

The 12 Levers — Book Club & Discussion Guide

The Complete Psychological Toolkit for Improving Your Life

By Spencer Greenberg and Jeremy Stevenson

To purchase the book go to: <https://12leversbook.com/>

How to use this guide

The 12 Levers is unusual for a self-help book: it's less a single argument to agree or disagree with, and more a **toolkit** to try. That makes it a great book club pick, because everyone will connect with different Levers, and bring different experiences that are relevant to the book in different ways.

This guide is built for a group of any size — a living-room book club, a workplace reading group, a therapy or coaching cohort, or a class. Feel free to skip around and pick the questions that resonate with your group. You don't need to get through all of them. Good discussions usually go deep on a handful rather than racing through every prompt.

A few suggestions for facilitators:

- **Read the room, not the checklist.** Pick 4–6 questions per meeting and let the conversation wander where the energy is based on what participants seem most excited about.
- **Keep it practical.** After discussing an idea, consider asking: "What would you actually *do* with this?" or "Do you think you could apply this now, and if so, how?" The book is based on the idea that action is what actually changes lives.
- **Set norms.** Some of these questions invite people to talk about anxiety, self-criticism, or hard chapters of their lives. Set a norm early that people can share as much or as little as they want, and that nothing said in the room leaves it.

A one-meeting format works fine, but you may enjoy splitting the book across **three or four sessions** to get the full value out of the discussion. If you divide it up, you could discuss 3 or 4 Levers per session.

Warm-up questions (before you dig into the Levers)

Use a few of these to open your first meeting.

1. Before reading, what was your relationship to self-help? Skeptic, superfan, cautious, newcomer?
2. The authors argue that the most important ingredient in any self-help resource isn't the stories or the theory — it's the **techniques** (the specific, concrete, repeatable things you actually *do*). Do you agree? Can you think of a book or idea that inspired you but never actually changed your behavior?
3. Both authors trace this project back to their own suffering — Jeremy's need for approval, Spencer's social anxiety. Do you have a brief personal story you're willing to share — e.g., 1 or 2 minutes — about why self-help feels relevant to you? (Make sure nobody feels pressured to share unless they want to.)
4. Before we get into specifics: which Lever did you find yourself most drawn to? Why?

Big-picture questions

These questions get at the book's central arguments, and can lead to fruitful discussion and debate.

5. **What the book leaves out.** The authors are upfront that self-improvement isn't always the answer — sometimes you need to change your *environment* (leave a toxic relationship, job, or situation), and serious distress calls for professional help. For those comfortable sharing, what's a challenge you face where you feel like self-help could help, or what's a challenge where you feel that self-help is not the right approach?
6. **Skepticism about the hype.** The book pushes back on trendy techniques — noting, for example, that the evidence for cold exposure and intense "energetic breathing" is thinner than the hype suggests (even though they may be useful to some point), while some of the most powerful techniques are "boring" and decades or centuries old. Did any of this challenge a practice you personally believe in? Where's the line between healthy skepticism and dismissing things that might help?

- 7. The core discovery.** The authors extracted nearly 500 techniques from 106 self-help books and 23 therapies, and found they all collapse into just 12 broad strategies. Did that claim land as a genuine insight, a useful simplification, or an oversimplification? Does knowing what the “12 Levers” are make the world of self-help feel more usable or comprehensible?
- 8. Knowing vs. doing.** A recurring point: reading about a technique gives you a little hit of insight, but insight alone rarely changes behavior — and motivation usually follows action rather than preceding it. Where in your own life do you already *know* what to do and not do it? What’s the smallest first step that would be “almost too small to skip”?
- 9. It only works on average.** Even the best techniques don’t work for everyone — there’s enormous person-to-person variability. The authors frame this as being *freeing* in a sense: it means you get to experiment and keep what fits you. How do you personally decide what to try and what to skip over, or when to keep going with something vs. move on?
- 10. Recycled and repackaged.** A running theme is that the same techniques keep reappearing under new names — mindfulness shows up as “defusion,” “decentering,” and “acceptance”; facing your fears shows up as “exposure,” “systematic desensitization,” and “feel the fear and do it anyway.” Has a book ever sold you an old idea in new packaging and made it sound like the next new thing?

Going through the 12 Levers

Below is a short reminder of each Lever, plus one or two discussion prompts. Pick the Levers that resonated most with your group rather than marching through all twelve.

Lever 1 — Unravel the Causes. *Understand what’s causing your problems by breaking them down (activating events, beliefs, consequences, and background vulnerability factors).*

- The book distinguishes the *origin* of a problem from its *current* cause — using the example that knowing a car crash caused your driving anxiety doesn’t stop the panic; what keeps it alive today (like avoidance) is what you can actually change. What’s a challenging area in your life where you feel that you could benefit from understanding the causes more deeply? Or what’s a situation in the past where the solution didn’t become clear until you investigated the causes?

Lever 2 — Uncover Your Guiding Foundations. *Clarify what matters most to you — your intrinsic values, principles, and priorities — to give your life direction.*

- What do you think is one of your deepest values that you could benefit from living by more fully?

