

Even if The Emperor *Does* Wear Clothes, Should it Be Everyone's Goal to See That?

Planning for a Fulfilling Life

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Hans Christian Andersen's classic fairy tale tells the story about two swindlers who were able to convince most people that their emperor wore very fancy clothes—which would only be seen by those with the proper understanding—while he was in fact naked. In real life, however, those of us on the autistic spectrum may encounter emperor whose clothes we, unlike most others, cannot actually see. This, however, does not mean that we should necessarily focus on learning how to see the clothes. There are plenty of people who can do so already, and we may be able to use our talents better elsewhere.

Below most of these slides will be some additional comments. You can use the remainder of the space for your own notes. You may want to jot down any questions you have as you think of them so that you will not forget before we get to your question. Have fun!

Agenda

- *What* we want in life
- *Why* we want it
- *Planning* to get there
- *Dealing* with people, training, and experience to get there
- *Realism* and resources



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This presentation will talk about how those of us on the autistic spectrum can use special abilities that we each have to compensate for problems we experience. Since our path will often be quite different from that taken by most, planning is especially crucial.

We will question things that most people take for granted. It is important to ask *why* one wants to achieve something. Some people like to have children, and most “neurotypical” people will take that goal for granted. Some of us will decide on that goal, while others of us will not. Some people want a particular job mainly for the prestige it entails; others because it deals with something that really interests us. Some of us will want a job primarily to support ourselves, with our joy coming elsewhere. We will talk about how to achieve each end.

We will talk about the resources we have available to use to achieve our goals, and we will talk about what is realistic without limiting ourselves unnecessarily.

What We Want—and Can Work Toward



- Career/supporting ourselves
- Education
- Other achievement (e.g., chess, sports)
- Personal
 - Marriage? Significant other?
 - Children?
 - Hobbies
 - Fulfillment

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Most of us at the very least need work to survive. We need to think about what kind of work will be most satisfying. We must balance what we get out of the job—money, professional satisfaction, fun, and making a difference in the world—with what we have to give up. Being on the autistic spectrum frequently means that we must watch more carefully for possible obstacles to see what may be in the way. For example, one may want to become a lawyer and may enjoy greatly analyzing legal issues. Most attorneys, however, usually have to deal with unpredictable clients and dishonest others. Therefore, someone in this situation might consider other possibilities such as teaching business law or becoming a law librarian. A police officer will have to deal with many tense situations on the street. Someone interested in law enforcement might think about other jobs that relate—e.g., doing computer work for a police station.

Some occupations require a great deal of education. Some of us enjoy such education, while it is a chore for others. The more education one has, the more likely the rest of the world is to tolerate certain “eccentricities,” but there are jobs that do not require as much a formal degree as skills. One can go to school to learn computer programming, for example, or one might pick most of it up on one’s own. Some people like simple job without much variation, and a skill that many of us can offer is that we are very dependable.

But first: WHY?

- Means vs. ends
- If I want to be a doctor, why?
 - Because my parents expect it?
 - To make money?
 - To be called Doctor?
 - Because I want to help others?
 - Because I like that kind of work?
 - Because it is a good way to make a living while putting my skills to work?

