

**OWN YOUR SHIT**

**ZAID ISMAIL**

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<https://zaidismail.com>

[distribution@zaidismail.com](mailto:distribution@zaidismail.com)

*Cover design by Zaid Ismail*

*Book edited by Maryam Patel*

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The power to improve your life always was,  
and always will be yours and yours alone.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Introduction

In a world where everyone is fighting for inclusion or acceptance, few stop to realise that they have yet to accept themselves. Tough love is frowned upon as being too harsh or politically incorrect, but at the same time we complain about the entitled millennials and the old folks that failed them. The business tycoons blame the consumers for plastic waste choking our sea life, and the oil tycoons blame the car owners for climate change. It seems fashionable to abdicate responsibility for who we are and instead blame the world for not treating us well.

Whenever I see such finger-pointing going around, the first thought that comes to mind is why don't people own their sh!t? It seems like a vulgar statement to some, but we live in times when moderation is considered boring, and vulgarity is the minimum form of expression that's needed before you'll get anyone's attention. If only we'd step back and realise that we are active contributors towards the world that is treating us like sh!t.

We blame society for all our problems. Society treats us like this or judges us like that. The tabloids are feeding us garbage, and social media is a bad influence. The complaints never stop. The single common thread through all this is the people that use these platforms. They are the same people that complain about the blood and gore that shows up on their timelines while sharing or reacting to the same content.

Moral decay and social consumerism would have no business value if it didn't get people's attention. As long as it does, it's only going to get worse until we collectively sit up and shout STOP. We are society! Society is not separate from us. It's not some other creation that exists external to us, that judges us harshly, or excludes us when we don't comply. We are it. Blaming

society for the problems we experience is in fact pointing the finger at ourselves.

Media moguls that sensationalise everything to sell papers or ad spaces don't just do so to get the latest trending hashtags. Nor do they do it to drag society down. They do it because that's what society wants. That's what appeals to the general consciousness of the masses that complain about the decay around them. When society rejects their content, they change focus to what is popular. When the same media senses the desire for rebellion, they fan its flames, and when they sense the desire for reconciliation, they pretend to be the ambassadors of compassion and understanding. They focus with precision on the pulse of society because that is what sells subscriptions and ad spaces. They don't define society. They give society a soap box. And that's the thing about how we live our lives as well. Our world is simply a reflection of what we tolerate and encourage in our own lives. Hence the inspiration for this book.

We lack mindfulness about the present moment. More than this, we lack mindfulness about what soul food we need to find peace in this dystopian world. Tough love for the soul is in short supply because everyone wants to be popular. Likes on social media translate into attention-whoring in our personal lives. When we don't get the attention that we want, we ignore our real-life relationships and focus on the virtual world instead. We wear our hearts on our sleeves, and we record our acts of charity for the world to see, because we want the world to recognise our struggles and celebrate our generosity of spirit. Without that recognition we feel incomplete or insignificant. Little do we realise that that generosity is in fact rooted in selfishness. We don't think twice about undermining the dignity of a vulnerable person just to improve our social standing. And the burning question as always is simply this. WHY do we do it?

Own Your Sh!t is the journey of introspection that you must take to understand the *why* of who you are. This book unpacks the steps that you experience in a single moment as you respond to life, lovers, friends, and colleagues. From the moment you feel that need that is born in your gut, it makes you aware of the assumptions that you make in your quest to fulfil that need, and how those assumptions stroke the fears that drive your behaviour. You'll grow to appreciate the nuance in the reactions that you get from others as you discover how their reactions influence your perceptions of them, and of reality in general.

Through the counselling that I've offered individuals from around the world ranging in age from teens to the elderly, the same patterns kept emerging. The patterns spanned race, religion, culture, and education levels. From the academic snobs to the corporate narcissists and even to the average person without a tertiary qualification, the patterns relating to their emotional wellness remained consistent. I distilled these patterns into this book that will guide you towards understanding why you experience life the way that you do. By understanding the why, it becomes possible for you to decide what you need to do to change anything that you don't want for yourself. This experience of human emotion and how it influences or defines the quality of our life is what I refer to as the *Egosystem*. Stated plainly, that is the sh!t that you need to own.

This is not a self-help book of mantras and exercises to tell you what behaviours or thinking patterns you must adopt to be successful. Instead, it's a book of introspection that raises your self-awareness and empowers you to consciously choose what works for you, rather than telling you what may have worked for someone else.

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*You can only ever fully realise your potential if you understand what defines you and your aspirations, rather than understanding the aspirations that others believe you should have for yourself.*

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As you discover new insights into your behaviour, don't distract yourself with how you saw those behaviours in others. Instead, let this be a journey of holistic reflection. Reflect on how the points relate to your actions and then acknowledge or dismiss it based on honest assessment, rather than protecting yourself from the accountability for the changes that you wish to see in your life.

It's common to focus on how we perceive others rather than how they perceive us. No matter how much we try to avoid it, it happens. When that happens, read the book again if that's what you need to fully grasp the concepts and realisations that it offers. Let this book become a companion to reference from time to time in your efforts to continuously improve your effectiveness in every part of your life.

There is a critical difference between situational mindfulness and emotional mindfulness. The one means you're paying attention to what's going on around you and the other is about what's going on within you. Most don't understand the difference, that's why we have celebrated gurus teaching people about meditation and convincing them that it's mindfulness. Meditation is not mindfulness, and mindfulness is not reflection. Each have their own purpose with one important exception. You can deliberately practice reflection and meditation, but the moment you deliberately practice mindfulness, you're distracted.

