal. Those are called orientational metaphors—figurative expressions that involve spatial relationships. Setting a linear goal entails defining a target state in the future and mapping out the steps to get there. Success is defined as arriving at the target.

Because they conflate ambition with the single-minded pursuit of an end destination, traditional methods of pursuing goals have an effect counter to their intent: they create a discouraging perspective where we are far from success. Our satisfaction—the best version of ourselves—lies somewhere in the future. There are (at least) three other glaring flaws of linear goals:

**Linear goals stimulate fear.** Starting something new is daunting, especially when it lies far outside our comfort zone. Because we lack the expertise that comes with experience, we're not sure where to begin. Sometimes the sheer number of options leads to analysis paralysis. We become so overwhelmed with choices that we are unable to take action. Other times, we feel like we're not qualified enough, and we succumb to self-doubt. We think we don't have the necessary time or financial resources. Or we may start imagining what will happen if we fail, and anxiety stops us in our tracks.

**Linear goals encourage toxic productivity.** Researchers who explored our relationship to idleness found that “many purported goals that people pursue may be merely justifications to keep themselves busy.” Focused on relentless plotting and execution, we may develop an overly

strict mentality in which we believe that if we don't complete each task, everything will fall apart. We work long hours, we feel guilty for taking breaks, we cancel on friends to do more work. We set unrealistic deadlines and blame ourselves when we miss them. We research the perfect productivity tool instead of simply asking how we feel. We work while sick. Anything to avoid slowing down on the treadmill of success. This emphasis on speed over sustainable progress leaves us mentally drained and, ironically, less productive.

**Linear goals breed competition and isolation.** When everyone around us is climbing the same ladder, scrambling over one another, we become competitive for all the wrong reasons. Even when we think of goals as our own individual ladder, we look at others on theirs and race toward the top. Either way, linear goals promote an individualistic mentality that can make us view potential collaborators as competitors, leading to alienation, lack of support, and fewer opportunities. The constant comparison and focus on individual achievement prevent us from pooling our resources and learning from one another, to the detriment of our careers and communities.

That is partly why *ambition* has become something of a dirty word. We assume that being ambitious means following a pre-written script and climbing a never-ending ladder, sometimes at the expense of other people. This flaw is not new, but modern life has created a giant public leaderboard that amplifies the artificial need to compete. Because of social media, we compare ourselves to our peers more than ever

before. We are notified of the professional feats of not just our colleagues but all the people we studied with in school. We receive constant reminders of the supposedly perfect lives of everyone in our network. And so our definition of success keeps on ballooning as we progress.

This phenomenon is called the Red Queen effect. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice says to the Queen: “In *our* country, you’d generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.” To which the Queen replies: “A slow sort of country! Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

Our collective focus on the ladder of success is what gave rise to the proverbial rat race of modern life: if only we can climb one more step—if only we can get that promotion, give that big presentation, grow our online audience, hire a team, buy that house—then we will finally feel at peace.

Our goals are often not even our own; we borrow them from peers, celebrities, and what we imagine society expects from us. French philosopher René Girard called this phenomenon mimetic desire: we desire something because we see others desiring it. In other words, our goals mimic the goals of others.

And of course it is impossible not to assess our game progression relative to other players—except that the leaderboard is rigged, and everyone is showing only a distorted version of their lives, snapshots of manufactured happiness where all the struggle and the doubt have been edited out.

Fear of failure causes us to endlessly stop and start, resulting in an uneven path where we keep going back to our comfort zone before trying to progress again. Toxic produc-

tivity leads to burnout, creating ups and downs. Working in isolation means we lack the support networks to help smooth the way.

Following that wild, twisted path with its intense highs and lows has repercussions. We may progress, but we feel like we're constantly failing. And so instead of inspiring audacious next steps, our goals spark anxiety (*What if I don't succeed?*), apathy (*Why care when the journey ahead is all mapped out already?*), and anger (*Why am I forced to play this game?*).

But this breakdown of old ways isn't a crisis. It's a rare chance to improve the way we explore our ambitions.

## BETWEEN STIMULUS AND RESPONSE

Imagine, for a moment, that you are traveling alone on a long-leg airline flight with no onboard Wi-Fi. There you are at 30,000 feet, suspended in the sky, transitioning from one place to another, neither here nor there. The places and people who normally define and control your daily life are miles away. You don't know exactly what will happen after you land, but there's no way to rush to your destination to find out.

How do you react to this environment?

*Response 1: Discomfort, fear, helplessness.* The fact is, you're hurtling along at 30,000 feet in a tin can with someone else at the helm. You knock back alcohol to dull your fear or try to sleep away your anxiety. You check out to the greatest degree possible and pray to a higher power that the pilot manages to land the plane.

Or . . .

*Response 2: Delight, calm, curiosity.* Removed from your everyday, you find yourself relaxing—yes, even in that uncomfortable seat. In this strange space, you feel an invigorating sense of possibility. You might crack a book you’ve been curious about but had no time for. Watch a movie that friends would be surprised to see you enjoy. Strike up a conversation with a stranger. Maybe you write in your journal, reflecting on what’s passed and mulling over what’s to come. Freed from your usual duties, released from the constraints of your day-to-day identity, you find the mental space to do something a little bit different.

The flight I have just described is a liminal space—an in-between territory where the old rules governing our choices no longer apply. Life is full of these moments, and the degree to which we learn to reap their lessons is the degree to which we grow and improve our lives.