Lever 3 — Actualize Your Guiding Foundations. *Align your actions with your values through goals, habits, choice points, and reviews.*

- Where's the biggest gap between what you say matters to you and how you actually spend your time and attention? What's one habit or "choice point" that could close that gap?

Lever 4 — Prepare for the Storm. *Create plans to prevent problems or better manage them when they hit.*

- Think of a recurring challenge in your life that you know will happen again (a stressful repeating work situation, a difficult relative, a spiral you know is likely to come again). What would a preparation plan for it look like?

Lever 5 — Approach the Monster. *Use gradual exposure to face your fears (when they're not actually dangerous) until the fear fades.*

- What's a fear you avoid that isn't actually dangerous? What would the *tiny* first rung of that ladder be to confront that fear?

Lever 6 — Shift Your Body to Shift Your Mind. *Regulate your physiology (sleep, relaxation, energization, healthy stress) to regulate your mind.*

- Which approach — mind or body — do you tend to reach for first when you feel off? What's one way you could take better care of your body that might have positive effects on your mind?

Lever 7 — Steward Your Thoughts. *Cultivate helpful thinking by reframing beliefs, working with internal "parts," and postponing unhelpful worry and rumination.*

- What's a recurring negative thought that is untrue or unhelpful? What would a more helpful alternative thought be that is at least as true?

Lever 8 — Tune the Productivity Equation. *Increase productivity by working more hours, more efficiently, or on more important things.*

- The book frames productivity as three separate dials rather than one vague push to "do more." Which of the three is actually your bottleneck — hours, efficiency, or importance (working on the right things)?

Lever 9 — Do More Glad-You-Did-It Activities. *Notice whether you're under- or over-active, and schedule activities that reliably lift your mood.*

- What's a "glad-you-did-it" activity you almost always enjoy but rarely schedule? What keeps getting in the way? What's an activity that you do that you usually feel bad about after? What's an alternative activity that would meet the same need but that after you'd feel good about having done?

Lever 10 — Communicate Skillfully. *Steer conversations into deeper topics, and be assertive, finding the balance between passivity and aggression.*

- Where do you tend to land on the passive–assertive–aggressive spectrum, and in which relationships? What would one notch toward the middle look like?

Lever 11 — Choose Your Attitude. *Frame your experiences with helpful perspectives — optimism, acceptance, Stoic resilience, appreciation, kindness.*

- The Stoic idea of focusing only on what you control runs through the whole book. Is there something you've been fighting that you'd be better off accepting — or something you've accepted that you should actually be fighting?

Lever 12 — Pay Attention. *Cultivate helpful attention by redirecting focus or practicing mindfulness.*

- Where does your attention go when it's not being directed — and is that serving you? What do you pay a lot of attention to that just makes your life worse? What do you wish you paid more attention to?

Try-it-together exercises

The book is emphatic that action beats insight. Consider trying one of these with your group:

- **Pick-a-Lever challenge.** Before the meeting, each person picks one Lever that fits something they're currently facing, tries at least one technique from it, and reports back: what did you do, what happened, would you keep it?
- **Smallest possible step.** Go around the circle: each person names one thing they've been meaning to do and shrinks it to a first step so small it feels almost silly to skip. If you meet again, check in next time on who actually did it and for those who didn't, what came up that stood in the way (or did they just forget?).
- **Build your personal toolkit.** Have each person write down the 2–3 Levers and specific techniques they most want to apply. Share them — you'll be surprised how different everyone's lists are.

Closing questions (for your final meeting)

11. The authors' stated goal is to reduce *unnecessary* suffering — the kind that's avoidable because the tools already exist to help with it. For those comfortable sharing, what is some unnecessary suffering in your own life that this book may give you tools to work on?
12. Which single technique from the book would you most benefit from using more — and why that one?
13. What did the group disagree about most (with each other), or on what topics discussed were the perspectives of group members most different?

Suggested multi-session schedule

If you'd like to spread the book across several meetings:

- **Session 1 — Foundations & the big idea.** The Introduction plus Levers 1–3 (understanding causes, uncovering and actualizing your values). Use the warm-up and big-picture questions.
- **Session 2 — Facing hard things & the body.** Levers 4–6 (preparation, exposure, body-mind). This is a good session for the exposure and body-mind discussions.
- **Session 3 — Thoughts, productivity & mood.** Levers 7–9 (stewarding thoughts, the productivity equation, glad-you-did-it activities).
- **Session 4 — Relationships, attitude & attention.** Levers 10–12 (communication, attitude, attention), plus the closing questions and a personal-toolkit exercise.

For book clubs and bulk orders

Reading *The 12 Levers* as a group, class, workplace, or organization? Here are a few ways to make it easy:

- **Bulk copies.** To buy copies in bulk (which usually comes with a discount) go to: <https://12leversbook.com/>
- **This guide is free to share.** Print it, email it, or hand it out — you're welcome to reproduce this discussion guide for your group.

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