Carey Nieuwhof

Didn't See It Coming: Overcoming the Seven Greatest Challenges That No One Expects and Everyone Experiences

Made by Blinkist

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Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

What's in it for me? A reverent, respectful look at how to overcome life's most challenging problems.

Life comes at you fast, huh? One minute, you're a fresh graduate, eager to change the world with your big ideas and inspiration. The next, you're a middle-aged cynic, self-medicating your way through regret, disappointment, and depression.

No one is immune: whether you're a high-flying executive or a hardworking barista, sooner or later, you'll encounter one of the seven great challenges in life:

cynicism, compromise, disconnection, irrelevance, pride, burnout, and emptiness.

The good news is, you can learn to recognize the signs of these impending challenges and take steps to mitigate their impact. These blinks guide you through the seven great obstacles and show how you can use Jesus's teachings as a roadmap to navigate them.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- concrete steps to nip cynicism in the bud;
- why character is more important than competence

for lasting happiness; and

- why simply putting away our devices won’t necessarily make us more present to our family and friends.

You don't become cynical because you don't care, but because you do.

The author Pastor Carey Nieuwhof is, in a word, an idealist. This might not surprise you: after all, to become so popular in the Christian community, it helps to see the best in the world. But that hasn't always been the case. Early in his career as a pastor, the author encountered the first of our seven great challenges in life: *cynicism*. He had to work through it to become the jovial optimist he is today.

When he first became a minister, Carey found work in a rural community in Ontario. He preached at three churches, the largest of which had an average attendance of 23 people. He wanted to grow his congregation, so he made sure the people who did show up felt special and well looked after.

Carey cared about everyone who came to his church. But this caring broke his heart.

The key message here is: You don't become cynical because you don't care, but because you do.

When Roger and Mary first showed up to Carey's church, he could tell they needed special help. They were emotionally needy and destitute and sometimes couldn't get to church because their car frequently broke down. Carey made sure they had gas money and drove across town whenever they needed spiritual or emotional guidance.

One day, Roger announced that they would stop coming to his church. The reason? Carey hadn't done enough for them.

Roger's accusation shook Carey deeply. In the weeks that

followed, he noticed that he had stopped caring and trusting people.

He knew he couldn't continue like this. But what should he do?

Carey remembered that God sent Jesus to counter inevitable human cynicism. Jesus confronted despair and made sure it wouldn't win. Carey realized that as long as Jesus was in his life, he didn't need to fear that his past would become his future.

Letting Jesus into your life takes years. Luckily, we can take concrete actions right now to

counter encroaching cynicism. First, schedule unstructured time for thinking and wondering. Staying open to possibilities that are new and different to scenarios you've already experienced can lead to unexpected joy. Second, ask open-ended questions, like "why?" and "why not?" and listen – really listen – to what people have to say. They might surprise you.

But the most important thing of all? Remaining curious. Curious people are never cynical, and cynical people are never curious.

Uncompromised character, not competence, determines how far you get in life.

Chances are, you know people who've changed over the years. You might have friends who used to have tons of energy but now spend all their time in front of the TV. Or worse, you might know people who made wedding vows but find themselves flirting – or more – a few years into their marriage.

What if all your friends are bastions of self-control and good moral judgment? You only need to take a look at the

highest levels of politics, entertainment, sports, and religious leadership. You're sure to see people there who have fallen from grace, having abandoned values they claimed to hold dear.

All these people have succumbed to the second of our great challenges – *compromise* – and their characters have suffered as a result.

The key message here is: Uncompromised character, not competence, determines how far you get in life.

For Carey, character is the extent to which someone lives according to their values. Someone who lives like the person they want to be. When you compromise your values, you widen the gap between who you are and who you want to be.

People with strong character will ultimately be more successful in life than their highly competent peers. Competent people may make a lot of money, have a lot of stuff, and have a large professional network. But competence doesn't guarantee happiness. Good character determines

ultimate satisfaction because good character means you develop meaningful relationships that have a lasting impact.

As a pastor, Carey has officiated hundreds of funerals. Not once have the spouse or children of the deceased read their loved one's résumé out or talked about how much they had in the bank. He's learned that a person can be incredibly successful and competent but still die without having an impact. If you have good character, on the other hand, you'll be remembered – and missed – by everyone to whom you were close.

No one will tell you to work on your character – except maybe your spouse if you're married. But you'll be penalized if you don't. People won't want to spend time with you, and you'll hurt the people you care about.

Working on your character isn't easy. In fact, it can be downright painful. You have to reach into the broken places in your heart to understand why you do the things you're not proud of.

But the alternative is compromising your values and inflicting long-term damage – to yourself and your loved ones. In the end, the choice is easy.

Technology doesn't create disconnection. It just amplifies what's already there.

Not-so-breaking news: we're more isolated than ever. Our phones, tablets, computers, cars, refrigerators, and the rest are all close enough to sentience to interfere in our relationships with those nearest and dearest to us.