But our brain is uncomfortable in the in-betweens. We are wired to quickly label situations as good or bad, an evolutionary mechanism designed to protect us from unknown risks. Safe or not? Friend or foe? Secret passage or dead end? However, this instinct can become problematic when a clear answer isn’t readily available.

Our neural activity intensifies in such situations, indicating a state of heightened arousal. Just like a sentry on high alert, the brain prepares for potential threats. Uncertainty becomes fuel for anxiety. In fact, uncertainty has been found to cause more stress than inevitable pain. When we don’t know what’s coming, we overthink every possibility and we conjure worst-case scenarios. Although we would like to relinquish control and soar through the skies, we often find



ourselves suffering from Response 1: uneasiness, or even white-knuckled terror.

At that point, we tend to fall back on one of three defense mechanisms, where we abandon our curiosity, our ambition, or both:

- **Cynicism:** Doomscrolling, passing up opportunities, poking fun at earnest people. Like the Beast before he meets Belle, we see transformation as a source of meaningless work, and we abandon any desire to build a good life. Why suffer when we can just survive?
- **Escapism:** Retail therapy, binge watching, dream planning. Like Peter Pan, we confine ourselves to an island where we can break free from the burden of our responsibilities, an idealized place to get away from the uncertainty of our lives.
- **Perfectionism:** Self-coercion, information hoarding, toxic productivity. We treat ourselves the way the stepmother treats Cinderella—“from morning until evening, she had to perform difficult work, rising early, carrying water, making the fire, cooking and washing”—with no rest or time for ourselves.

These are not personality types. Rather, they're shields we raise in the face of uncertainty. We can shift between them depending on our circumstances.

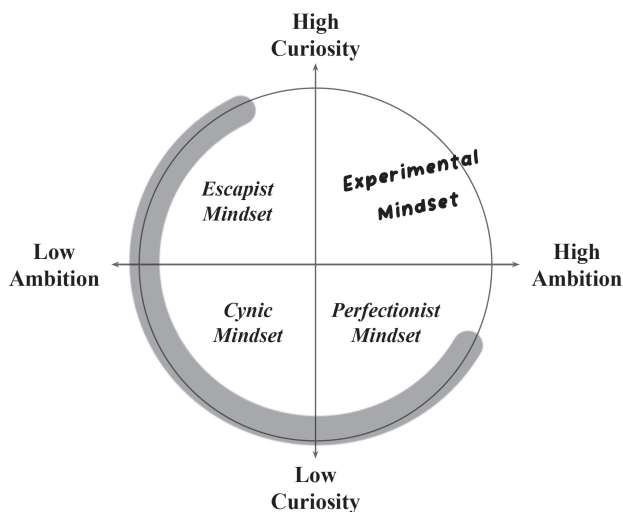
And those defense mechanisms are perfectly normal. They're part of a cognitive process psychologists call compensatory control. When confronted with a stressful experience,

our first instinct is to remove the stressor. And when we cannot eliminate the source of stress, we urgently seek activities that restore our sense of control—anything to compensate for our helplessness.

Not only are these shields we raise for protection ineffective in our modern world, but they also block our opportunities for growth, self-discovery, and what makes life exciting.

Psychologists often say that our freedom lies within the gap between stimulus and response. We can deal with the heavy load of uncertainty like the frightened flier, by closing our eyes and waiting for an unnamed pilot to land the plane—or we could make a brave go at exploring the possibilities of this in-between space.

As Amelia Earhart once said: “The most difficult thing is the decision to act.” Though we may not have all the information at hand, we can choose movement instead of stagnation, exploration instead of paralysis. And when we do, the sky is just the beginning. This is the promise of an experimental mindset.



## THREE MENTAL SHIFTS

How can you go from rigid linearity to fluid experimentation? Throughout this book, you will build a toolkit to support three profound shifts in how you navigate the world:

**From Response 1 to Response 2.** Response 1 is automatic and rooted in the anxiety of uncertainty. Response 2 is autonomous and based on a strong sense of agency. We all oscillate between the two responses, but the more we flex our curiosity muscles, the more uncertainty transforms from something to escape to somewhere to explore. Switching from Response 1 to Response 2 is switching from defensive to proactive. Instead of being passive passengers along for the ride, we can explore possibilities within the uncertainty. Not knowing the destination sparks our imagination. Freed from the need to control the outcome, we can experiment and play.

**From fixed ladders to growth loops.** Relying on a mental model of traditional goal setting means the focus is on linear progression toward a predefined outcome. Each rung represents a measurable achievement, a predictable step along a planned trajectory, which leaves little room for surprise or serendipity. When we shift to a “loop” mental model, the journey follows iterative cycles of experimentation, with each loop building on the last. Our task becomes to widen each loop by nurturing our creativity and leaning into promising tangents instead of dismissing them as distractions.

**From outcome to process.** When we are operating with an outcome-based definition of success, progress means ticking off big, hairy, audacious goals. When we shift to a process-based definition, progress is driven by incremental experimentation. Success transforms from a fixed target to an unfolding path. Without a fixed definition of success, we welcome change as a source of reinvention. Our direction emerges organically as we systematically examine what captures our attention instead of fixating on an artificial scorecard.

Linear goals promise certainty—if we just stick to the plan and climb, we will arrive safely at the expected destination. But life rarely follows such rigid and predictable patterns. Experiments are built for the in-betweens; they propel you forward even without a fixed destination, in constant conversation with your inner self and the outer world. By having the courage to leave the shore, we trade the illusion of control for the possibility of discovery. Rather than resisting uncertainty, we befriend it. The first step is to rekindle your curiosity to imagine new possibilities.