



“The key to success is learning the meta-language of learning. Learning how to learn. How to achieve peak performance in a difficult arena of life that requires mastering 100 micro-skills to become among the best in that field. Isaiah Hankel breaks down that meta-language, and shows us how, regardless of our life’s mission, to quickly achieve mastery in whatever field of life inspires us.”

—**James Altucher, Journalist and Author of *Choose Yourself***

“The biggest advantage of reading *The Science of Intelligent Achievement* is the sense of personal responsibility the book provides. Most books in this category are either pure fluff in that they offer nothing but feel good nonsense about how to ‘be grateful’ and ‘be nice’, or they are written with the goal of absolving the reader of any fault in life. Here, Isaiah takes a completely different angle as he puts the responsibility of choosing your focus, creating something worthwhile in life, and continuing to grow pragmatically squarely on the reader’s shoulders. Every page pushes you to take control rather than give up control, to actively choose what to spend your mental energy on rather than just ‘letting go’ and hoping for the best. It’s a great read if you’re up for the challenge of taking ownership over the good and bad in your life.”

—**Jordan Harbinger, Co-Founder of The Art of Charm and Sirius Radio Talk Show Host**

“*The Science of Intelligent Achievement* unapologetically slapped me in the face by telling me what common mistakes ‘average’ people do and how these ‘average’ habits and actions are keeping me in a mediocre career and life. There is something fresh and simple about Isaiah’s ability to not sugar-coat topics. This book is full of relatable stories and interesting facts that stay with you after you are done reading. I recommend this tough-as-nails self-help book to anyone who wants to evaluate their direction in life.”

—**Dr. Nick Ross, Senior R&D Engineer at Intel**

“This is a jam-packed book that is chock-full of actionable and practical advice on the hard truth about what it takes to live a happy and successful life. You won’t be able to make excuses for yourself after reading this book.”

—**Ben Greenfield, Founder of Greenfield Fitness Systems and Advisor at EXOS Performance Nutrition**





The Science of Intelligent Achievement

**How Smart People Focus,
Create and Grow
Their Way to Success**

Isaiah Hankel





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FOREWORD

Twenty years ago I left my hometown. Recently, I found myself back there. Unfortunately, I was there for my Grandpap's funeral. He was a patriarch, a war hero, and a role model for each member of our family. He had left a legacy behind by living with authenticity.

While reconnecting with siblings and greeting friends of the family, I was struck by how much I'd grown since I left town. I had been the first in our family to graduate college. I got married, I enrolled in graduate school, had a child, received a Ph.D., trained at the National Institutes of Health, and landed a dream job at Harvard Medical School (HMS). However, my path hasn't been easy.

In the beginning, I worked hard, but I didn't work smart.

I was out of focus. I wasn't living in reality. I hadn't taken full responsibility for my choices. I wasn't being strategic ... and I definitely wasn't being authentic.

It wasn't until I had a frank and honest conversation about how I could leverage my experience and my interests to do something fulfilling and to start achieving intelligently. It was then that everything came into focus, I faced a harsh reality and took responsibility for my life and my career.





My journey is far from complete. And I do not go alone. In addition to my indomitable wife, I've had a few close friends and colleagues help me along the way. And of course I've returned the favor. When one of these friends asked me to write the foreword to his second book, I had to help him out and said yes immediately.

Isaiah and I first met via an email introduction. He had a novel approach to leadership and career development so I invited him to give a talk at HMS. Through several conversations and a growing friendship Isaiah was open to my advice, and criticisms. While my opinions were plentiful, he shrewdly picked up on the important points and began to craft his message and share it across the globe. I invited him back to HMS two more times, once for a Leadership Series and another for his Career Development workshops. In turn, he's twice invited me to appear on his webinar series where my aim was to empower professionals to confidently (and scientifically) take control of their career and lives.

In Isaiah's second book, *The Science of Intelligent Achievement*, he tackles some issues that apply to most everyone: focus, creative ownership, and pragmatic growth. When Isaiah brings up "Blind Spot Ignorance" in Chapter 29, he discusses how we can identify blind spots in others but not usually ourselves. He also states that self-perception rarely matches social perception. To combat this Blind Spot Ignorance, Isaiah advises to keep blind your spots in full view. This requires a fearless self-inventory where you take ownership of your shortcomings, mistakes, and biases. Once you self-monitor for bad habits and potential pitfalls, you will no longer be "blindsided" by the truth and can begin to live with authenticity.