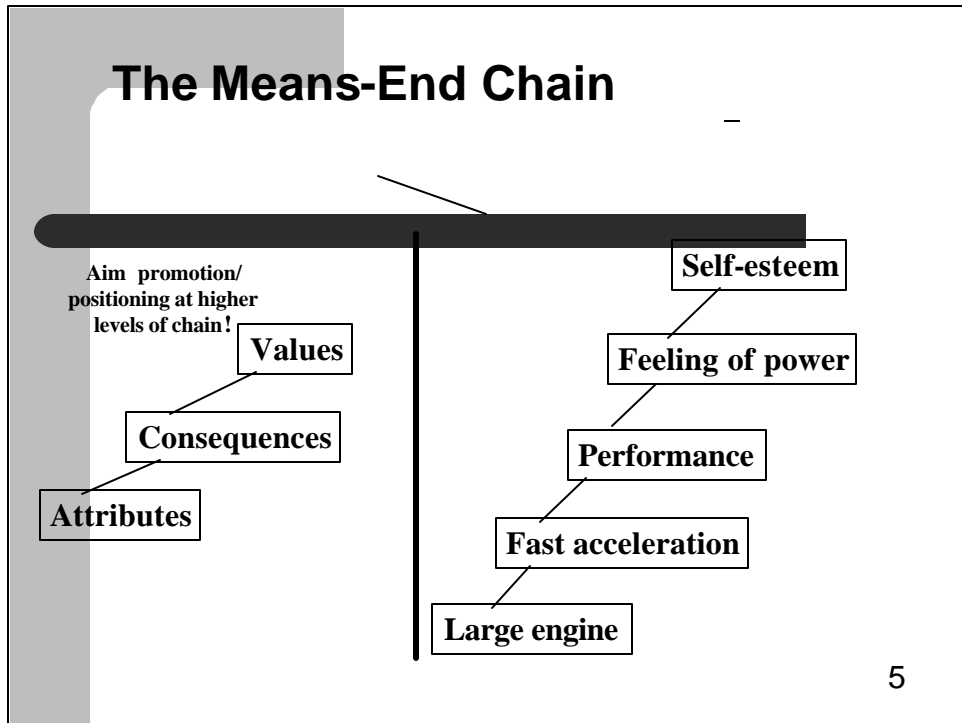


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Many of us already have some goal. They may be specific or they may be more vague. Sometimes, we have these goals not so much because this is something we really want, but we may hold the goals because others—such as family members—have suggested them.

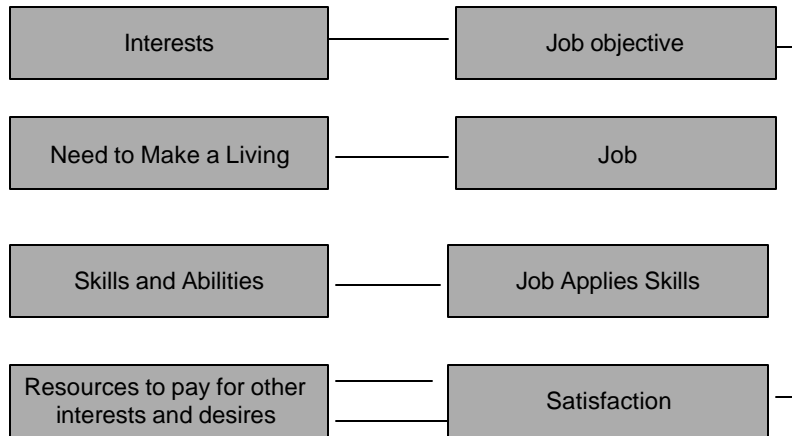
For the goals you have, what motivates you?

The Means-End Chain



This is a slide from one of my marketing classes. It demonstrates that we need “means” to get to an “end” that we really value. For a car, for example, it is usually not the large engine we might value as much as the rapid acceleration, which in turns gives us a feeling of power.

