YOUR DEFAULT SETTINGS

ADJUST YOUR
AUTOPILOT
TO BUILD A
MORE STABLE
AND IMPACTFUL LIFE

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Understanding Default Settings

What Is a Default Setting?

All technology has default settings. Your smartphone has a default internet browser, your refrigerator has a default cooling setting, and your vacuum has a default brush. It's a configuration for the product chosen by the manufacturer. Many of us don't change the defaults on our tech, so they stay that way for a long time. We usually don't know that we *can* change them, or we think the current setting is good enough to do its job.

How do defaults apply to human behavior? Your default settings are your repeated behaviors and beliefs. When you do something by default, you do it without even thinking about it, as if you were on autopilot.

There are a few ways to identify a default setting in your life:

- You can identify defaults in anything you do as second nature that you haven't changed in years. Consider the way you brush your teeth every day, the way you tie your shoes, or the way you put your hands on a steering wheel. What are your patterns of actions, words, and thoughts that have become ingrained over the years?

- You can identify your default settings by looking at your environment. Your defaults aren't necessarily unique to you; others might share the same behaviors. You may jaywalk at a certain traffic light because *everyone* jaywalks at that light, or bring a reusable bag when you go shopping after seeing your neighbors with theirs in the checkout line. Which of your behaviors or beliefs have been shaped by your current or previous communities?

- You can also discover your defaults by comparing yourself to people you've met recently. Perhaps your default setting is putting dishes in a dishwasher differently than your roommates or holding the door

open for other people when others just keep walking. What things do you do differently than other people?

When you answer these questions, you'll realize that you have default settings in all areas of your life.

A DEFAULT SETTING

Time

A behavior, word, or thought repeated many times

Why Do We Have Defaults?

Default settings make us more efficient. In computer programs, default settings ensure that new users get value right away when using a product for the first time. When you open a new Word document, the default font type and size are already set and you can start typing right away. An out-of-the-box smartphone comes with a default camera app on its home screen—you don't have to research or download anything to start taking photos. In short, defaults save us time and save us from making hard decisions when we have limited experience. And just like in technology, the default settings in your life can be incredibly useful.

A default way of greeting people means you don't have to scramble for words every time you see somebody. A default method of folding laundry makes it faster to put

your clean clothes away. A default route to work means you'll arrive on time without getting lost.

When a repeated action becomes second nature, you can finish it without even having to think about it. For example, during a typical commute to work, you don't need to devote brainpower to remembering where to turn or where to merge; you essentially function on autopilot. A default commute frees up your mental capacity to solve other problems, like planning your tasks for the day or brainstorming ways to contribute to a new project.

How Did We Get Our Defaults?

You aren't born with your default settings—they are conditioned into you.

Your first defaults were set by your parents. When you were little, your parents looked after you and ensured that all of your needs were met so you could explore and grow. As a kid, you had no important life decisions to make: all decisions—where you lived, where you went to school, where you traveled for vacations, where you got your hair cut, where you deposited your first savings—were narrowed to a few choices or made for you entirely. This supervision is helpful when you don't know much, and these defaults set the foundation for your own decision-making as you get older and learn more.

Your parents play a key role in shaping you as a person. As you become more and more independent and go out into the world on your own, your neighbors, teachers, peers, and people you meet online—rather than just your parents—start to determine what kind of human you're becoming and what defaults you adopt.

There's a concept in psychology called *group identity*, which states that the group you identify with influences your personal goals and actions. The similarities and common interests within a group create stronger bonds and make it easier for members to relate to each other. Think back to when you were a kid. Chances are that the sports you tried, video games you played, or TV shows you watched were also popular within your circle of friends. You didn't invent your free-time activities. Your interests likely originated from your community's interests. You saw something in person, on TV, or online, and then you tried it yourself.

YOUR PARENT'S DECISIONS

Hometown

Bank

Religion

Diet

...

YOUR DECISIONS
(AS A TEENAGER)

☑ Same as parent

☐ Custom

Settings last updated: **Never**

Your surroundings also influence your ideas. If I asked you to think of any country in the world, you'd more than likely name a country you've either been to, heard of, or read about in the past. Even when we use our imagination to create something we perceive as "new," it's really just a mash-up of things we've previously experienced or heard of. The sources of your ideas are limited to your encounters up until this point.

