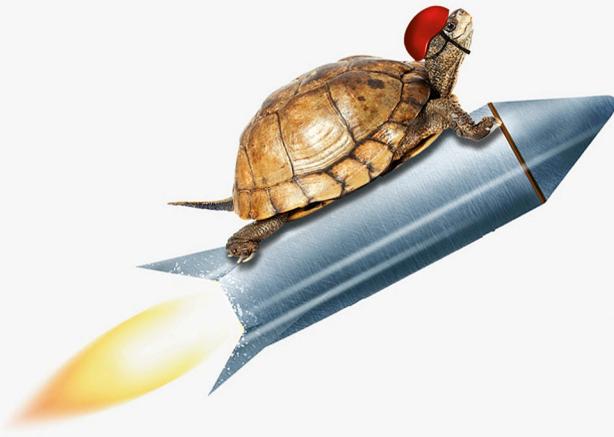


Startup Your Life



**HUSTLE AND HACK YOUR WAY
TO HAPPINESS**

Anna Akbari, Ph.D.

Introduction

Sometime in my twenties, I developed a fear of flying. Not a debilitating, can't-get-on-the-plane kind of fear, but a high level of anxiety in anticipation of the flight—which was further exacerbated when the first bump of turbulence inevitably hit. My mind would race, my body would freeze, and I would prepare myself for the worst. As a kid, the thought that a flight would be anything other than successful never entered my mind. But as firsthand experience and a steady stream of horrifying one-off news stories accumulated in my brain, I came to associate flying—consciously or otherwise—with a loss of personal control.

Control, that elusive thing. Like many high-functioning individuals, I thrive when I'm calling the shots. But in the air, the usual systems are completely unavailable to me—not least, any chance of escape. It's distressing at best, completely paralyzing at worst.

You might say that the years between college graduation and the point at which we eventually pair off and start a family resemble that dreaded bout of turbulence. The pressure of establishing sustainable employment, passable financial security, and a stable romantic relationship is enough to make even the most mature, collected person hit the panic button.

I was no exception. I finished my PhD in the spring of 2008. Too burnt out to make any rational decisions about what would come next, I decided to use that summer to decompress and recalibrate. I slept regularly for the first time in years. I taught a summer school course and took on some part-time consulting projects, but for the first time in my life, I also zoned out. It felt amazing.

Soon, fall arrived, and—since I only knew how to think and operate in semesters—I decided it was time to get serious about sorting out the next phase of my life—hopefully making something of the expensive, arduous preparation I'd invested in for so long.

Of course, my timing was terrible. One glance at a newspaper or television that year confirmed that the financial system was collapsing. And even as I saw it affect various bankers and hedge fund moguls I knew, I considered myself exempt from the fallout. *I'm in academia*, I told myself. *How in the world could Wall Street affect me?* A naïve proclamation, indeed, about a series of events that would leave virtually no industry and few individuals untouched.

So there I was, an eager, optimistic woman with an advanced degree and a mountain of debt, ready to tackle the world—but no one was biting. Academia shifted to a mostly adjunct model, so unless I was willing to move back to Iowa or some equally remote location, finding a tenure-track position would be next to impos-

sible. And the corporate world was no more hospitable. In fact, I quickly found that I had more friends who were unemployed than employed. At least most of them received severance pay and had a bit of savings to cushion their job search. I, on the other hand, was still living like a twenty-two-year-old grad student. The panic button was permanently clenched.

This was the first time in my life that I felt a total lack of control. The world as I knew it was crumbling around me, and I couldn't change it any more than the choices I'd made so far—nor did I want to. Instead, my best recourse was to embrace the situation.

At the time, the spirit of entrepreneurship hadn't yet taken hold in our culture. It wasn't until after 2008 that a confluence of technological advancements and financial circumstances, as well as a shift in how work gets done and how money gets raised, settled into our everyday culture, eventually producing a society of what Silicon Valley calls "everywhere entrepreneurship." And yet, even before it became our default work mode and mindset, I had some entrepreneurial ideas I needed to explore. I became an early adopter: In 2002, right after college and while still in the Peace Corps, I ventured out on my own to start a music foundation. I spearheaded the venture, raised all the international financing, and managed the program during grad school for five years, at which time it was permanently integrated into the local community and supported by government funds (no small feat in an underserved area of the Dominican Republic). Building on that theme and momentum, back in the States in 2004, I collaborated with a classmate while still in grad school to start an arts education platform that matched students of all ages with talented creative professionals in New York City for private lessons.

