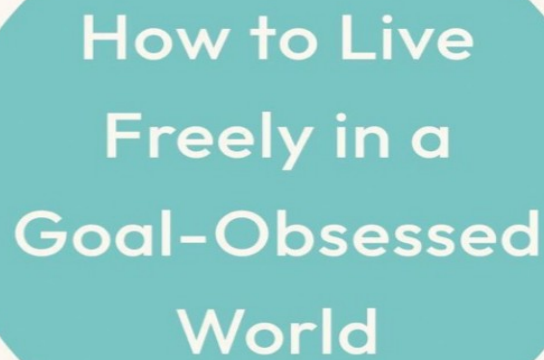
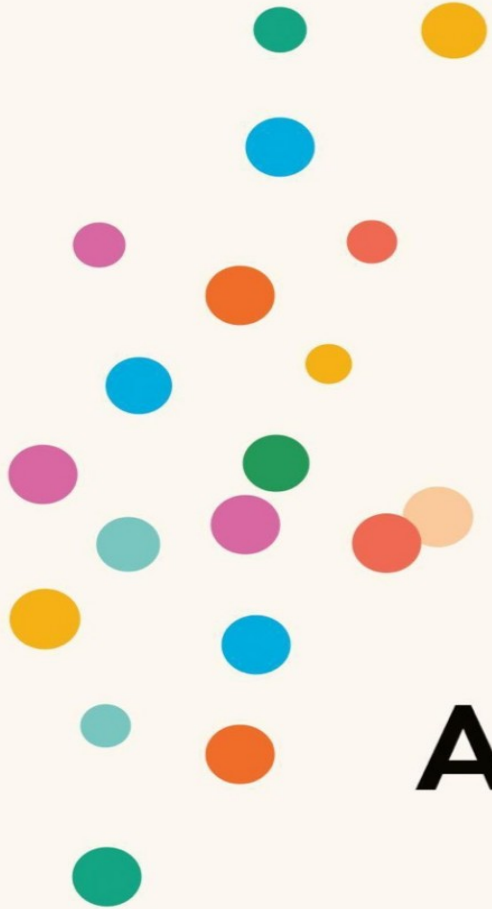


"I loved this profound,
practical, and generous book."
—**Oliver Burkeman**, author of
Four Thousand Weeks



tiny experiments



How to Live
Freely in a
Goal-Obsessed
World

**Anne-Laure
Le Cunff**

Neuroscientist and Founder of Ness Labs

PRAISE FOR *TINY EXPERIMENTS*

“I loved this profound, practical, and generous book. Through the ingenious lens of the tiny experiment, Anne-Laure Le Cunff shows how we can jettison arduous and dispiriting attempts at self-improvement in favor of achievable and energizing adventures on the path to a more vibrant, accomplished, and wholehearted life.”

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“The fear of failure often stands in the way of learning from trial and error. This is a thought-provoking guide to doing more trials and making fewer errors.”

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—Ali Abdaal, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Feel-Good Productivity*

“A paradigm-shifting exploration of how to apply the techniques of science to the often crazy, chaotic, and highly uncertain domain of navigating your career and life in the modern world. An actionable toolkit for crafting a life so unique that it could only belong to you.”

—Tiago Forte, *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of *Building a Second Brain*

“The urge to start experimenting will hit you around page two, and it just builds from there. *Tiny Experiments* is an inspiring, tangible playbook to break past the status quo of our overwhelmed generation.”

—Jo Franco, creator of JoClub and author of *Fluentish*

“A compelling case for an experimental mindset, this book is a call to action for anyone ready to explore life through the lens of curiosity.”

—Ana Lorena Fábrega, author of *The Learning Game*

“An essential handbook for our modern era—an era defined not by linear definitions of success, but by the squiggles and swerves necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world. *Tiny Experiments* will fundamentally alter how you think about and live your life.”

—Simone Stolzoff, author of *The Good Enough Job*

“One of the first books I’ve read that goes far beyond critiquing the flaws with the modern default path of work, daring us to imagine a more expansive form of ambition: one built not on what might impress others, but on what will make a life worth living.”