The way you sound originates from your community, too. Your accent might not stay exactly the same if you move around, but no matter what you sound like, your speech patterns will always be influenced by your experiences and the places you've lived. For example, there are more than twenty dialects of English in the United States. Each has its own word choices, sentence structuring, and intonations that are picked up through exposure. The patterns that surround you become your default simply because it's what everyone around you sounds like.

You may not be aware of all the things you absorb from those around you, but community, and the time you spend *in* a community, shapes your ideas, your interests, and your voice.

Community Voices Become Your Decisions

Your community influences more than just your ideas and interests. The conversations that take place around you, even if you aren't really listening, can influence your future decisions too. When I was growing up, my parents would gossip about our neighbors after work: "So-and-so got a well-paying engineering job." "Mr. X got an impressive promotion and raise." These weren't conversations I was particularly interested in at the time, but my brain stored the idea that an engineering job was impressive and could make a lot of money. So when I turned eighteen and needed to make my first career decision, what field did I choose? Electrical engineering. It took some reflection to realize that I didn't actually enjoy engineering, but had only chosen it because of the ingrained belief that it would be lucrative and make me respected and successful—all because of a few conversations overheard during my childhood.

And conversations are just the beginning. Some of your standards of behavior come from observing how people in your community act as much as what they say. You probably greet a cashier the same way as the people before you. You may sort your recycling, garbage, and compost because your community expects it, or you might litter because it's commonplace and your parents, teachers, and neighbors don't care.

The influence on your decisions isn't even limited to your physical community. When you started using social media, you probably posted whatever you found interesting, but after a while, you may have adjusted your content based on what got the most likes. I've certainly taken down some of my posts after not getting very many likes. I speculated about why I couldn't get more traction: if my friends didn't like my update, they may be thinking I'm too boring, too self-centered, or not entertaining enough. It's human nature to desire inclusion and acceptance and the fastest way to this goal is maintaining the status quo. Don't ruffle too many feathers and you can

be safe as part of the flock. Negative feedback and silence are hard to receive, while the feeling of belonging is easy and satisfying to accept.
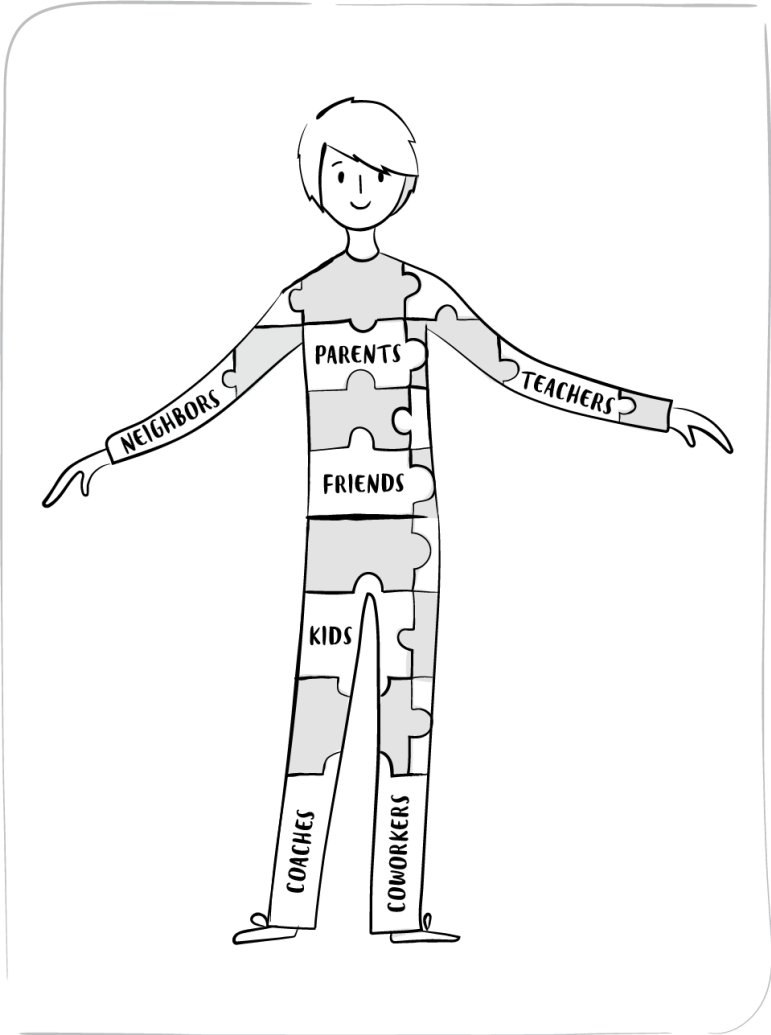
Why Change a Default Setting?

