

# MILTON ERICKSON'S RULES OF LIFE

*These rules were compiled by Milton Erickson's daughter, **Betty Alice Erickson**. It should be noted that these are not going to be found elsewhere in the Ericksonian literature. You are getting them here, exclusively, at [www.Ericksonian.info](http://www.Ericksonian.info) or from Betty Alice herself.*

*These are ten "Rules of Life" that Milton Erickson lived by and taught his children.*

*These are not "Presuppositions of Ericksonian Hypnotherapy and Psychology." These are the rules of life that Milton himself lived by and were, arguably, the backbone of his philosophy.*

*And, because they are rules like "what goes up, must come down," they are essentially true whether you like them or not.*

*As Betty Alice put it "Nobody has to follow them, but rules of life, of physics, exist regardless of whether or not you believe in or follow them. People can't flap their arms and fly. Believe it or not."*

– Doug O'Brien

## Milton Erickson's "Rules of Life"

by Betty Alice Erickson

Milton Erickson's innovative way of working with people is legendary. But like the childhood game of "telephone" where the end result is often far from the original message, some of what he believed and taught is not true to him. Years ago, my mother and I were discussing that. We were both distressed that so much of what he was, what he did, was being so misunderstood, so different than his basic beliefs. Nobody was doing it on purpose; it was just that nowhere was there basic information about his core beliefs. So my mother and I wrote "ten rules." They seem simple, and they are. But most of life, Most of therapy, is simple—or as I say, when I am teaching Daddy's work: "Erickson was profoundly simple and simply profound."

### 1. Life is hard work.

We all know this—but we don't know how deep it really is. We are the only creature on earth who looks for hard work. Nothing else climbs a mountain "because it's there" as George Mallory is famously quoted. No other living thing trains for a marathon—to run 26 miles faster than someone else merely for fun. People are hard-wired for hard work—we complete one task and look for another."

### 2. Life is unfair.

Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. It's easy to forget unfairness that we like—we're happy to win the lottery even though it's not fair to the others who also bought tickets—even more tickets than we did.

Intellectually, we all know that life simply isn't fair. But we like to forget that and especially forget to compare ourselves to all humans—the only "fair" comparison.

Everyone reading this, has, has had, and will probably continue to have an extraordinarily rich life when compared to the vast majority of humans on earth. We're richer, better educated, better fed, better housed, and have more opportunities than most humans who have ever lived on earth. That's not fair.

If we want to complain how “unfair” something, anything is, we first should compare ourselves to others in the world. But, typical of human beings, we always pick those richer, smarter, younger, better-looking...on and on. *“That’s not fair... .”*

Even easier—I was once stuck in traffic, really stuck, for more than an hour on the freeway, on my way to the airport. All of us on the shuttle could clearly see the flaming wreck just ahead. Our stress was eliminated with one sentence from another person who remarked thoughtfully, “Even if we all miss our planes, I bet everyone in those cars would trade places with us.”

Erickson knew, as we all know, even children know what’s fair and what’s not. Our unconscious never forgets that perhaps hard-wired information. Sometimes we consciously forget though.

### **3. Life is filled with pain.**

If we are alive, we will have suffering. Our heart gets broken, our leg gets broken, our car gets totaled, we lose our job, our parents, and our friends. We hurt.

We forget that pain is natural—parents die, and hopefully before their children. If we fall, we well might break a leg. People’s bodies aren’t perfect—we get appendicitis but we get operated on. Accidents happen.

Some pain is transient. What hurts today may well be forgotten tomorrow. Most of us can still remember not being chosen for a team, not winning a prize in school, the bully who stole our favorite jacket, our lunch money. But most of us move on and even learn to be amused at ourselves.... tears for not getting elected as president of third grade? If only you had realized this was not the worst thing in life!

Some pain is absolutely nothing but pain. But we all know it’s a cost of being alive. What we know as pain disappears when we cease to exist. Boris Pasternak said: “How wonderful to be alive.... But why does it always hurt?”

My father told me whatever amount of emotional pain we feel indicates how much joy we can feel. Don’t feel much pain in your heart? —You won’t feel much joy either. Learning which to focus on is your choice.

He felt physical pain a great deal of his adult life; some of it excruciating. I never heard him complain. It was what it was; no one could stop or carry it for him.

### **4. Everything ends.**

Thank goodness! Who wants to have a childhood skinned knee forever? Who wants or needs to remember mistreatment, meanness, betrayal—or abuse over and over? Conventional wisdom, and probably truth, is that we really can’t forget anything; it’s encoded within for as long as we are fortunate enough to have our minds.

But we can dismiss memories we don’t want—once they are processed and we accept nothing more can be done. We can metaphorically put them in a box on a shelf in the attic or in the garage much as we put a winter sweater away. And sometimes, when we go back and open that box to pull out the sweater, we find there are only a few threads left and watch moths fly out.

We also know memories are often inaccurate—we re-create them each time we remember them or tell them. Most of us have been convinced that a certain event took place a certain way. Then we see a photograph of that long-ago event and Grandma **is** there and we are actually sitting on her lap! Research has been done showing the changeability the malleability of memories. Of course, some memories are totally accurate—and we all know we defend our memories passionately—memories make us who we are.