—Paul Millerd, author of *The Pathless Path* and *Good Work*



TINY EXPERIMENTS

*How to Live Freely
in a Goal-Obsessed World*

ANNE-LAURE LE CUNFF

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To the wise teachers who always lead me back to curiosity

Don't let anyone rob you of your imagination, your creativity, or your curiosity. It's your place in the world; it's your life. Go on and do all you can with it, and make it the life you want to live.

—Mae Jemison, American engineer, physician, and former NASA astronaut



INTRODUCTION

Goodbye, Linear Life

“Are you sure?” my manager asked me, with genuine concern. I was twenty-seven, living in San Francisco, and had just turned in my resignation from Google. I was voluntarily leaving what had been my dream job: amazing pay, international travel, challenging work that matched my skills, interesting colleagues, and seemingly no limit to the heights I could achieve if I continued climbing the corporate ladder. When I got this job fresh out of university, my parents were happier than I’d ever seen them. And so was I! It was a chance to be part of the heartland of the tech world.

So my manager’s question made sense. No, I wasn’t sure I was doing the right thing. But I didn’t say that. Instead I nodded confidently, gave her a hug, and thanked her for these formative years.

The question you’re probably asking is *why*.

Google’s headquarters in California was an unlikely place for me to end up. I’m French Algerian and I was raised in Paris. My mother was born in Sidi Okba, Algeria, known in ancient times as “the city of magic” because of its extraordinary propensity to attract spiritual leaders. At the doors of the Sahara Desert, Sidi Okba was a gateway where Arabs and Bedouins met for the commerce of spices, camels, and fabrics. My father was born in the fortified French city of Dinan, which for many centuries was a strategic place to circulate between Normandy and Brittany. It is known for one of the largest medievalist events in Europe, where people gather to celebrate the

city walls with annual themes such as “gates to the imagination” or “the times of builders.”

Christmas in my family meant halal turkey and champagne. I wore miniskirts to school in France and covered my hair with a veil when visiting my family in Algeria. My father, in the French didactic tradition of mathematics, would teach me about fractals and chaos theory, while my mother would share Arabic proverbs.

Although they came from different worlds, there was one point my parents agreed on: the importance of studying hard and choosing your career wisely. I was the first woman in my family to pursue higher education, encouraged by both my father, who saw it as the path to success, and my mother, who saw it as the path to survival. My curriculum—science and business—was optimized for job prospects.

As a child of the internet, I had always been fascinated with how pixels come to life. I spent my teenage years exploring my curiosity in weird and wonderful ways: maintaining a hand-coded blog whose design changed every few weeks, translating obscure Japanese songs into French, and managing an online community for young fiction writers. Every day, millions around the world came online to learn, connect, tinker, and create. There was a sense of mystery as to how it all worked, as well as a certain reverence for the magicians at companies like Google weaving all those threads to produce the World Wide Web.

I got my Google interview in a fluke, after nerding out about the future of technology with a stranger sitting next to me on a flight to San Francisco. I went through their intense hiring process and landed the job—the perfect job. I arrived on campus feeling lucky, along with a dash of impostor syndrome.

Google is famously data-driven, so each project assigned to me had clear objectives. Career success was also codified around two tangible concepts: the ladder for your role and the level for your seniority. The promotion process was based on a rubric telling you exactly what skills you need to have

demonstrated to graduate to the next level. No need to guess. No need to tinker. It was all in there, clearly mapped out.

Inspired by my peers, cheered on by my parents and my friends back in France, I set out to diligently climb the ladder. I scheduled my days in thirty-minute increments, promptly replied to all emails, volunteered for extra projects, and even found time to arrange one-to-one meetings with mentors who helped me plot the next steps in my Google career. I was flown all around the world for conferences and trade shows. I got promoted and took on a global role in the digital health team. I sometimes had to cancel social plans to work late hours on presentations, but believed it was worth the sacrifice. My journey was mapped out before me; all I had to do was keep climbing.

FROM ONE LADDER TO ANOTHER

American psychiatrist Irvin Yalom wrote about awakening experiences—events that shake us from default routines, crack our defensive barriers, and open new possibilities. Some of them can be major, such as the loss of a loved one, divorce, war, and illness. Others can be referred to as “a sort of petite existential shock therapy”—sobering thoughts that lead you to reconsider how you are really living. It took a combination of both to reawaken my consciousness.

