

Life Lessons
from
Famous People

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LIFE LESSONS FROM FAMOUS PEOPLE

by Neil Strauss

Here are a few instructions for living compiled from the common experiences in the countless celebrity interviews and misadventures I've had while writing for *Rolling Stone* and *The New York Times* over the past two decades. After all, it's much easier to learn from others' mistakes than our own:

1. *Let go of the past.* Many of the people we consider legends remain so scarred by scandals, injustices, and regrets from decades earlier that they're barely able to appreciate their accomplishments. While you do have to deal with each and every problem in the moment, when it's over and done with, there's nothing you can do about it anymore. So focus instead on being great at what you enjoy. And that, ultimately, is what you'll be remembered for. Unless you're Ike Turner.

2. *Fame won't make you feel any better about yourself.* Many celebrities who work hard for their success believe that celebrity and money will resolve their feelings of insignificance, insecurity, worthlessness, or disconnection. But they soon learn that rather than fixing one's flaws, fame—and, as Bruce Springsteen puts it, the “leap of consciousness” it takes to deal with it—magnifies them.

3. *The secret to happiness is balance.* People who spend every waking hour working like Lady Gaga or partying like Lindsay Lohan tend to end up in crisis. At best, they get to a certain point in life, look around, and find themselves alone. At worst, they have a mental breakdown or end up in jail or dead. Almost everyone who reaches a plateau where he or she is happy and comfortable says it's because of finding balance, creating boundaries, and dedicating each week to a mix of work, re-

laxation, exercise, socializing, and family—plus some alone time to do something contemplative, creative, or educational.

4. *Fix your issues now, because the older you get, the worse they become.* Another theme in the interviews I've done is that people who grow up in stable homes with unconditional love, like Sacha Baron Cohen and Jay Leno, tend to stay out of trouble, while others who suffer from trauma, abandonment, or even simply neglect in childhood—and never resolve those issues—often end up sabotaging their career and their life.

5. *Faith and confidence versus self-doubt.* An interesting theme I found in talking to celebrities is that aspiring stars who believe that fame is God's plan for them tend to become more famous and have longer careers than those who believe their success was a lucky accident. Whether this is an indication of piety or hubris, the lesson is that success comes from acting out of confidence, conviction, commitment, and deservedness, no matter what critics, haters, and competitors are saying and thinking—and with no fear of failure and no problem bouncing back undiscouraged if one doesn't succeed at first.

6. *Derive your self-esteem from within, not from others' opinions.* The artists who are the most miserable are the ones who spend too much time reading—and believing—their own press. No matter how bad or good or right or wrong others may be, you're handing the key to your happiness to strangers when you're letting their words control your feelings. What many people don't realize is that when someone is talking bad about them, the goal is not actually to make them look bad, but to make the speaker look good.

7. *Say yes to new things.* Most of the rich and famous people in the book ended up that way by complete coincidence. Just trying something new one day or answering an advertisement in a newspaper or working hard with little reward set in motion a chain of events that led to them becoming household names. So rather than finding reasons not to do things, embrace Stephen Colbert's dictum of saying yes to everything.

And then, when you do get famous, avoid burning out by embracing Neil Young's dictum of saying no to everything but your art.

8. *Live in truth.* This means not just being honest with others, as Merle Haggard and Chuck Berry advocate, but being truthful to yourself and who you are. The artists who last the longest learn to accept themselves as the flawed but striving-to-improve human beings they are.

9. *Never say never.* Life takes many surprise twists and turns—some for the worse, some for the better. So never rule anything out as a possibility, especially if it involves the clichéd things that successful people do—unless you want to eat your words in the future. Most of the time when we vehemently detest something in another person's behavior, it's either because we recognize a part of it in ourselves or we're secretly envious.

10. *Trust your instincts.* I interviewed Cher, who had an international number one hit because she trusted her intuition and fought for it, while other artists plummeted into obscurity because they were dependent on advice from others. Even if your decision turns out to be wrong later, at least you'll know that you did what was right and true for you in the moment, and you'll be less likely to have regrets later. This, however, is not always an easy thing to do, because it's a lot easier to blame someone else for a mistake than ourselves.

11. *Be happy with what you have.* I often think of the week I spent with Bo Diddley, who was not only one of the most important musicians of the twentieth century but a genuinely sweet person. He went to the grave bitter about getting ripped off for his music in his youth instead of appreciating the influence he had and the money he'd earned. Not only did he get to make a living touring the world and playing music for a worshipful audience, but he had homes, horses, and dozens of grandchildren. He was also in danger of losing most of it to his litigious ex-wife, but that's another lesson.

12. *Everyone loves you when you're dead.* Because when you're dead, you're no longer competition. Your happiness and accomplishments are no longer a threat to others' belief system and self-esteem. You've been appropriately punished. So enjoy your life while you have it.

So let us raise a toast to the artists, celebrities, and crazy people of the world—to the ones arrested outside clubs for driving drunk and filmed yelling racial slurs at audience members and hospitalized for accidentally setting themselves on fire with crack pipes. Thank you not just for keeping us entertained with your mistakes, but for reminding us to be happy with who we are.

The above is an excerpt from "Everyone Love You When You're Dead," a New York Times bestselling book published by Dey Street/HarperCollins. Copyright © Neil Strauss.