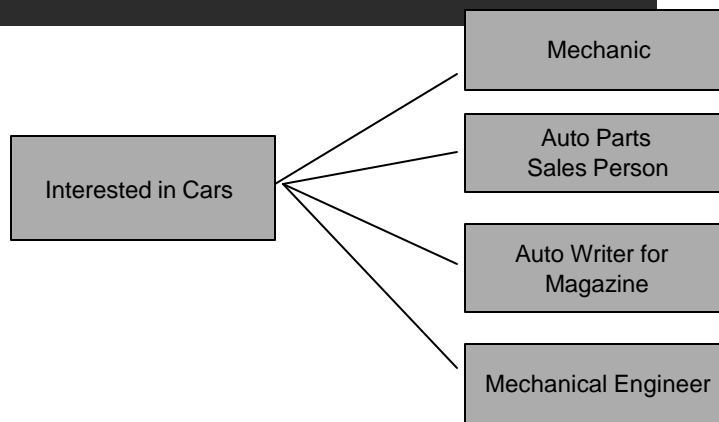
Some Ways of Thinking of Goals



When we look specifically at planning for a job, there are several ways to look at the situation. Some of us are lucky enough to be able to find a job that we can do well and really enjoy. Others look at a job more as a “necessary evil”—a way to make a living. Some of us have special abilities that make us really good at doing a particular job. If we like to do those things, this provides better opportunities for rewards—such as more money, a feeling of success, or the recognition of others.

Sometimes, we have strong interests outside work, and may work in large part to make money to do those things. For example, one might be good with numbers but not really like accounting that much. However, if one is good with accounting, one can make a lot of money that way, and in turn, one can spend that on things that one really likes—e.g., traveling or high performance bicycles.

Goals and Opportunities: An Example



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If one has a general interest, that can lead to many possible careers, depending on (1) the demand for people in those occupations, (2) how strong one's skills are, and (3) which specific job suits one best. Note, for example, that if one is interested in cars but does not want to get one's fingers dirty, then, if one has good writing skills, one can become a writer for an auto magazine!

Preparing to Become an Auto Parts Sales Person

- Work part time in auto parts store
- Read auto magazines and learn of newest developments
- “Hang out” with auto enthusiasts

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To consider any specific option of the kind demonstrated on the previous page, we then need to consider what one must do to achieve that job. Here, for example, are some ways that one can prepare to become an auto parts sales person. Note that this involves a number of different experiences that all help us prepare. Some can be done alone while others are done with others.

Preparing to Become an Automobile Journalist

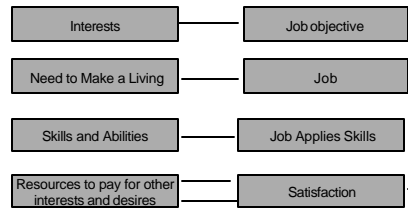
- Take community college courses in
 - Journalism
 - Auto mechanics
- Read articles on cars to
 - Learn the style
 - Expand your own knowledge
- Talk to others and experiment with how best to explain
- Try to get articles published while still in school
- Make a web site on cars

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Here is an illustration of what it takes to apply auto interests to journalism. Many different kinds of training may be necessary.

Exercise

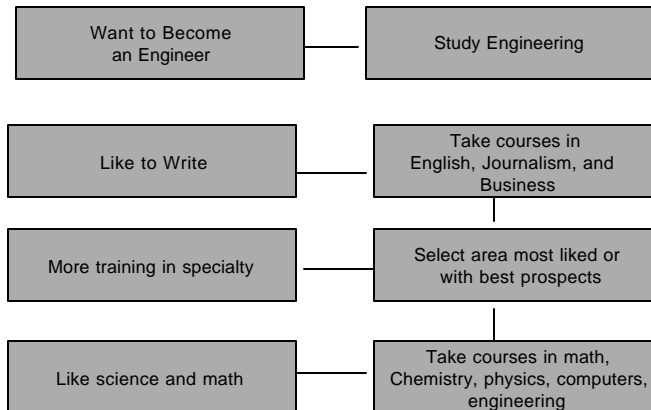
- Which path best describes my situation?
- What would go in my boxes?
- Do I need to add any?
- Do I need to do several different plans?



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Now it is time to think about your case!

General vs. Specific Goals-- Examples



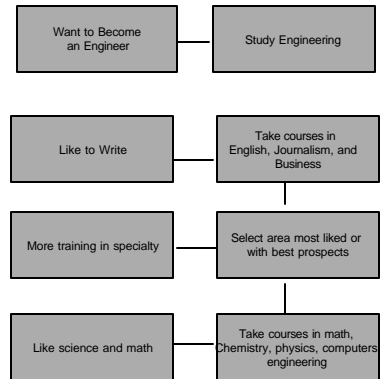
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Goals can be either general or more specific. If you know that you want to become an engineer—or better yet, specifically a mechanical, electronic, or architectural engineer—then you know what to study.