The cost for “everything ends” is pure and simple—happiness ends too. The saving grace for mankind, though, is that we can have memories we choose to remember. Just because we tearfully said goodbye to our parents, a beloved friend, even our wonderful dog—we can still carry wanted memories within of beloved people, pets, times, within. We can remember to remember the memories we like, that we want. We can practice remembering that double rainbow we once saw, that one Christmas morning, long ago when we lay in bed and thought life was completely perfect. Those are the ones we should practice.

### **5. Every choice costs.**

Unfortunately, but also fortunately, we can't know the future. So we never know the full cost or benefit of any choice. If you follow Erickson's rules, however, it's “not fair” to blame yourself for poor consequences of any thoughtful choice. You couldn't possibly know all the future costs. You thought, considered, wondered, and then made the best choice you could make.

Some choices turn out as good, as we had planned, thought and hoped. Some choices have unexpected good or bad consequences. Adults have been alive long enough to know that; that's one reason children need strong parents. Learning can always result from any choice, if we decide to learn. If we don't, then we don't even get to pull that benefit out of a poor choice. Children know this benefit automatically—mistakes teach us. Does anyone tie shoes right the very first time?

### **6. The law of averages is usually correct—that's why it's called the *law of averages*.**

The expected and usual occurs most often. Insurance companies make a lot of money knowing this. We also already know it—most lottery tickets don't win; even most luggage on a plane arrives safely. Once we take precautions against unexpected events, once we've fastened our seat belts, it's foolish to spend time worrying about events that aren't likely to occur.

### **7. Change is the only constant.**

You, me, rivers, mountains, the earth—everything. So we might as well figure out how to live with it, to change what we can, and live tolerantly (or happily!) with the rest.

Time can't be frozen or reversed. The law of entropy had its origin in thermodynamics, but it is relevant to our lives and professions. The more disorder, the more chaos, the less energy is available for more productive goals.

Acceptance of reality is a real centerpiece of Erickson's work. When we accept what is possible or even appropriate for our limited energy, we can then influence more of what we want.

And the hardest part is determining what can be modified, impacted, even changed. We can't "make" youngsters more responsible but we can set up consequences; we can't stop a spouse from drinking but we can decide if we want to be impacted by it; we can't stop aging, but we can influence some of the results—appearance, cholesterol, our overall health.

### **8. It is what's in our head and heart that really matters.**

Life can be filled with joy, happiness and delight; that same life could be filled with misery, unhappiness and fear. What we focus on, our definitions become our life. Perceptions are very different—some people think fried giant beetles are an epicurean delight. Not my perception!—but valid for them. Views of the past, ourselves, our abilities? All changeable. Best of all, when humor and curiosity, the most powerful of feelings, are added, the whole mix changes and usually for the better.

Part of Erickson's legacy is embodied in the phrase, "Stop and smell the roses." He also taught us to see and enjoy humor in life and have curiosity about it. In my early 20's, I quit my job and sold everything I owned to emigrate to Australia. Daddy didn't even attempt to comfort or soothe my fears. He merely looked at me and said that he had no idea how quickly I'd find a job, where I'd live, how I'd find friends or anything. But he absolutely knew the experience would change me forever! He was really curious about how I'd be different. —What an intriguing thought! How would I be different? Curiosity virtually replaced my fear about this giant step in my life.

### **9. What we receive in life depends on merit—and good or bad luck—or a combination.**

No one "merits" cruel parents—or winning the lottery. The law of averages says: Most of the time, preparation and hard work bring reward. But sometimes it helps to be in the right place at the right time.

This is one of the "rules" Dad emphasized a lot. It is definitely the one my clients dislike the most even as they recognize its basic truth. The dot-com millionaires are an unarguable illustration. Yes, they worked very, very hard—sometimes days for a stretch—as they tried to perfect what they believed was a wonderful improvement, invention or something. But they were also in the right place at the right time... five years earlier, five years later; all their hard work would not have paid off.

Every one of us can look back and see a time when we were lucky enough to have had a wonderful opportunity. If we were prepared, and jumped on that opening, we benefitted from merit and good luck. We did the hard work of preparation, had faith in that hard work, and were also in the right place at the right time.

### **10. Life was made for Amateurs**

Life was made for amateurs. We are all amateurs at it. So enjoy it—and learn how to play it better. This rule, the last one my mother and I listed, truly exemplifies one of the basic gifts of Erickson's work. It is simply profound and profoundly simple.

We are all born, live and then we die. We begin our journey toward death the moment we are born...some take longer to get to the end than other. There is nothing more simple than that.

Human beings seem compelled to complicate their lives, to make simple issues difficult. For example—we all know the three most powerful words in the English language—I love you. Not much is simpler than that. We also know the four most powerful words in the English language—You're right, I'm wrong. But people rarely say those—the most simple, and usually most effective way to handle a problem. We defend, we rationalize, justify, blur the message, and the listeners respond in kind.

Everything becomes blurred, complicated and unsatisfying to both. This is also a joy-filled—we're amateurs. None of us have lived this moment before. Of course we make mistakes. Amateurs do. And that's ok. We can always learn. Amateurs do.

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