

50 THINGS I WISH I'D TOLD YOU LIFE SKILLS



#1 Be nice to people

The best reason to be nice to people is that it will make them happy, and this in turn will make you feel good about yourself. Helping someone when they drop their shopping, are lost and need directions, or fall over costs you nothing, except perhaps a few minutes of your time, and it will make all the difference in the world to the other person.

Say good morning to security guards and receptionists, smile and thank the people who serve you in shops, bars and restaurants, offer to give up your seat on trains, buses or the tube to people who need it more than you. The warmth you give will be given back to you, not every time, but in time. You will know that you have done the right thing.

Even if your offer of help is spurned, your kindness will ultimately be appreciated. If someone is rude to you, stay calm. You can still assert yourself, and speak your mind, but do so politely. Being the better person is not always easy, but it pays dividends to treat people the way you would like to be treated.

Lecture over.

#6 How to keep a plant alive

Plants need three things to thrive: light, water and food. If your plant has a label, see whether it likes to be in direct sunlight or shade. If the foliage is pale or it's growing fast towards the light, shift it to a brighter position.

Overwatering is the most common mistake, but some plants require more water than others, and how much varies during the seasons. Feel the top of the soil to see if it's wet or dry and, if the soil is pulling away from the sides of the pot, it is too dry. Not all plants like to be watered from above, so the safest method is to stand the plant pot in water in the sink for 15 minutes. When you lift the pot out, let it drain before placing it back in its saucer. If the plant pot is too heavy to lift, pour water into the saucer and see if it disappears – add more until it is no longer absorbed. Don't allow the plant to stand in water in its saucer. Allow plants to dry out a bit between watering, but don't let them get so dry they start to wilt.

Soil will become depleted of nutrients in time; the plant needs most food when it is actively growing in spring and summer. Buy a liquid fertilizer and follow the manufacturer's instructions.

#9 Write a thank-you note

Take the trouble to thank people for their hospitality, kindness, or generosity – it's just good manners. The rules are simple: keep it short, keep it personal, and show appreciation. Write by hand, do a quick draft so that you know what you want to say, make sure there are no spelling errors, and try to keep your handwriting legible. Even if your note is very late, it is still worth doing, but if you get into the habit of writing short notes quickly you'll keep in everyone's good books. A lack of manners and an absence of thank-you notes may have been tolerated when you were small, but the same rules don't apply when you are grown up. An email or text is better than nothing.

Remember, when someone receives a thank-you note it makes them smile, and that may be the best reason of all for sending one.

#12 How to get a stain out

Most stains can be removed – the secret is to act quickly before the stain sets (in other words, forms a chemical bond with the fabric).

If the garment isn't 'dry clean only', treat the stain immediately with cold water – you can use an ice cube from your drink or from the freezer. This will at least remove some of the excess stain and will help prevent it setting.

Keep fresh stains away from heat and sunlight, as this enables setting. Note the fabric composition of the garment before you treat – silk is hardest to clean. Supermarkets sell specifically targeted stain removers, but if you don't have them, try the solutions opposite. If it is a stain like tomato sauce or curry, try to remove as much of the debris as possible before you treat it.

Always use a white cloth to work at a stain – an old ripped-up bit of sheet or a shirt will be fine. If you use a coloured dishcloth, the chances are it will just release colour onto your garment, giving you a separate mark to deal with.

Always place a cloth under the stain, then work from the back because you want to tease it out of the fabric, not push it further in. Dab gently, don't scrub.

Pre-wash treatments

Blood: Rinse with cold water, spot treat with an enzyme cleaner or soak in lukewarm water with detergent and leave for 15-30 minutes before washing.

Grease, fat and oil: Sprinkle with cornflour or talcum powder, give a gentle rub and leave for 15-30 minutes. Brush off and wash as usual. Use a biological washing powder, or try soaking in a dilute dishwasher solution, but wash this out thoroughly as it can bleach.

Red wine: Pour carbonated or warm water over it - bubbles help to lift out the pigment. Apply fine-grain salt and leave for 15-30 minutes before washing.

Tea and grass stains: Apply lemon juice to the area, leave for 15-30 minutes.

Chocolate: Run warm water over the mark, then dab with detergent.

Coffee: Soak in lukewarm water. Dab stain with diluted liquid detergent or vinegar, then wash. Bar soap can set the stain, so don't use it.

Sweat: Soak in warm water, dust with fine-grain salt and leave for 15-30 minutes, or apply an enzyme cleaner.

Mud and dirt: Agitate in lukewarm water to lift the dirt out, put detergent onto the remaining marks and leave for 15-30 minutes.