**Foreword****xxi**

Selective investment of your focus, energy, and relationships; taking creative ownership of your path, success, and happiness; and a pragmatic approach to your decisions, habits, and overall growth will lead you towards your authentic self. And it's this kind of achievement that will result in increased productivity, a meaningful message, and a lasting legacy in your life.

I wish I had this book twenty years ago because to me, *Intelligent Achievement* starts and ends with authenticity, or as Isaiah calls it in this book “true success.”

—**James Gould, Ph.D.**,

Director, Office for Postdoctoral Fellows,
Harvard Medical School







PREFACE: A FOOL'S GUIDE TO FAKE SUCCESS

No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne

My real doctor was on vacation. This new doctor was merely stepping in to examine me as part of a routine annual physical. By chance, the new doctor was older, much more experienced, and had just diagnosed two other male patients with testicular tumors.

It was as if he was *primed* to diagnose me as well.

After noticing my right testicle was slightly smaller than my left, the doctor ordered a series of labs to confirm that I indeed had a tumor. What followed was the most life-altering, life-changing, terrifying experience I've ever had.

I was called in to have an ultrasound and, as the technician examined me, I could see the results in her eyes. I asked her sporadic questions and she gently dodged them with some "I don't know's" punctuated with a "we have to wait for the results from the radiologist." *Just like she's been trained to do for all the other people having biopsies and waiting on their death sentences*, I thought.

My heart pounded harder and harder each time she avoided the obvious answer.





Then, I saw the falsity—the mocking joke of my chosen career path.

This is not me, this job, I thought. This isn't what I want or am meant to do with my life.

My “healthy lifestyle” was laughable. How healthy could a fake life be? How much was I depleting my health and energy to live a lie?

My fake personality. My fake identity.

One after another, all the falsities and pretenses of my life were paraded before me.

What a fraud I had become. No, worse, I was a *disaster*.

My relationships were a disaster. Half of them had faded into the background of my life and the other half were completely fake to begin with. Connections that had once been built on shared values and tied together tightly with meaning, were now frayed, loose, and superficial.

I was no longer selective with who I gave my time and energy to. Instead, I had become completely passive, allowing anything and anyone into my life.

My career was a disaster. I thought I had achieved an untouchable job title. I thought I had become irreplaceable. In reality, my employer was ready to cut me loose after three weeks of medical leave. I was completely dependent on them for my survival. I owned nothing and owed everything.

My health, which I once touted as Olympic-level when I was a NCAA Division I wrestler at University, was now average at best, thanks to an undisciplined diet and “just a couple of beers with the guys” every night.





Preface: A Fool's Guide to Fake Success

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I stopped being reasonable and pragmatic, choosing instead to live life with my head in the clouds. I chose to evade reality. I avoided even the slightest attachment to personal responsibility because surely someone else was watching out for me. Surely, there were no real consequences to this life and even if there were, I could turn everything around at a moment's notice if I really wanted to.

Within two months of my surgery, I went from feeling on top of the world to realizing that I was just a few weeks away from being broke . . . and that I was completely alone, completely out of touch with reality, and soon to be remembered only as a cautionary tale.

From Tragedy to Intelligent Achievement

Tragedy, while painful, is enlightening.

Tragedy is an opportunity for growth.

When I found out the news that I needed surgery, the first thing that jumped in my head was, "This can't be happening."

Now, I'm thankful that it did. The diagnosis changed my life for the better. It showed me how foolish I had been, chasing after fake signals of achievement. Cancer showed me everything that I had wasted and taught me that it was time for me to do a hard reevaluation of my life.

It didn't happen overnight. Nothing good does.

Slowly, I learned where I needed to stop spending my energy and where to start *investing* my energy instead.

Over the course of the next year, I stopped following my fool's guide to fake success. I stopped wasting time on things





like my “image,” job title, salary, and—especially—the next good time.