What's more, social media has morphed us all into obsessive narcissists. A well-known study from the 1950s asked teenagers whether they thought they were "very important." Less than 10

percent said yes. The very same study conducted in the 2000s revealed that more than 80 percent of teens agreed that they were "very important." With so many of us thinking that we're God's gift to humanity, it can be hard to give others the patience and attention they deserve.

There's no doubt that technology is closely linked to the third of our seven challenges: *disconnection*. But it isn't the start, nor the end of it.

The key message here is: Technology doesn't create

disconnection. It just amplifies what's already there.

Whatever your weakness – be it vanity, laziness, or prejudice – there's a technology to make it worse.

But technology also helps us keep in touch with friends, learn new skills, and help people in need. It may bring out the worst in us, but it also brings out the best.

Just like money, technology makes a terrible master but a wonderful servant. It amplifies both the bad and the good. Our job is to make sure we have

something worth amplifying in the first place.

Real conversations are a good place to start. Too many of us never really talk to one another, but rather just take turns monologuing. So be interested in the person you're talking to. Ask them sensitive questions and really listen to their answers instead of just waiting for your turn to speak. Whether or not you use technology to have these conversations won't matter. You'll walk away with a deeper connection every time.

That said, it certainly won't hurt to limit technology's place in

your life – especially when it comes to your family. Dinner, and other important family time, should be device-free. Actually, any time you want to meaningfully spend with someone should be device-free.

The author Carey keeps his phone on Do Not Disturb mode all day so he's not distracted by the pings. There's usually enough time in the day to catch up on what he missed on his phone. When it comes to his family, that's not always the case.

Embracing change and fighting irrelevance helps deepen your impact.

Meet Aunt Helen. Aunt Helen's house seems to be stuck in a previous decade. From her shag carpeting to her waterbed and orange egg chair, it's clear that she's stopped evolving her style.

Aunt Helen knows what she likes, and she doesn't feel the need to bother with avocado toast or succulents or whatever the kids are into these days. Even if her style comes back into fashion, she won't even

know that her egg chair is now worth a fortune on eBay.

Aunt Helen embodies the fourth of our great challenges in life: *irrelevance*. And unless she changes with the times, she stands to lose much more than just a cool sense of style.

The key message here is: Embracing change and fighting irrelevance helps deepen your impact.

There are a few reasons why we're so resistant to change. For one thing, it's impossible to crave something we've never tried. As we get older, we begin

to devalue novelty for its own sake. Our brains are wired to prefer the familiar.

Another reason is that the more success you have in life, whether it's personal or professional, the less likely you are to want to mess with it. You've gotten this far doing things your way, so why fix something that isn't broken?

Perhaps most important of all, though, is that change is extremely hard. You might make embarrassing mistakes or even have a painful experience – and we're not just talking about

falling off one of those electric scooters.

But a life without change is one that invites regret. The further you fall behind the times, the harder it is to make impactful bonds with people outside your immediate circle. This can leave you feeling lonely and isolated.

The good news is, the more you change, the easier it is. But how do you start?

What you need is a mission. Find a mission that's bigger than yourself, that you can stay focused on through changing times. When you have a worthy

cause to hold to, you will *want* to stay current so you can use today's language to communicate your message. After all, if you want your mission to impact people in today's climate, you need to take the temperature every once in a while.

Pride is incredibly damaging but can be mitigated by cultivating humility.

Remember that study of narcissistic teens who classified themselves as “very important”? It’s easy to see that they suffer from *pride* – number five of our seven great challenges. But in fact, most of us suffer from pride, on some level at least. And that includes you.

At its heart, pride is the preoccupation with one’s self over all else. Pride is nurtured by insecurity. Prideful people are constantly comparing

themselves to others, measuring how they stack up. They measure their self-worth according to their most recent success or failure. Perhaps worst of all, prideful people can't take pleasure in someone else's success. The victory of a peer, or even sometimes a loved one, means their loss.

How can this be changed?

The key message here is: Pride is incredibly damaging but can be mitigated by cultivating humility.

Unchecked pride leads to a hardened heart. It inoculates you against good advice and

makes you think the rules don't apply to you. This will ultimately lead to the erosion of your most valuable personal relationships and even potential scandals if you're in a leadership position. Pride is what makes executives embezzle company funds, or politicians have affairs with campaign aides.

The Bible tells us that pride comes before a fall. Often, a fall looks like humiliation. But what is humiliation if not involuntary humility?

This is the key to countering pride. Humility is what we need to harness and practice, to

guard ourselves against the isolation and hardened heart that pride can cause.

You can actively monitor your humility in the following ways. First, never lose your gratitude. Prideful people feel they are entitled to their success or the good things they have in life. But the best leaders talk about how lucky they are. They realize they're not the only ones responsible for their success.

Second, keep your notebook open. If you realize you don't know everything, you're much more likely to encounter opportunities to learn, whether

it’s from a textbook or the guy standing behind you in line at the coffee shop. The more you stay open to learning, the more you’ll realize you don’t actually know.