Urine and faeces: Rinse in cold or cool water, as hot water can set the stain. Soak and agitate in cool water with detergent.

#13 Etiquette

This is just a fancy word for good manners, and these will take you a long way. Here are a few pointers:

1)

Say please and thank you.

2)

Be on time.

3)

Dress appropriately for the occasion whatever your personal style.

4)

Shake hands when you meet someone and introduce yourself.

5)

Make sure you have got someone's name - if you haven't heard, it's fine to ask again.

6)

Look at the person who is speaking to you.

7)

Don't invade other people's space, so keep a polite distance and apologize if you bump into anyone.

8)

Don't turn up to a dinner or a party empty-handed, but don't take anything to a business event.

9)

Wait until everyone has been served before starting to eat.

10)

Remember your table manners (use cutlery from the outside in).

13)

Don't study your phone in company or at the table, wait until you are alone.

16)

Wait 24 hours before responding to an angry text or email. Then respond calmly if you see fit.

19)

Clean up after yourself when you are sharing a kitchen or a bathroom.

11)

Don't speak with your mouth full.

14)

If someone is rude to you, don't respond, as they may be having the day from hell, and it can stop the situation escalating.

17)

Whatever your sex, wait for people to go through doors and hold the door open for them. Thank people when this is done for you.

20)

Knock before you enter someone else's bedroom.

12)

Remember to ask people about themselves and don't interrupt others while they're speaking.

15)

Apologize if you are wrong.

18)

Let people off trains and buses before getting on yourself.

#21 Escape a bad date

The mathematical odds are that everyone will have a few bad dates in their lifetime. They can make for very funny stories, but really life is too short!

A simple rule if you are meeting for the first time is to arrange in advance for a quick pre-dinner drink only. If there's zero chemistry you can be polite and pleasant, have one drink, and leave when it's finished. Hold out your hand firmly for a handshake to avoid farewell kisses.

Another strategy is to go the bathroom and call a friend; ask them to call in five minutes and say that there is an emergency and you are needed. Your date will probably know that this is a get-out clause, so just be firm, apologize and leave quickly to save their embarrassment.

If your date is making you feel anxious or unsafe work out a safe escape route. Whatever happens, don't leave with them. If the opportunity arises, be prepared to leave quickly when they visit the bathroom. Or ask for help at the bar – some bars and pubs have a code 'Ask For Angela', when they know that you need assistance. Take the opportunity to discreetly pay for your share of the drinks so that you can leave with a clear conscience and avoid provoking any further ill-feeling.

If your date insists on paying (or pays secretly) you are under NO obligation to reciprocate.

You can say NO at any time.

#26 Finance

Making ends meet isn't easy and a lot of people get into difficulties. They put their heads in the sand, ignore bills, overlook unpaid rent, and increase their overdraft to the max without once addressing the issue of their overspending. But the problem won't go away, and the sooner you face up to it the better.

The first step is to make a list of your monthly expenditure. Put in your rent and your monthly share of the utility bills including gas, water and electricity. List any monthly payments for your phone and insurance and don't forget to include bank and overdraft charges, and credit card repayments. Work out what you spend a month on food, travel, petrol, parking, toiletries, clothing and socializing. Don't just guess, look at your bank statements and work out what you have actually been spending. Don't forget income tax or student loans in your calculations. Add up the total. Now work out your monthly income. Subtract one sum from the other and you'll see how much you are overspending a month.

The next step is to work out how you can cut your costs. Can you ditch the gym and go running instead? Could you walk or cycle instead of driving or taking public transport? Set a limit on what you can spend on food, clothes and socializing. Can you negotiate a better tariff from your utility supplier, or a better phone contract? Use an app to tally what you are spending and alert you if you are going over budget. If you have large debts, talk to your bank and to us, in order to devise a path back to solvency.

#43 How to pack

There is no standardized international carry-on suitcase size or weight, so check with your airline what the maximum dimensions are and what weight is allowed. Make a list of what you want to take and be ruthless. If you haven't worn that dress or shirt for the last three summers will you really wear it this summer?

1)

If you have a carry-on case your toiletries cannot contain more than 100ml of liquid, so buy small plastic bottles and decant your favourite products in them. Put them in a clear bag for security. Buy everything else on arrival.

3)

Fold flat shirts, trousers and skirts and either roll them up, or lay them at the bottom of the case.

5)

Wear your heaviest shoes to travel in.

2)

Put shoes, soles together, in a plastic bag and pack at the bottom of your case. You can stuff your shoes with socks.

4)

Roll up underwear, T-shirts and socks to maximize space and minimize wrinkles, and tuck into spaces.

6)

Keep an emergency set of clothes in your hand luggage in case your checked-in suitcase goes missing in transit.