One morning as I was getting ready for work, I noticed my arm had turned purple. I went to the Google infirmary, where I was sent to the Stanford hospital. The doctors found a blood clot that threatened to travel to my lungs. Surgery was required to remove it. I was so worried about derailing my team’s ongoing projects that I asked to delay the operation so that I could time it when everyone would be off work for a company retreat. My manager would have been furious if she knew I had done this, so I didn’t tell her.

When they picked me up at the hospital after the surgery, my friends snapped a group picture. I was in the middle, in a wheelchair, smiling and holding a bouquet of flowers. My face looked the same as before the surgery, but already I could feel that something had shifted in me. I recovered quickly and went back to work, kept hitting my targets and supporting my team, but my efforts felt mechanical.

Not long after, I went home to France for Christmas, my first time back in a year. I was surrounded by friends and family I hadn't seen in ages. Someone asked, "How's life?" Such a trivial question, and yet...When I automatically replied that work-is-great-and-San-Francisco-is-nice-thank-you, I noticed for the first time how inert my voice sounded.

How *was* life, really?

I hadn't ever asked myself this. I was too busy, always focused on finishing the next deliverable or hitting a bigger target. And I was living the dream—so of course everything must be great.

Separated from San Francisco by thousands of miles, I finally let myself honestly confront the question. Life wasn't terrible, but it wasn't great, either. I was likely burned out, but that was only a symptom of the problem. I was so consumed by the routine, the rubric, and the next rung on the ladder that I had lost the ability to notice anything else. I stopped asking what I wanted out of my day or even out of my future.

And despite this relentless grind, I was also finding myself getting bored. While I had spent my younger life guided by a genuine yearning to learn and grow, I was now following a prescribed path trodden by so many colleagues before me.

Realizing how I felt was like an electric shock. Many people are able to build a rewarding, balanced life on the foundation of a job at Google. I was not one of them. On my first day back in the office after the holiday, I quit.

In hindsight, I could have used a reflective pause after quitting, but I wasn't able to sit with the fear and anxiety of having gone from celebrated employee to unemployed nobody. My mom was already worried I was headed for the homeless shelter. So I immediately threw myself into the next

socially sanctified adventure: after working at a Big Tech company to grow your professional network and save up some money, break off the golden handcuffs to build a company of your own.

I moved back to Europe and founded a tech startup.

Within a year, the young company was highlighted as one of “the healthcare startups you need to know about” in *WIRED* magazine. I broke up with my first cofounder but then was accepted into a prestigious startup accelerator, where I met a new cofounder. We spent an inordinate amount of time building pitch decks and meeting with potential business partners. I was so busy, I didn’t notice I had jumped from one kind of hyperfocused, outcome-driven pursuit to another.

Only when we failed to advance to the next stage of the accelerator and had to shut down the company did I allow myself to sit still for a moment. In truth, I had no choice. There was no obvious next step. After years of hustling, I finally went to a place I had never allowed my adult self to go to before: I admitted that I was lost.

And that was the most liberating thought I’d ever had.

ON THE DOORSTEP OF CHANGE

You might be familiar with the Hero’s Journey, a narrative pattern first described by mythologist Joseph Campbell in his influential book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, one found in stories across cultures and time. We face challenges, descend into the abyss of the unknown, and must find the resources to break a path and reemerge transformed. Just like in the myths, life is made of cycles of being lost and finding ourselves again.

Feeling lost and free, I started thinking about my in-between time not as a dead end to escape, but as a space worth exploring. And with that mindset, I quickly became reacquainted with an old friend and ally: curiosity.

Not having a clear playbook to follow opened a world of possibility. I paid attention to the conversations that energized me and the topics that drew me in. I took online courses. I attended workshops. I bought books for pure pleasure. All the while, I freelanced to maintain a source of income. I felt like my old self again, and I loved her. I wasn't falling off a cliff. Rather, I was living in my own Choose Your Own Adventure novel.

My curiosity kept leading me back to the human brain. Why do we think the way we think and feel the way we feel? The more books I read, the more intrigued I became, until I eventually decided to return to school to study neuroscience. This time, I didn't have a grand plan. I just wanted to explore, learn, and grow. I was wholeheartedly stepping into the unknown.