That company eventually fizzled, but I'd been bitten by the bug. Soon, even my casual social conversations shifted to verbal

daydreaming about potential companies and projects. *Wouldn't it be cool if there were a . . .*, followed by rapid-fire brainstorming, popped up in more and more exchanges. I knew I couldn't control the rest of the world, but perhaps I could find my own satisfaction in life as an entrepreneur.

This approach challenged and stimulated me in much the same way school always had. Unlike many entrepreneurs, I loved school. Some find academic institutions limiting—but I found them liberating. School was the only place I'd known where an uninhibited exploration of ideas was central to its operation. Where creative imaginings and conversations about idealized possibilities—not just realities—happen daily. It felt like play, not work, and if I could find a way to replicate and sustain that feeling, I could never “work” again.

While I further nurtured my entrepreneurial persona, I continued to develop and teach sociology courses that deepened my understanding of the world onto which I wanted to project my ideas. I taught courses that explored our sense of identity—everything from the way we look to our relationships with technology. I did research on how we form social connections and what helps or hinders our quest for happiness. I was thriving—intellectually. The rest of my life, however, left much to be desired.

For starters, I was broke. Academia pays very little, and starting your own venture pays even less (at first). Not a great combination when living in one of the most expensive cities in the world. How would I pay my rent? Could I afford that late-night taxi home, or should I prepare for a 3 a.m. subway stroll? Which one of my more “successful” friends would pay for my drink out of sympathy? I also was very single. I couldn't articulate what or whom I wanted, let alone attract it. How could I compete with the hordes of gorgeous women in New York when I wouldn't even want to date myself?

It was time to take back control.

Sound familiar? Even if you didn't enter the "real world" in the middle of an epic financial meltdown, chances are you experienced similarly distressing uncertainty during your post-college/pre-settling-down phase. Turns out, getting your shit together is hard. I was accustomed to hard work—I thrived on intensity and challenge—but the assumption was always that there *was*, in fact, a viable solution. That if I just worked hard enough, I could not only manage, but excel. Suddenly, that did not seem to be the case. Nowhere in my lengthy education did anyone lay out the practical guidelines that would make my life suck a little bit less while I established myself professionally. No one taught me how to be happier along the way. Hard work alone wasn't cutting it. I needed a strategy.

So clearly I wasn't an expert at life, but I was an expert researcher. I didn't have all the answers (yet), but I did have a cognitive framework and academic platform to work from—and, most importantly, I knew how to create something from nothing. I suddenly realized that my years of entrepreneurial "training" were exactly what I needed to improve my everyday reality, and being better at life became my obsession. I researched tools and resources, analyzing them and testing them out on myself. I created personal sociological experiments and repeated opportunities for A/B testing—or strategically playing with variables. Taking a page out of tech startup methodologies, I started with a hypothesis, implemented and tested it, gathered feedback, then started the cycle all over again until I found my own variation of product-market fit.

I realized that the entrepreneurial business approach that had worked for millions of people and companies—the same ideas I'd already been using professionally for years—could also work as a foundation for transforming my personal happiness and well-being. And if it worked for me, I knew it could work for other people.

So I distilled my years of studying, researching, and personal experimentation into a replicable, action-oriented, results-driven approach to living a richer life. Because despite the diversity of our circumstances, we all have, at our core, the same issues, the same perplexing questions: the turbulence of figuring it all out.

I used these processes to optimize any given area of my life, from my manner of dress to my dating habits. Once I had tested each process on myself, I added it into the services I offer through my company, Sociology of Style, which takes an intelligent, systematic approach to image and wellness issues, providing holistic image consulting and life coaching. Sociology of Style allows me to help people reformat their lives and fine-tune their well-being—to flourish rather than just get by. I help people project confidence, gain mental attunement, exercise smarter, refine their eating habits, find a mate, and enhance opportunities for personal wealth. Sociology of Style also supports more intangible pursuits, like creating meaning and generally getting “unstuck.” In short, I help people be happier.