For others, we may have some general interests and may need to decide how to approach them. For example, if you like to write, there are a number of options that are available. To find out which ones appeal most to you, you may want to take courses in different fields—e.g., English and journalism—and then “hone” in on the one that (1) turns out to interest you most, (2) offers the best job prospects, or (3) you have found yourself most successful.

Exercise

- How specific are my plans?
- What would my diagram look like?

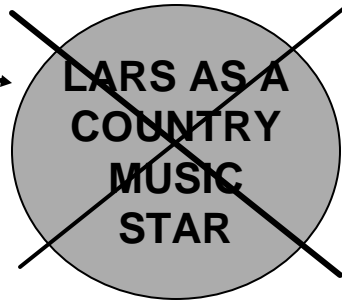


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Now, again, it is your turn! What are your interests, and what can we do with them?

Realism of Goals

- My skills
 - Technical
 - Social
 - Suitability
- Demand for people to do this job and pay
- Convincing others to hire me



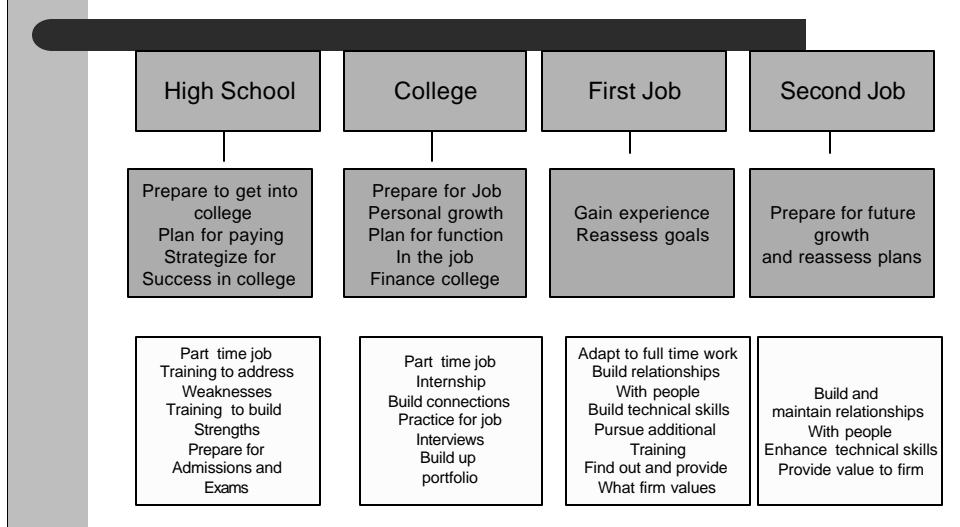
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There are some jobs that may be very interesting but are not good prospects. For example, someone who does not sing well cannot expect to be successful as a country music star. Some jobs are in short supply—a lot of people want to work at ski resorts! There are other situations where potential employers (or customers) expect certain personality traits that we just don't have.

The more passionate one is about a dream, the more one may want to try to find a way to make it come true. We should not rule out something just because we see that it will be difficult to achieve, but we must know the obstacles we are up against and what it will take to overcome them.

If you have the resources to support this, you can try certain things and reserve the right to change course if things do not go well. But then it is a good idea to have one or more contingency plans—plans as to what to do if you decide to abandon one that turns out no longer to be promising.

Building Up to Goals—One Sequence



Some goals are long range. One does not start out as the manager of a ski resort, for example, and one needs to plan far ahead to move along. Here are some intermediate goals that can be pursued long ahead. Note that not everyone will go through all these phases—some may want to go directly to work after high school or get technical training. Others may need to go through numerous jobs in order to get the needed experience for the ultimate goal.