Although I was in a formal program, I didn't want my curiosity to stop flowing. Inspired by the experimental mindset taught in scientific training, I asked myself: *What experiment could I run on my own life that would bring me an intrinsic sense of fulfillment, whatever the outcome?*

I love writing, so I made a pact with myself to write and share 100 articles in 100 workdays, drawing on my university studies and personal readings. I wrote about mental health at work, creativity, and mindful productivity.

Sharing my work daily was terrifying at first. I felt naked. I was admitting to the world that I was a work in progress, as was everything I wrote. My only anchor was the pact itself. I resisted the urge to clarify my end goal and solely focused on showing up. It wasn't always easy to do, so I leaned into self-reflection. I took notes and journaled. I watched for signs of burnout and played with various formats—such as shorter articles for when life got busy.

Slowly, a path emerged. I finished the 100 articles and decided to keep going. My newsletter grew steadily to one hundred thousand readers. I called it Ness Labs, a combination of the suffix *-ness*, which describes the quality of being (which you find in words such as *awareness*, *consciousness*, *mindfulness*), and *labs*, as I wanted it to be a laboratory for personal experimentation. People wrote emails to thank me for helping them turn

chaos into creativity, for sharing tools to reduce their anxiety, and for opening doors to parts of their minds they had been afraid of exploring. Others asked if I would ever create a course or write a book.

I kept on with my studies, and today, as a neuroscientist, I investigate how different brains learn differently using technologies such as electroencephalography and eye-tracking. Ness Labs has turned into a thriving small business with an amazing team. I get to speak and write about topics I care about.

The uncertainty of my future isn't gone, and yet each day I wake up excited to discover what new crossroads life will present to me. I'm always on the lookout for new experiments. I'm not rushing to get to a specific destination. I'm playing a different game: a game of noticing, questioning, and adapting.

TOOLS FOR THE IN-BETWEENS

Uncertainty has so much to teach us. We experience it not just in big life transitions, but in lesser moments of ambiguity, such as the “messy middle” of a project, when we'd like to throw in the towel. When we find ourselves in these precarious moments, our automatic response is too often fear or anxiety. And so we rush toward a defined outcome to escape it, as I did with my startup.

But there is another way: the experimental way.

I've spent the past years at Ness Labs developing tools that help us live lives of joyful experimentation. My pact of 100 articles was the beginning of a new approach to growth—distilled in this book—based on research and what I learned teaching thousands of people how to implement its principles. Through empirical study and personal experience, I have isolated a set of practices that are an antidote to burnout and boredom alike—a counterforce to the fear, overwhelm, confusion, and loneliness many people

I know are feeling as they try to apply old notions of success to the world we're living in today.

This book isn't a step-by-step recipe for accomplishing a specific goal. Rather, it offers a set of tools you can adapt to discover and achieve your own goals—especially if these goals fall outside the well-defined ambitions suggested by society.

Together, these tools will enrich your life with systematic curiosity—a conscious commitment to inhabit the space between what you know and what you don't, not with fear and anxiety but with interest and openness. Systematic curiosity provides an unshakable certitude in your ability to grow even when the exact path forward is uncertain, with the knowledge that your actions can align with your most authentic ambitions.

In the following four parts of the book, you will learn how to:

- Get started by committing to curiosity.
- Keep going by practicing mindful productivity.
- Stay flexible by collaborating with uncertainty.
- Dream bigger by growing with the world.

You are about to replace an old linear model of success with an experimental model of personal and professional growth. In this new model, your goals will be discovered, pursued, and adapted—not in a vacuum, but in conversation with the larger world. You will ask big questions and design tiny experiments to find the answers. You will become comfortable with following a nonlinear path, where each crossroads is a call for adventure.

This way of life is based on ancestral wisdom and backed by modern scientific knowledge. It shows that when you lean into your curiosity, uncertainty can be a state of expanded possibility, a space for metamorphosis. It's a way to turn challenges into triggers for self-discovery and doubt into a source of opportunity. Get ready for an exciting new era: your experimental life.



PACT

Commit to Curiosity