During this experimental, entrepreneurial journey, I found increasingly wider outlets to share my incremental realizations—or rather, they found me, as word of my services gained media attention. “I never thought about my life that way” or “that’s such a unique approach—I’m going to think about how I _____ differently now” was the overwhelmingly common response. I was asked to write articles, appear on podcasts, give keynote speeches, even give a TED talk. Every few months, I doubled the price of my services, curious where I’d cap out, but I saw no dip in clients. On the contrary, my client base grew steadily, so my rates rose with them. CEOs and successful entrepreneurs began to seek me out. Large, highly visible organizations paid me to fly to their events to give speeches. People were paying attention—and investing real money in what I had to say.

I also worked through these ideas in their most natural habitat: the classroom. While I am entrepreneurially minded, I am also an academic and have a passion for teaching. I first taught at Parsons and the New School, then moved over to New York University, where I taught undergraduate senior seminars as well as graduate classes, mentoring students on in-depth research projects. I used the classroom as an experimental field for my research and theories and enlisted my students as a sounding board. My classes were among the most popular in the department, with some of the longest waitlists. Many students told me that, of their entire academic careers, they were most proud of the work they completed in my class, because it pushed them to reimagine the world and themselves in ways they hadn't previously considered. This led several students to seek out internships with me at my company every semester. I continue to mentor many of those students today, and some have become my employees.

Every day and context was an opportunity to test, observe, implement, and refine—as well as an opportunity to share what had worked for me with more individuals on a similar path. People were coming to me every week to learn how to live a better life, so I knew I was onto something.

The Search for the Magical Book

Early on, I also turned to books—books that promised to make me happier and told phenomenal stories. But while many were charming and inspirational, I couldn't find a single one that gave me the practical tools I needed to pull it all together.

Some “gurus” offer broad, philosophical inspiration, while others give highly specific instructions on how to be happier: meditate, create boundaries, think positively, make peace with your body. Many books out there argue that doing any single one of

these actions can radically transform your life. Others hone in on a particular aspect of life (e.g., work), or one particular concept (flow) or problem (depression). And most of the remaining books look at the academically oriented “science of happiness” from a positive psychology perspective.

Most happiness books were written by people I couldn’t relate to. People who already had all of life’s big challenges figured out—a dream job, a loving partner, financial security, and a happy family. Those books, rather than laying bare the process of change, actually demanded that I—and anyone else still figuring it all out—“read between the lines” to see how their experiences could possibly apply to my life.

So where is the guide for everyone else?

Fifty percent of adult Americans are now single¹ (more than ever before), and those individuals are less likely than married adults to own their homes and have children.² Where’s the guide for the woman who isn’t married yet—or in a relationship at all? The woman who doesn’t necessarily have kids—and maybe isn’t sure she wants them? What about the person who lives in a studio apartment and is trying to transform it into a home but without financial resources?

Since the Great Recession, temporary positions and contract employment have been on the rise, with 40 to 50 percent of the American population estimated to become independent freelancers by 2020.³ How about a guide for the people who are struggling to carve an independent career path that looks more like their personal vision? What if they have no idea how to actualize an alternative to a 9 to 5 job?

Fifty-six percent of women are currently dissatisfied with how they look.⁴ Where is the guide for the woman who is relying on unsuitable and impersonal fashion magazine advice?

Eighty percent of people ages 18 to 44 have their cell phones

with them 22 hours per day.⁵ What about the man who feels consumed by social media and email, sleeps with his phone, and can't seem to step off the hyper-connected hamster wheel long enough to hear himself think, never mind meditate?

Where is the thoughtful, strategic guide for that person?

This was the book I needed but couldn't find when I was a single, recent graduate, living in a tiny apartment with an equally tiny budget, full of intellectual promise yet with a lot of unanswered questions—and completely overwhelmed by how to begin and where to seek guidance. There wasn't just one particular thing that was ailing me, and the issues I needed to combat were bigger than the ennui addressed in some books. My quest wasn't about adopting a general life philosophy—though that developed as a byproduct along the way. Rather, it was about systematically targeting and transforming multiple aspects of my life over a prolonged period of time. Directives to “just meditate,” “think positively,” or “dance spontaneously” simply didn't cut it. I knew that unbridled optimism alone wouldn't deliver the results I was looking for—and it likely won't for you, either.