Instead, I started *selectively focusing* my energy in new, positive people and pursuits. I stopped allowing myself to be dependent on others and instead took *creative ownership* over my own success and happiness. I also decided to get back in touch with reality. I decided to start exercising *pragmatic growth*—to see things for how they are, not just how I wanted them to be.

Together, these three things—selectivity, ownership, and pragmatism—came together to form a kind of guidepost for me; one that directed me toward *The Science of Intelligent Achievement*, instead of fake success.

Now, thanks to this guidepost, I'm married to my best friend, I run two companies with close friends and colleagues—companies that help hundreds of thousands of people and are truly successful in terms of both profits and cash-flow—and just welcomed my first kid into the world.

Enter this book.

I wrote *The Science of Intelligent Achievement* to show you how to create your own guidepost of selectivity, ownership, and pragmatism; and in part as a cautionary tale, to help you avoid the common mistake of chasing after fake success like I did.

My hope is that the pages that follow will lead you to the highest levels of Intelligent Achievement in your own life.





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is for everyone who helped me *achieve real success through selective focus, creative ownership, and pragmatic growth*. Hard lessons and incredible people made this possible.

To my family, including my wife and daughter, Laura and Zara, who have filled my life with many *intelligent adventures*. To my parents, John and Karen, and my brother and sister, Noah and Jessica, for teaching me the importance of *taking ownership over my life* and for always reminding me to be *selective with my mental energy*.

To Team Cheeky, including all of my friends and colleagues at Cheeky Scientist for helping me make a *pragmatic* difference in the world. Thank you for working so hard to *turn our message, "Remember your value as a PhD" into a magnet*.

To all the members of the Cheeky Scientist Association for continually striving to improve their lives and improve the world. You are all an example of *seeing through the victim illusion* and *turning pain into productivity*.

To everyone who has ever supported or spoken well of Hankel Leadership, including members of *My Life Aligned*. You have set the standard for the *law of relaxed productivity*.





xxx

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Keep *avoiding willpower depletion* and keep *hacking and stacking mini-habits to success*.

To Annie, Chloe, Pete, and everyone at Wiley for believing in this book and helping me bring it to life.





INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS INTELLIGENT ACHIEVEMENT?

Try not to become a person of success, but rather try to become a person of value.

—Albert Einstein

Achievement is about value. It's about attaining value through effort and skill.

The question is, what do you currently value?

What are you working to attain?

Have you been taught to value your job title or your relationship with some other person above all else? Have you been convinced that the most valuable things in life are your paycheck, the number of people who say “hello” to you at the office, and the number of people who say “I need you” at home?

Or, have you become so passive in what you value that you let anyone and anything into your life, as long as whatever you let in allows you to stay disconnected from the cold hard truth that when things really go wrong in your life, the only person who will be able to fix it, and the only person who will be responsible for it, is you.

Welcome to fake success.





Passivity, dependence, and the sacrifice of realism and personal responsibility to whatever fuzzy, grandiose ideal is currently trending in the ether of your mind—these are the markers of fake success.

Fake success is a moving target. It's unstable, as I learned the hard way. I thought staying busy, competing with others at the office, and thinking as big as possible was my meal ticket to permanent achievement. But it was all an illusion. What I had built up in my mind as the pinnacle of existence was dark and empty.

My *laissez-faire* attitude about my attention and where I put it ... the mutual feelings of security that came from needing other people and them needing me ... the joy and freedom of keeping my head in the clouds so I never had to commit to anyone or anything.

... oh, how I cherished my broken little toys.

Once things went wonky in my life though, I saw just how hollow this kind of fake success is.

Intelligent Achievement, on the other hand, is *not* a moving target. It's *not* empty either. Instead, it's sturdy, full, and immovable.

It's *not* something that's just handed to you. It's *not* something you're nudged into chasing or coerced into wanting.

Intelligent Achievement comes from within you. It's a collection of values that are aligned with who you are—values you have to protect and nurture. These values do not increase your dependence on other people and things. Instead, they relieve you of dependence.





Introduction: What is Intelligent Achievement?

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Intelligent Achievement is something that you have a part in building from the ground up—you know what's in it—you chose it, someone else didn't choose it for you. It's instilled with your purpose and it's something you alone are responsible for.