Third and finally, be ridiculously honest with yourself. Of all the lies we tell, the ones we tell ourselves are the deadliest. The people around you can probably already see your weaknesses. Why not admit them to yourself? Once you do that, you’ll be able to start working on improving them.

Recovering from burnout requires patience and outside help.

When the author was 40 years old, he gave the keynote address at North Point Church, founded by one of his mentors in Alpharetta, Georgia. He was over the moon when his mentor and family told him his speech was a “grand-slam home run.”

In our society, workaholics are rewarded, and it was no different for Carey. He’d worked incredibly hard to prepare, and it was the pinnacle of his career to date. But what came next

wasn't an afterglow of happiness. In fact, it was the worst few months of his life. His productivity tanked, and he slipped into a deep depression. He even contemplated suicide.

Carey had fallen ill to a distinctly modern illness, and the sixth of our seven great challenges: *burnout.*

The key message here is: Recovering from burnout requires patience and outside help.

There are many signs of burnout. For Carey, it was exemplified primarily by a loss of

passion and a dulling of the senses. Nothing excited him anymore, and he didn't feel satisfied or rejuvenated by sleep or time off.

Little things exhausted him and made him disproportionately emotional. He couldn't focus on anything for long, and as a result, his productivity plummeted, even though he was self-medicating with yet more work.

Carey felt cynicism encroaching, and worst of all, he couldn't remember the last time he had laughed.

If you recognize these signs in yourself or a loved one, the best thing you can do is contact a medical doctor. They will help you assess how bad your symptoms are. Next, contact a Christian counselor who will help you deal with the spiritual problem at the root of your burnout.

Carey only managed to get through his burnout with the help of doctors, counselors, family, friends, and colleagues who gave him the tools and space he needed to get better. If you find yourself burned out and wanting to recover, you will need a circle of trusted friends

to walk with you through the process.

Be patient with yourself: you won't start to feel better until you've rested enough. And while you're waiting to recover, don't make any big decisions. Give yourself the mental space to focus on just feeling better.

The best lesson Carey learned while recovering from burnout was to work on his health every day. His goal now, every day, is to live in a way today that will help him thrive tomorrow.

More stuff won't cure a feeling of emptiness. But finding a mission you care about will.

As Carey is the author of several popular books, it's not a shock to learn that he loves writing. For many years he has kept a blog that keeps him pretty happy most days.

One day in 2015, one of his blog posts attracted half a million viewers in its first 24 hours. He was completely elated. Until he wasn't. The feeling didn't last very long. Shortly after, Carey received a visit from our

seventh and final great challenge in life: *emptiness*.

Many of us think we could be happy if only we attained a new level of something. Whether it's more success at work, more money, a more stable life partnership, or a more up-to-date smartphone – it's easy to fall into the trap that *more* brings happiness.

The key message here is: More stuff won't cure a feeling of emptiness. But finding a mission you care about will.

More stuff actually does bring happiness. But only for a while.

Then, more doesn't satisfy you anymore – you need better. Finally, when better has run its course, you need something different. For the sake of something different, you'll sacrifice the good already in your life. And you'll end up feeling empty.

The feeling of emptiness often comes after a peak, like Carey's popular blog post. To counteract it, we typically do two things: work more or self-medicate. Many people self-medicate with alcohol or drugs. But for Christians in Carey's experience, the most common self-medication is food.

Over-eating and over-working are two of the most prevalent problems Carey has come across in his community. They both might make you feel good for a bit, but they're not the answer to emptiness.

When you notice yourself starting to self-medicate, it's time to practice self-care. Self-care can take many forms. It's different for everyone because it depends on each person's particular needs at a particular moment. For some, it can mean getting off the couch and going for a walk. For others, it can mean going home and doing absolutely nothing.

To figure out what kind of self-care you need, ask yourself: what do I need today to thrive tomorrow?

Now, rigorous self-care will go a long way to curing your feeling of emptiness. But it won't go the whole way. For that, you need to return to that all-important goal of yours: your mission.

Seek out a mission that's bigger than yourself. Give your life away to a cause that matters – really matters – to other people. In serving others, you'll fill up your life in such a way that it will never be depleted.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

The seven greatest challenges in life are cynicism, compromise, disconnection, irrelevance, pride, burnout, and emptiness. Regardless of where you're from, your job, or your background, you are likely to be faced with one or more of these challenges before long. Luckily, there are ways to overcome them – and make a difference in your community and to those who matter most to you.

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What to read next: *Thrive*, by Arianna Huffington.

You've just learned how being prepared for life's inevitable challenges can help you sail past them rather than be dragged down. Staying open to change is the only way to stay light on your feet and able to weather any storm with grace and resilience.

Making the best of any situation, however unexpected, is a key to success. In our blinks to *Thrive*, by Arianna Huffington, you'll learn how even Huffington, one of the most influential women in the world, wasn't immune to the serious consequences brought on by overwork. Through her journey, she was able to redefine success to improve her health, happiness, and productivity – and so can you.

Nice work! You're all done with this one.

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