As an entrepreneur, I learned that one of the best things about startups is their ability to “pivot” quickly—to start over after a failure. Lean Startup guru Eric Ries believes you don't succeed as an entrepreneur because you're a “visionary” or simply because you got lucky and were in the right place at the right time. “It's the boring stuff that matters the most,” he argues.⁶ Personal success, like professional prowess, is about tinkering with the minutiae over and over again. It's about developing and following the right process, not just having a good idea. And that demands rigor and daily maintenance—far beyond a few positive affirmations.

In a startup, the number of unknowns multiplies daily, and there are no existing patterns or company history to look to for guidance. What do you do when planning is not an option? When

control is out of your reach? You isolate the small stuff, experiment constantly, and use the results to lay a more sustainable foundation for the future. You validate your idealized vision by testing it out in bite-sized increments. You see what sticks, integrate it, and move forward—and leave what doesn't work behind. Life, it turns out, is not so different from running a startup.

The good news is you don't need bags of cash to be happy and fulfilled. Nor do you need to be a genius. Life is a business, and like most businesses, you'll experience a series of failures along the way. But if you're savvy, you can apply a scientific approach to creating and managing the life you want. In other words, you can take control of the process before you even know exactly what you're aiming for.

Living your life like a startup is about maximizing flexibility and measuring ongoing results, not avoiding failure or reaching one particular end goal. It's about embracing defeat, analyzing it, and failing up. This book traces stories of entrepreneurial triumph and failure, then applies the lessons learned to everyday life.

Your Life, the Startup: What to Expect

This book may inspire you, but more importantly, it will increase your odds of personal satisfaction. It will help you reclaim control and create happiness by rewriting your story through research and strategy, not luck or daydreaming.

Drawing on startup methodology and inspirational stories from Silicon Valley and beyond, this book teaches you to reframe your life using these core principles and anecdotes. Entrepreneurial moguls like Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg rightly fascinate us. Their meteoric rise is the stuff of modern legend, but their path to greatness often is not as seamless as we might imagine—and their journeys are not so dissimilar from ours.

Since life doesn't always permit you to sit down and read cover to cover, this book offers great flexibility in how it can be experienced. You can read from start to finish or easily jump around from topic to topic according to your interests and needs.

Here's what you can expect:

In Chapter 1, "The Imperfect Prototype: Become an MVP;" you will learn the value of reframing your life as a work in progress rather than a final product. You'll learn tactics for testing ideas and actions that allow you to operate with greater confidence and efficacy, and you'll see the value of stripping away inessentials. Less is more, in ways you might not expect.

You'll start to retrain your brain in Chapter 2, "Get Your Mind Right: Optimize Your Mental State." You'll ensure that your thought processes are working for, not against, you. Passion and practicality can coexist, and in this chapter I will teach you how to balance your heart with your head. You'll learn where and when to utilize positivity and optimism (as well as its limits) and begin to edit your mental operation manual.

Take back power and start making your own luck through thoughtful experimentation in Chapter 3, "Outsmart Dumb Luck: Experiment-Driven Decision Making." Nothing is too small or insignificant to test, and this chapter proves that approaching your life like a science experiment always takes the blue ribbon. Plus you'll learn why planning can be counterproductive and why even "failed" experiments are beneficial.

In Chapter 4, "Everything I Need to Know I Unlearned: Disrupt Your Assumptions," conventional wisdom gets the boot. You'll get out of your habitual ruts by putting your personal assumptions to the test and learning what you're taking for granted. You'll turn "knowledge" on its head and avoid the groupthink trap while also shaking up the mental models that shape and control you.

We are social creatures engaged in a perpetual performance,

largely at the mercy of our audience. You'll systematize that validation process in Chapter 5, "Win Every Room: Establish Product-Market Fit." Operating in "beta" mode will help you find the intersection of what matters to you and what resonates with your audience—in all facets of life. You'll learn to impart happiness to yourself and those around you by focusing on not just what you're doing but *how* you're doing it.