Intelligent Achievement teaches you the scientific process of finding success through your most valuable assets—selective focus, creative ownership, and pragmatic growth—first, by developing your focus and learning how to conserve your mental energy.

If you've failed to reach an important goal because you were distracted, misinformed, or overcommitted, then you know the role focus and selectivity play in achievement.

Second, you will learn how to stop allowing your happiness and success to be dependent on other people. A bank, tax collector, or the government may be able to take away your house, business, savings, stocks, and other indicators of fake success, but they can never take away your knowledge, network, or ability. You must take creative ownership over these three things in your life.

Finally, you will learn the art of changing your life through pragmatic decisions and actions. Self-improvement is not the result of dramatic changes. Instead, personal and professional change is initiated and sustained by consistent, practical changes. To grow, you must leverage the power of micro-decisions, personal responsibility, and mini-habits. Your own biology will not let you improve your life in any other way.

Intelligent Achievement will also show you how to avoid falling into the trap of chasing fake success. What fake success





signals have you been pursuing? Your image? Job titles? Annual salary? Facebook friends?

Chasing empty indicators of success has left millions of people in a variety of careers—blue-collar, white-collar, and academics alike—leading a vacuous, shallow life, that leaves them burnt out, dependent, and disconnected.

It's never too late to turn things around. Whether you want to reach higher levels of true achievement in your career or in your personal life, you need to *start valuing the right things now*: selective focus, creative ownership, and pragmatic growth.





1 Why Mental Energy is Your Most Valuable Asset

When mental energy is allowed to follow the line of least resistance and to fall into easy channels, it is called weakness.

—James Allen

Nothing can save you from your fatigued mind.

Not time—hours don't matter when your brain is incapable of making good decisions.

Not money—dollars won't buy you clarity or stamina.

Not relationships—how can you make others happy when you can't do it for yourself?

If you've ever sat in front of the TV to watch something you've seen before because you're tired, you know that time is not your most valuable resource. If you've ever bought anything beyond food, water, shelter, or your other basic needs, you know money is not your most valuable resource.





Protecting Your Mental Energy

Right now, your psychological immune system is seeking safety. You have trained it, either actively or passively, to fear change.

The only way to reprogram it is to start being more selective with where you spend your mental energy. The first step to protecting your mental energy is to ignore the urge to give your attention to whoever or whatever is seeking your attention.

Build up a resistance against this inclination by saying “no” to everything first. This will be hard to do at first but, over time, it will become easier and easier.

Learn to feel a sense of success when you say “no,” rather than a sense of failure.

You’ve been trained since birth to say “yes” to everything. Every time you agreed to do something your parents or teachers told you to do, you received positive affirmation. Now, you see, saying yes is the key to getting rewarded.

This is a mistake. Saying yes without discretion brings failure, not success. Set “no” as your default response. Start rewarding yourself for being selective. Every time you say “no” you get one step closer to achieving true success.

Most importantly, learn to keep all gossip and meaningless drama out of your life. Nothing will drive your mental energy levels down faster than having an emotional blowout. Defending yourself against gossip at the office is tiring; hard work is not. Fighting with your relationship partner is tiring. Falling out with a friend or family member is tiring. Maintaining healthy relationships is not.





Why Mental Energy is Your Most Valuable Asset

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The solution is simple—stop burning through your mental energy on emotional drama. The key to doing this is to learn to walk away from energy draining people.

Energy draining people—think of them as vampires needing the energy of others to survive—grow stronger by feeding on your attention. They play the victim, act out, and create all kinds of drama to steal away your attention. Stop letting these people hijack your focus. Protect your mental energy by walking away from them once and for all.

Saying “no” and removing energy draining people from your life will help rewire your brain so that you’re no longer addicted to distraction or drama.



Surround Yourself With Mental Energizers



Once you’ve learned to protect your mental energy, surround yourself with people and activities that increase your mental energy levels.

There are some people and activities you *should* say yes to, of course. The key is that you need to be selective about who and what you let into your life.

Find people who energize you and keep you on track towards your goals. Then, hold onto them. Find activities that excite you and bring you closer to your goals. Then, keep executing them. These people and activities will ensure that your psychological immune system starts to defend *against* distraction, and *against* drama.