Mindfulness is about focusing without personal bias on the present moment. The moment you're focused on something other than the present moment, you're not present. That's why mindfulness must become second nature to you. It must be the way you are, not the way you want to behave. It's like those times when you were so focused on whatever you were doing that you didn't notice anything else around you. If you were consciously aware of what you needed to block out, you wouldn't have had a heightened focus on what demanded your attention.

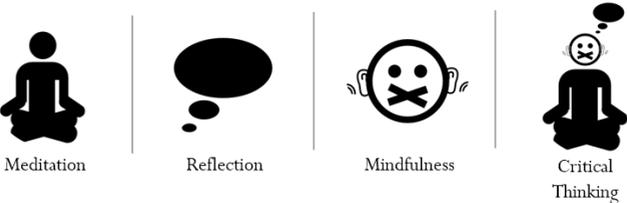


Figure 1 - Critical Thinking

Combine meditation, reflection and mindfulness, and critical thinking becomes a natural disposition. Critical thinking is unachievable when we're distracted by environmental influences, emotional upheaval, or if our mind is wandering to some other place and time, while we're trying to deal with something more immediate.

Critical thinking is the ability to recognise and understand what it is that you're contending with in the present moment and being able to objectively question its merits towards achieving the best outcome. Being objective is impossible without mindfulness, and mindfulness is developed through

reflection and meditation. Meditation, however, is not necessarily limited to yogic practices or religious customs but can be any moment when you immerse yourself into a meditative state without allowing sensory triggers to disrupt your thoughts or emotions. Like walking in a forest, or on the beach, or taking a long drive without any company. Incidentally, it is during such periods of silence that reflection occurs naturally, and often subconsciously.

One of the reasons why people suffer from attention related difficulties is that they're so preoccupied with what they need to avoid that they lose sight of what is right in front of them. Then they do prescriptive meditation exercises to quieten their minds without realising that it's more than just mental clutter causing them to be distracted. It's the equivalent of what technique means to a bodybuilder.

Putting in the effort to lift a heavier weight doesn't mean that they'll develop the right muscles. It just means that they'll be able to lift the weight that they're targeting. If they fix their technique, they'll develop the correct muscles needed for maximum effectiveness, while also reducing the risk of injury, and simultaneously improving their appearance. The same is true for our brains. Just being able to process information is not the goal. The goal is being able to process it effectively and then being able to apply it in a different context. Otherwise we end up like parrots repeating mantras in a mirror.

Back to the largely ignored subject of emotional mindfulness. Without understanding how your emotions sway your focus and your perspectives, being mindful in any setting will still leave you distracted enough to arrive at potentially incorrect conclusions. That's because your interpretation of the facts presented to you is processed against the backdrop of your emotional relationship with that setting. No amount of meditation or reflection is going to save you from that bias when you need it the most.

You don't need any prior knowledge of psychology or philosophy to understand the concepts and principles discussed in this book. But you absolutely must be willing to reflect honestly and sincerely on your current state, with an intense focus on understanding where you're at, and not with the intention of apportioning blame for the state in which you find yourself. Once you are committed to this approach, nothing can stop you.





## CHAPTER TWO

# Understanding Why

Are you willing to look at yourself with kindness or do you judge yourself harshly for the mistakes that you've made? Do you accept accountability for your choices, or do you believe that others are to blame for the state that you're in? Knowing when to blame others is just as important as knowing when to accept responsibility. Looking at ourselves with kindness, not in an apologetic way or through the lens of a victim, but genuine kindness and understanding becomes difficult when everything around us prompts us to judge ourselves harshly. If we judge ourselves through the eyes of others, we'll find reason to reject the truth of who we are, instead of learning to understand and appreciate why we do the things that we do.

Life is about joy as much as it is about pain, happiness, sadness, success, failure, and so much more. There is no neutrality in that. The absence of one gives rise to the other. Like darkness presents itself in the absence of light, we soon discover that darkness itself doesn't exist. When you find yourself in a dark space, consider that you may just be avoiding the light. Why you would choose to avoid it, then becomes the question that we must answer.

Remember that you cannot create darkness. You can only remove light. Unhappiness is therefore the absence of joy. You cannot create misery; you can only remove joy.

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*It's not what we do that prevents us from experiencing happiness, but what we prevent ourselves from doing that denies us the joy that we want to experience.*

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The remedies that dictate what you need to do to change the course of your life is found everywhere. Friends, family, and acquaintances including self-help gurus, life coaches, and psychotherapists can all tell you *what* you need to do to experience their idea of happiness. What they often cannot do is give you advice or guidance about *why* it is that you're preventing yourself from doing what you know you must do to be happy. Many have lost sight of even this.

We all think we know what will make us happy, yet most of us don't act on that knowledge because without knowing *why*, it becomes difficult to connect with that goal. If we don't know the *why*, the *how* becomes a gamble because we'll find ourselves trying to make changes for the sake of change, or we'll look for advice from others on what they think will make us happy, but we'll find it difficult – if not impossible – to turn our focus internally to answer those tough questions ourselves.

When it comes to human emotions, simple statements have a profound impact on our state of being. Innocent utterances can destroy a good mood and an unintended silence can offer comfort. On a different day, the same innocent utterance can inspire a revolution, while silence can condemn a loved one to a perpetual state of conflict or sadness.

Why do we ignore people's intentions but hold on to the impact of their actions? Why is it so easy to hold on to an unpleasant experience even when we know that it wasn't intended to offend us? Similarly, why is it so easy for one person to get over a terrible experience, while a similar experience haunts another for the rest of their lives? The answers lie in what we choose to take from our experiences, and most importantly, *why*.

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