



Questions That Make a Difference Every Day

by **Marshall Goldsmith**

My colleague, Dr. Andrew Thorn, taught me the fascinating, and incredibly practical, daily-questions process. I now try to use this process every day. I find that it does a wonderful job of keeping what is most important to me ‘in my head’. My good friend and coach, Jim Moore, also uses this process for the same reason. We are both amazed at how well this works!

Every day I challenge myself by answering 32 questions that represent behavior that I know is important, but is often easy to neglect. Every day Jim asks himself 17 questions. There is nothing ‘magic’ about the numbers 32 or 17. The idea is to just ask the number of questions that seems ‘right for you’.

Each question is put on an Excel spreadsheet and is answered with a ‘yes’ (use a 1 to represent this on the spreadsheet) and ‘no’ (use a 0 on the spreadsheet) or a number. The process moves very quickly!

In my case, I share my numbers every day with my coach. This helps ensure accountability.

One rule: no negative feedback. No matter what the other person has done, we say nothing that might produce guilt. On the other hand, we make positive comments that reinforce success. Recently, my coach listened to my report on how much I weighed. When it was clear that I had moved closer to my weight goal, he said, “Great job!”

My coach and I live many miles apart and I travel extensively. We are still able to connect on the phone about 85% of the days. When we miss a day or two, we simply catch up later.

For example, I will share some of the questions that I use for myself. Please remember my questions reflect my values, and might not work for you.

I know begin with six ‘active questions’ that have been proven (in my research involving over 1,700 people) to lead to higher satisfaction with life. You will note that each question begins with, “Did I do my best to...”

Did I do my best to:

1. Be happy?
2. Find meaning?
3. Build positive relationships?
4. Be fully engaged?
5. Set clear goal?
6. Make progress toward goal achievement?

The good thing about beginning these questions with “Did I do my best to...” is that it is very difficult to blame someone else for my failure. No one can be responsible for “Did I do my best to...” but me!

In terms of the happiness question, my philosophy of life is simple: Be happy now. I have a great life—wonderful wife and kids, good health, don’t have to work, love my job and don’t have a boss. If I weren’t happy today, someone screwed up—that would be me!

In spite of all my blessings, I can still sometimes get caught up in day-to-day stress, forget how lucky I am and act like an idiot. It helps to get a daily reminder of the importance of happiness and gratitude.

Another question that I ask myself is, “How many minutes did you spend writing?” This is harder for me. I am an extrovert who loves teaching, coaching and just being with people. It is sometimes hard for me to sit by myself and write. Yet writing is a critically important part of my life. Through my writing I have reached millions of people that have never heard me speak. Writing is how I am communicating with you now.

Some of my questions are about health, such as “How many sit-ups did you do?” (This works. Today I did 200 sit-ups at once. Not bad for a 64-year-old guy!)

Disciplined follow-up is the key to the success of my teaching and coaching. One question is “With how many clients are you current on your follow-up?”

My relationship questions include, “Did you say or do something nice for your wife? Your son? Your daughter?” I am certainly not a perfect husband or dad, but this process helps me get better.

Why does this process work so well?

For one, it forces Jim and me to confront how we actually live our values every day. We either believe that something matters or we don’t. If we believe it, we can put it on the list and do it! If we really don’t want to do it, we can face reality and quit kidding ourselves.

Jim would say that this process saved his life. Before doing this process he had put off getting a physical exam for years. He listed “Am I current on my physical exam?” as one of his questions. After 90 days of further avoiding the exam, he finally got it done. The doctor said, “You have cancer.” That was years ago. Jim is fine. The doctor also said,

“If you had waited seven more months, before getting the exam, you would be dead!” Jim knew he should have had a physical exam. He just didn’t do it! The daily questions process helps make sure that actually DO what we know we should do.

I asked my wife Lyda (also a psychologist) if she thought this process would work as well with a computer-generated list of questions instead of sharing with another person. She said, “No, it is a lot easier to blow-off a computer than another person.”

Imagine a coach was going to call you every night and listen to you answer questions about your life. What questions would you want to ask yourself, every day? In the past several months, I have had more than 100,000 participants in my training programs write their own questions. The results are very revealing and sometimes even profound.

Try it out. Write the questions that you would need to ask yourself every day. Even the process of writing questions will help you better understand your own values and how you live or don’t live them on a daily basis. If you really have courage, recruit a coach or friend and start asking daily questions to each other. You might be as amazed at the results as I have been.

Goldsmith's What Got You Here Won't Get You There is the Harold Longman Award Business Book of the Year. All of his articles and videos online are complimentary at www.MarshallGoldsmith.com.