Your mental energy is going to plummet throughout the day, certainly. But that’s not a bad thing. It’s only bad if it’s





being wasted on people and activities that are pivoting you away from true success.

Be selective and start saving your most valuable resource—mental energy—for the best things in life, not the worst.

Notes

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2 How Busyness Leads to Burnout and Manipulation

Beware the barrenness of a busy life.

—Socrates

Busyness drains mental energy and prevents mastery.

You may have heard that mastering any skill, whether it's business, surgery, playing the violin, or fencing, requires 10,000 hours of practice. What you may not have heard is that this practice is best done in short bursts, not in long drawn-out days.

Scientific studies published in *Psychological Review* have shown over and over again that the fundamental difference between elite versus average performers in any field is the number of hours the elite tier spends on deliberate practice¹—the uncomfortable, methodical work of stretching your ability to execute a skill.





Elite performers deliberately practice three times longer than average performers.

That's not the surprising part. The surprising part is that the *average performers* practiced more hours overall. So, what gives? The average performers work harder than the elite performers and don't get rewarded for all this effort?

No, they don't. It's how you practice that matters, not how long.

When researchers compared the mean time both sets of performers spent working versus the waking hours of the day, they found that average performers passively spread their work throughout the day.

The elite performers, however, were very selective with their efforts. Instead of spreading their work out passively, they consolidated their work into short bursts. These performers' *working time* versus *waking time* charts showed two sharp peaks—one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Elite performers spent more time in deliberate practice but only worked an average of 3.5 hours a day.

As a result, the elite performers leverage their mental energy more productively. The rest of their time was spent on leisure, relaxation, and recovery.

The Busy Life Versus the Productive Life

There's a right way and a wrong way to live.

Feeling inspired and energized as you execute productive actions that lead to both the achievement of your goals and a





Busy People Are Followers, Not Leaders

You can set your agenda for your life, or you can follow someone else's. The choice is up to you. The biggest problem with being busy all the time is that it keeps you reliant on other people.

Busyness keeps you dependent on the herd. This herd mentality is your brain's default mindset, and it's what you have to actively work against every day if you want to be successful. The only way to stop blindly following others is to stop doing what others want you to do.

That means setting firm boundaries with people and continuing to express your creativity and individuality no matter how much resistance you get. The problem is that others commonly reject creativity and originality. Studies reported in *Psychological Science* show that most people have a negative bias towards creativity.²

Most people act like they want you to express yourself openly but, in reality, they don't. Instead, they just want you to stay busy following their agendas.

Busyness is how others control you.

Busyness is how others get you to conform.

Why Busy People are Easily Manipulated

Distracted people get taken advantage of, and busy people are distracted.

When you are busy, it's easy for other people to make you feel like you only have one choice: theirs.





When you're busy, it's easy for other people to make you feel like you need them to be successful.

When you're busy, it's easy for other people to make you feel like it's your duty to take care of them.

Distraction turns people into pushovers.

When grown men and grown women try to make you feel guilty for not spending time with them or not doing what they want, it's simply a power play.

These people know that you have a thousand other things going on and would rather give in to them than feel guilty. They use your busyness against you by making silent threats to play the victim or suck you into drama. As a result, you say yes to everything. You have to say yes. If you don't, you'll have to deal with emotional blackmail.

Staying busy is an easy trap to fall into no matter who you are.

If you want to be average, run around all day in a false sense of busyness. Stay passive and unfocused, only half concentrating on whatever you're doing at the time. Worry constantly. Plan for the worst. Try to fit in, let others boss you around, and say yes to everything. Most importantly, never be selective with your attention.

But, if you want to be productive, if you want to achieve worthwhile goals while feeling a sense of fulfillment, it's time to get focused. You need to start being self-aware enough to reject busy, meaningless activities and, instead, to focus on the one or two things that really matter to you each day.





How Busyness Leads to Burnout and Manipulation

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Notes

1. Ericsson, K. *et al.* (1993) 'The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance'. *Psychological Review*, 100(3): 363–406. <http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=buy.optionToBuy&id=1993-40718-001>
2. Mueller, *et al.* (2010) 'The bias against creativity'. <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1457&context=articles>





3 The Infection Known as “Other People’s Opinions”

It is not advisable to venture unsolicited opinions. You should spare yourself the embarrassing discovery of their exact value to your listener.