Exercise

- What do I want?
- What will I need to get there?
- How does each step lead to the next?

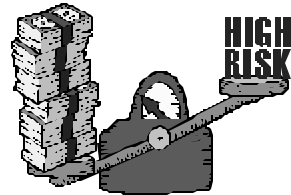


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You have probably already thought some about what you want to do in life, but of course, specific plans to take time to develop. Now, for one option you are considering, what kinds of preparation do you anticipate that you would need? You may want to make a chart or drawing with each step pointing to the next.

Making Tough Choices

- Money vs.
 - Satisfaction
 - Enjoyment
- Short term vs. long term satisfaction
- Contribution to society
- Safety vs. risk
- Job stress and conformity expectations



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There are some tradeoffs between different opportunities. What are your priorities?

How important is each of the following to you?

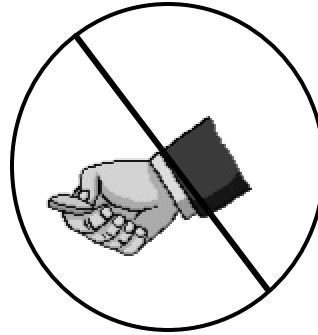
- Making a lot of money
- Enjoying my work
- Being able to make money right away rather than going to school
- Limiting risk
- Have work that is not stressful
- Having a lot of free time
- Prestige
- Helping make the world a better place

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You might start by thinking about how important each of the following is.

Some Tools in Making Decisions

- Flow charts
- Pro and con lists—assign weight to each issue
- “Bouncing” ideas off others
- “Sleeping” on the idea



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Different tools can be used to help you make the decision—but even with these tools, the decisions can still be quite hard! Note that you may need to “mix and match” the different tools.

We have already seen flow charts.

One way to overview the merits of an idea is to take a sheet of paper and create two columns. In one column, we write the good things about an option—e.g., that it pays a lot of money and that it allows one to work independently. On the other side, we write the bad things—e.g., that the job can be stressful and that we have to go to school a long time before we can begin to make the money. Now, we need to find out how important each one is. For example, a great deal of money might merit a +5, independence +6, stress -9, and postponed income -3. There will be more good and bad points to each alternative, but for the time being, the two alternatives are running very close, so this is likely to be a hard decision. But maybe something even better will come up.

It is useful to ask for feedback from others—what do they think about the idea? However, the decision as to what to do is ultimately yours, so you need to focus in on your values.

Decisions should not be made in haste, so we need some time to think over a decision before making it.

Can I Change My Mind?

- YES!
- Addressing consequences
 - Commitments
 - Time spent
 - Financial issues



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Many of us decide to change our plans at different times. I first wanted to become an attorney and then a psychology professor. In the end, I became a marketing professor.

If we change our plans, something may be lost. If we spend time studying for a career and then change our minds, we may have to start over. If we start a business and decide to abandon it, time may be lost. We will have more flexibility before we have children to support, so that may be a consideration.

Making contingency plans

- What if my plans to not work out due to
 - Not liking the job after all?
 - Not being able to complete training or pass exams?
 - Not being able to get the job?
 - Not being able to do the job for health reasons?
- E.g., if I can't become a pharmacist, I can try these jobs:
 - Chemistry teacher
 - Laboratory technician
 - Wine maker
 - Chemist
 - Unrelated jobs
 - Computer technician

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There are lots of “ifs” in life. We need to have backup plans in case things do not go as expected. Many times, preparation can be used for other purposes—e.g., if becoming an auto mechanic no longer seems promising, maybe you can do body work on cars or work in an auto parts warehouse.

Exercise

- Possible obstacles to my goal(s):
- Alternatives I might like:

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We should not become discouraged by all the possible obstacles to what we want, but it helps to identify the big ones and consider what might work “just in case.”