When we're young, default settings help us fit in. But these same default settings can be a problem later if they persist without reevaluation. Unexamined defaults can end up taking our life in the wrong direction.

Although default settings in technology are designed to create the best experience for the majority of consumers, there still isn't a "one size fits all" answer. Your smartphone's pre-installed internet browser app may be slower and less secure than another option. Your refrigerator's default thermostat settings may require recalibration to keep your food from spoiling in a warmer environment. Your vacuum's default brush may be perfect for carpet, but not as efficient if you have tile floors.

In general, default settings can be problematic for three reasons:

#1 Defaults Become Outdated

Default settings—both in software and in our lives—are most helpful when we wouldn't know where to begin otherwise. But that ignorance is temporary. We'll always have default settings—shortcuts for making decisions, patterns of behaviors, and habits—but we don't need to hold on to our *original* settings over time. When we have limited time, we don't want to waste it on things that don't move our goals forward. "Greatness," as American historian James Harvey Robinson said, is "courage in escaping from old ideas and old standards."

#2 Defaults Are Impersonal

Our default settings are like hand-me-down clothes. When we get them, we don't have a choice of size, style, or color, and they usually don't fit us as well as they fit their previous owner. Because your default settings are initially set by your parents and community, they're

impersonal and set without any consideration for your individuality.

Defaults within communities are optimized for the average, not for any one person. "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else," Ralph Waldo Emerson argued, "is the greatest accomplishment." While I love my parents, grandparents, and the community I grew up in, I'm more than just the sum of those influences.

#3 Defaults Are Limiting

Accepting the default settings created by others (even people we trust, like our parents, teachers, and friends) means that we're also accepting their assumptions, which are likely going to limit our individual growth and impact.

An expert in growth, Elon Musk, has a mantra to approach problem-solving by looking at "first principles." This means ignoring the conclusions that others have

made, starting with fundamental basics that you know are true and building up from there. Revising assumptions ensures that nothing is missed. But to do so, you have to evaluate your routine behaviors and be willing to change any that aren't working.

YOU

YOUR FIRST
DEFAULT SETTINGS

You will make progress with your original defaults,
but not as fast as if you examine and change them.

The Key Benefit of Changing Your Defaults

The most critical moment of your life happens when you decide to examine *and adjust* your default settings.

Your awareness of your default settings, your ability to evaluate them, and your willingness to change them are the key components of correcting your course in life. There will be several benefits along the way:

- While your old defaults may have been holding you back, your new settings can help you upgrade all parts of your life, making it even more positive, more energized, and more stable.

- Adjusting your defaults means you are more in control of your life. Each adjustment you make is a purposeful change in the direction your life is taking and in defining success on your own terms.

- The journey of defining new habits and beliefs will make you dig deep and examine what you truly enjoy and hate. The more you know about yourself, the more aligned your future decisions will be to your goals.

- Updating your routine can also help you get ahead. Most people don't change their defaults. When you do, you will stand out more from your peers.

- And because default settings drive recurring behaviors, the effects of changing them will become a lasting foundation. Once changed, these behaviors will become your new autopilot.

The main benefit of updating your default settings, however, is **your long-term impact**.

Humans have an inherent desire to leave a lasting legacy. Everything we do contributes to how we will be remembered, but having a significant impact is not easy. In fact, more often than not, our impact is suppressed. We end up in jobs that don't leverage our strengths.

Our interpersonal interactions are polite, but essentially transactional and shallow. Our digital habits consume a lot of our time, leaving us feeling too drained to create something new.

To have the most positive impact on others, we need to align our work to our strengths and passions, spread love in our interactions, and hand-pick our digital content to recharge us. We can't accomplish these things without first analyzing our defaults. Updating and personalizing your default settings means that your autopilot will take you—and your impact—further.

In the following chapters, we'll use this lens of long-term impact to approach analyzing and changing our defaults.

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