The way you deliver your goods matters, whether you're seeking a job or a life mate. In Chapter 6, "Work It: The Runway of Your Life," you'll learn to make the world pay attention. Because let's face it—we all judge. A lot. And if the way you look and what you're saying doesn't resonate, the sad-but-true fact is that people are less likely to listen. You'll also redefine authenticity and clarify its connection to happiness. I'll teach you how to hack your image for maximum power potential: you'll put a little spit-polish on your exterior demeanor, fine-tune the way you present yourself, and see how life shines a little brighter in your reflection.

Our lives are increasingly mediated by technology, and you'll learn to expertly manage your digital identity in Chapter 7, "Go Virtual: Life, Mediated." We'll break down the difference between your "real" and "reel" personas and harness the power of tech-fueled surrogates. You'll learn how virtual spaces can be more than time-sucking, airbrushed facades and can actually be liberating and therapeutic, and offer a chance at a second existence—and deeper happiness.

In Chapter 8, "Hustle and Grow: Bootstrap Your Way to Happiness," we'll dissect your relationship with money and you will learn to live lean—not by pinching pennies but through fiscal maximization. We settle the debate on whether money makes you happier and differentiate between "good" and "bad" money. You'll understand what it really means to bootstrap—and why

you should do it—and how hustling is the X factor that will give you the edge.

Partnerships are hard, but the qualities of a good relationship—in business and romance alike—are timeless. In Chapter 9, “The Partnership Puzzle: Be Your Own Matchmaker,” you’ll learn how to harness the power of partnerships to fuel happiness and success. You’ll meet some romantic entrepreneurs who are going rogue and disrupting the current courtship model. I’ll reveal the real truth behind our endless search for The One, and teach you how to find lasting relationship flow.

In Chapter 10, “Bellyflop with Grace: The Art of Failure,” we explore why giving yourself permission to fall down can be a win. You’ll redefine what it means to fail, and we’ll look at how you can transform failures into opportunities for growth. A hard-earned comeback can be even better than a landslide victory (I’ll tell you why), and you’ll learn when to test your limits and how to use patience as your secret weapon.

Letting go is hard, so we often linger a little too long, unsure of when to move forward. In Chapter 11, “Peace Out and Level Up: Make Your Exit,” you’ll learn how and when to move on. I’ll teach you to take charge of your relationship with change and live a life in transition.

How many times have you daydreamed of starting over? Chapter 12, “Hitting Refresh: The Life Pivot,” teaches you to flip the mental switch that gives you a fresh start—on whatever scale you need. You’ll rediscover how to play and use it as a catalyst for reimagining what’s possible. You are the serial reinventor of your own life.

Throughout this book, I’ve included personal anecdotes and amusing stories, and the book’s format follows the “scrum” model, an iterative approach to project management often used by agile

software developers. Scrum allows teams to respond to unpredictability and complexity by taking control of projects through short work sprints. In *Startup Your Life*, you will become your own scrum master—the person in charge of moving the project ahead and removing any impediments to reaching your goals.

By creating small, incremental goals, measuring and analyzing their results, and holding yourself accountable, you waste fewer resources while mitigating risk and shortening the time it takes to achieve real, measurable results. So at the end of each chapter, I offer realistic, actionable strategies that allow you to implement and live the chapter's lessons. They're a sort of built-in workbook that you can return to again and again whenever you're in need of a tune-up.

And should you want a refresh on the key ideas covered throughout the book, each chapter closes with the top ten chapter takeaways—write them down, share the ones that resonate on social media, or just revisit them periodically as gentle reminders and motivators.

Personal fulfillment is created, not inherited or earned. And a haphazard search for happiness leads to unpredictable, intermittent results, not sustainable well-being. In this book, entrepreneurial methodology lays the foundation for success while you implement these tactics as the scrum master of your own life. Outside forces feel a lot less overwhelming when tackled systematically and iteratively. There will be turbulence, but when approached strategically, it's all within your control. So buckle up, and let's startup your life.

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Coming December 27, 2016

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