Marketing Oneself



Dealing with
coworkers

- On the job
- In school
- Socially
- In love

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One thing is to have the skills to be useful for a firm, to master the material taught in school, and to be valuable to others socially and in the romantic sense. It is another thing to make others realize that one is useful. This is something that one must do over time. One must often be subtle to be effective—bragging is often not well liked.

One strategy

- Accommodating limitations
 - Compensating
 - Seeking feedback from appropriate source(s)
 - “Check lists”
- Emphasizing strengths
 - “Marginal utility” to the employer
 - Assessing strengths that may be used in organization

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Everyone has areas in which one is not as strong as in others. Those of us on the autistic spectrum usually have certain problems—e.g., many of us may have difficulty “reading” people’s facial expressions and understanding “unwritten” rules. Therefore, we must try to compensate by using our other strengths to excel in other areas.

Sometimes, carefully selected, trusted others can provide feedback on what we do. It is also useful to make formal “checklists” so that we do not need to remember social conventions in the “heat of the moment.”

Economists use the term “marginal utility”—i.e., what do you get from using an additional resource given that you have already used others? Some of us may not perform as well as others in many situations, but we excel in others. For example, a person who is interested in computers and video equipment may be an excellent contribution to an office even if he or she does not interact with others as well. To “sell” those strengths to others, however, we need to identify them and be ready to use them when appropriate.

Examples of Strengths

- Computing skills
- Other areas of knowledge
- Organizational skills
 - Planning
 - Organizing and storing information
 - Finding information
- Writing
 - Creative
 - Technical
 - Proof-reading
- Construction
 - art
 - other
- Dependability
- Attention to detail
- Creativity

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Those of us on the autistic spectrum differ greatly in the skills we have, so we are not all suited for the same jobs. As a matter of fact, we often tend to fall on extremes on many skills. Some of us have great writing skills, while this is a weakness for others. Some have great mechanical skills—but I'm not one of them!

This is just a partial list. Do you recognize any of your strengths here?

Marketing Oneself

- Strengths may be
 - designed into job description
 - demonstrated informally
- Reciprocity
- Building good will
- Marketing oneself
 - To supervisors and evaluators
 - To others who influence indirectly
- Making oneself visible--subtly

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To market ourselves, we need to be useful to others—who in turn can be useful to us.

Sometimes, we can build our strengths right into our job description. For example, if you work in a computer store and feel comfortable talking with most of the customers, you might be assigned to deal with those technically savvy customers who need special help.

It is a good thing to build up a “reservoir” of good will. If you do favors for others, they may in turn be willing to do favors for you. The more useful you appear to be to others—especially when they are in a “tight” spot—the more valued you will be in an organization.

Some general self-marketing objectives

- Being seen as
 - valuable to the organization
 - cooperative
 - constructive
 - dedicated
 - pleasant to work with
- Being valuable:
 - skills and abilities
 - dependability
 - self-directed
 - dedication

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Here are some impressions that it would be nice for other people to have of us. The job here is to translate what you have into what can give these results. We are all different, so this will take some thinking and planning!

Exercise

- What are some of my strengths--whether they can be applied at work or not?
- Which of my strengths may be most valuable on the job?

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For now, which strengths come to mind that you can use to get other people to see you as valuable?

Compensating for Challenges

- Organization
 - Binders
 - Computer hard drives
 - Reminders to self
 - Post-its
 - Computer reminders
 - Daily calendar
- Remembering faces
 - Photographs if possible, otherwise descriptive notes
- Preparation for social situations

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We frequently have to make tradeoffs. For example, conventional wisdom holds that it is important to “network” with others and that cocktail parties are a good way to do this. In my case, however, I discovered that it is just too difficult to tell voices apart in a crowded room, so at conventions, I skip such events. Instead, I get a good night’s sleep to be able to make a better impression the next day.

Trade-offs

- Go to cocktail party or rest to make a better impression next day?
- Disclosure

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Here are some tools that can be used to compensate for problems in organization and remembering faces.