

5 Questions That Can Change Your Life

The right question makes all the difference. What's your tennis ball?

What can a question do? If it's the right question, it can change your life. In my research on the power of inquiry for my book [A More Beautiful Question](#), I learned that asking challenging questions—of others, and particularly, of yourself—can do everything from helping you overcome fears to enabling you to make better decisions and life choices.

Why are questions so powerful?

When we formulate questions, we begin to “organize our thinking around what we *don't* know,” according to the Right Question Institute, a nonprofit educational group that studies questioning. Indeed, often just by asking a question, we are taking the first step toward learning something new or solving a problem. Questioning is also associated with *divergent thinking*, which taps into our [creativity](#). And there's evidence to suggest that questions are highly motivating: Ask yourself a question and your mind almost can't help going to work on finding an answer.

Of course, some questions are better than others. While researching my book, I asked many successful people—innovators, business leaders, great creative thinkers—to share questions they found to be particularly powerful.

Here are 5 of those questions—each designed to help with a different aspect of living a better life. Try asking yourself these questions, but don't be in a rush to find a quick or easy answer. These aren't the kinds of queries Google can answer; a more personal “search” may be required.

1. What's my tennis ball?

This question is derived from a [commencement speech](#) given at MIT last year by Drew Houston, founder of the successful information storage service Dropbox. It's a more interesting way of asking yourself, *What do I really care about?* or, *What am I meant to do?* As Houston explained in his speech, “The most successful people are obsessed with solving an important problem, something that matters to them. They remind me of a dog chasing a tennis ball.” To increase your own chances of [happiness](#) and success, Houston said, you must “find your tennis ball—*the thing that pulls you.*”

Where should you look for that thing that pulls you? Pay attention to your own behavior and to the things you find yourself doing without thinking. “When you're in a bookstore,” says author Carol Adrienne, “what section are you drawn to?” Another suggestion is to think about what you loved doing in younger days. “The things we loved as a child are probably still the things we [love](#),” says [Eric Maisel](#), a psychotherapist and author. He suggests drawing up a list of favorite activities and interests from [childhood](#) to “see what still resonates with you today.” Once you've figured out what pulls you, it's time for another question: *How might I find a way to incorporate this interest or activity—this tennis ball—into my everyday life?*

2. What am I grateful for?

Self-questioning can easily drift toward a focus on what's missing in one's life: *Why don't I have more money, a better job, a bigger house?* Meanwhile, we tend to take for granted what we actually have going

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for us. But happiness experts say that if you want to find a quick and easy way to bring more positive energy into your life, start by asking yourself the question above—and keep asking it, every day.

“[Gratitude](#) is a shortcut to happiness,” says the filmmaker Roko Belic, whose 2011 documentary *Happy* was a study in what makes some people happier than others. The [same conclusion](#) was reached by Tal Ben-Shahar, a professor at Harvard University and author of *Happier* and *Being Happy*. He believes it’s important to “cultivate the habit of gratitude” by asking, at the end of each day, *What am I grateful for?* and writing the answers in a “gratitude journal.” He maintains that people who do this tend to be not only happier but also more successful and more likely to achieve their [goals](#).

3. What would I attempt to do if I knew I could not fail?

This question, quite popular among [risk-taking](#) entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley today, can be traced back more than three decades to American pastor Robert Schuller, who used it in inspirational sermons and books. More recently, it was featured in a popular [TED talk](#) by technologist Regina Dugan, who hailed the question’s power to help people get past [fear](#) of failure—so that “impossible things suddenly become possible.”

How can a mere question help conquer fear? It has to do with the power of the hypothetical “what if” to enable us temporarily to shift reality and look at the world through a different lens. By asking *What if I could not fail?*, we create a mental landscape in which the constraint of failure is removed. This frees up the imagination to think of the most ambitious possibilities. Of course, at some point one must return to real-world thinking, where failure is a very real possibility—and ambitions may have to be scaled back. But the point of this question is to allow you to at least start out thinking big and bold.

4. What if I made one small change?

As you set out to make actual changes in your life, start small. Wall Street executive Caroline Arnold, author of [Small Move, Big Change](#), advises that if you focus on “microresolutions”—small, targeted, [behavioral changes](#)—you’re much more likely to succeed in improving your life.

For example, when Arnold set out to “get in shape,” she focused on one small behavioral change—walking to work instead of taking the train. And she only committed to doing this once a week, on Mondays. Eventually it became a habit, and now she walks to work every day. So why not just resolve to walk to work every day to begin with? By holding yourself to that higher standard, your chances of failure are greatly increased, Arnold says. Bottom line: Resist the urge to try to change too much, too quickly. Begin, instead, by asking, *What if I made one small change?*

5. What will make a better story?

Life is about choices: Do I take this path or that one? When you come to forks in the road, ask yourself this wonderful question, shared by author and consultant [John Hagel](#): *When I look back in five years, which of these options will make the better story?*

Why use this question to guide you? Because, as Hagel explains, “No one ever regrets taking the path that leads to a better story.”

Warren Berger (@GlimmerGuy) is the author of [A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas](#).

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