—Ayn Rand

A few years ago, I had to get emergency surgery after a negative health diagnosis (see the Preface for the backstory). After the diagnosis, there was no time to think.

My life sped up. Things started happening at warp speed, and I couldn’t catch up. I was thrown into a vicious conveyer belt of mandatory action by a team of medical specialists.

After my tests, labs, and surgery, however, things slowed down. Now, there was plenty of time to think—too much time, perhaps. There was also plenty of time to ask for advice.





The Infection Known as “Other People’s Opinions”

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As often happens during these kinds of traumatic events, I felt a deep sense of loss and confusion. Clearly, I was doing something wrong in life for this to happen ... right? Where did I mess up? What did I need to change? Why was I being punished? I needed answers and I needed answers now.

To find the answers I needed, I asked all my family members and friends for their advice. I went to a variety of therapists, psychiatrists, and counselors. Some of them had very strong opinions on what I was doing wrong and how I should change my life, while others just agreed with whatever I suggested, told me that “it was just bad luck,” or kindly admitted that they had no advice to give.

While talking to others was helpful, looking to them to guide me was a mistake. Instead of centering me, everyone’s various opinions pulled me apart. Their emotional responses to my emotional situation made me—you guessed it—more emotional. It wasn’t until I decided to listen to myself that things started to get better.

Once I took some time for myself—and listened—the answers came. In fact, the answers were always present. There was a small voice inside of me the whole time telling me exactly what I needed to change. The voice told me that I needed to start being more selective. More selective in what I gave my attention to, who I gave my energy to, and certainly, whose advice I listened to.

You Know What’s Best For You

Other people’s opinions are like viruses. They infect you. No matter who you are or how strong you may be, other people affect your emotions and behavior.





lied to are more likely to lie and cheat.⁶ Similar research shows that having an obese friend increases your chances of becoming obese by 171%⁷ and having a smoker in your family increases your chances of smoking by 61%.⁸ And the influence of others can impact our brain health just as readily.

Negative Opinions Can Rot Your Brain

The first step to having a breakthrough in life is to start ignoring other people's opinions. When it comes to friendly advice, you must learn to be highly selective. This holds particularly true when the advice is negative. Scientific studies reported by *Stanford University News* show that exposure to negativity lasting 30 minutes or more peels away neurons in your hippocampus, the part of your brain responsible for problem-solving.⁹

Yes, negative opinions can literally *rot your brain*.

You might think that allowing negative people to “vent” at you or trying to make them feel better is virtuous. But, in the end, it does not make you a better person. Instead, it reduces your mental energy levels and hurts your performance.

One study examined 120 participants who were asked to talk with or ignore a negative person.¹⁰ After four minutes of interaction, each participant was given a thought exercise that required solid concentration. The participants who ignored the negative people performed better on the thought exercises than those who engaged with the negative people.

Other studies show that always feeling obligated to make other people happy is incredibly destructive. It can lead to





The Infection Known as “Other People’s Opinions”

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burnout,¹¹ reckless behavior,¹² and even suicide.¹³ There is nothing noble about listening to unsolicited opinions, especially unsolicited negative opinions.

Still not convinced? Here’s a summary of how negative opinions and negativity can slowly ruin your life:

- 100% chance you will become more negative for each negative person you let into your life.¹⁴ In contrast, each positive person you let into your life increases your chances of becoming positive by only 11%.
- Double your odds of unhappiness.¹⁵ Put another way, one negative friend doubles your chances of becoming unhappy.
- 50% higher risk of dying young.¹⁶ People who give in to worries and demands from negative relationships have a 50% increase in the risk of dying early.
- 34% more likely to have heart problems. Negative relationships boost heart disease risk by 34%.
- Poverty.¹⁷ Negativity is linked to poverty and reduced brain activity.
- Brain damage.¹⁸ Listening to a negative person for just 30 minutes peels away neurons in your hippocampus, the part of your brain that’s responsible for problem solving.
- Reduced creativity.¹⁹ People who work for a negative boss are far less creative than those who work for a positive boss.
- Depression and anxiety.²⁰ Complaining about your problems increases your risk of developing both clinical depression and anxiety.

