

# THE HABITS AND RITUALS OF A FUTURIST

Kjaer Academy Online Course

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# THINK



***“The mind is not a vessel that needs filling,  
but wood that needs igniting.”***

Plutarch

**Absorb:** Futurists tend to read voraciously and broadly. Seek and absorb different sources of information – even if they are ones you do not necessarily agree with. Listen to books, podcasts or watch videos, films or documentaries to expand your horizons. Adopt a personal multi-channel approach. Each medium offers something different.

**Agile:** Willing and able to hold and evaluate multiple potential realities; futurists are comfortable dealing with ambiguity and understand that the future can play out in an infinite variety of ways. A futurist's job is not to predict the future but to envision likely outcomes and scenarios, as well as a few less likely ones. The latter helps contextualise the former.

# Habits and rituals A-Z

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**Analytical:** Data, data and more data. Faced with endless amounts of background material, a futurist must practise intelligent sense-making. It is a mindset that holds up information and asks: “but what does it mean for tomorrow?” A futurist is attuned to the principles of Occam’s Razor; the less speculation one uses to identify a trend, the more likely it is to be true. Turning knowledge into insight is a daily challenge and a muscle that needs to be exercised.

**Articulate:** Communication is an important aspect of a futurist’s work. So, work on your communication and storytelling skills, but be credible and have your future stories underpinned by data and cases. Constantly ask how and why and where? Articulate your statements clearly and substantiate all points you make.

**Brave:** An aspect of a futurist’s mindset that is not often discussed is the need for bravery. Dealing with the future is not easy. You inevitably ask questions that move you and your associates outside the comfort zone. Most people prefer to be confirmed in their current strategy and world view rather than think about the uncertainties tomorrow may bring. The futurist mindset is therefore also a brave one. Change is daunting, failures in current approaches can be hard to acknowledge and you will meet resistance – in yourself, your organisation and others. The key is to focus on positive directions and all the opportunities that current trends and drivers present without losing sight of the myriad of challenges and risks ahead.

**Challenger:** Just because something has always been a certain way does not mean it is the right way. Challenge ‘learned perspectives’, habitual thinking and assumptions. Train your critical thinking by putting away your ego. A critical thinker is more concerned with ‘getting it right’ rather than ‘being right’.

**Collaborative:** Far from being a solitary thinker in the ivory tower, a modern futurist embrace collaboration and exchange of ideas. The futurist is a lynchpin in the flow of information and ideas – the one who cuts through the clutter to make succinct analysis and future narratives. However, you can only do this by listening to others’ ideas and views – after all, we create the future together. So it is both relevant and stimulating to invite other people to the table and take their perspectives on board.

**Creative:** Creativity is not something a lucky few are born with. It comes naturally to some, but everyone can learn to be more creative. Why is it so important? Because creativity goes hand in hand with the ability to spot connections that are invisible to the purely analytical mind. It is essential to whole-brain thinking and will empower you, not only to identify trends but also the possibilities that they represent.

# Habits and rituals A-Z

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## Create something:

1. Your personal reading list
2. A new ritual
3. A drawing of something you saw today
4. Plant something
5. Write a letter to your future self
6. Record a memory, maybe on video
7. Anything really.....

**Critical thinker:** The process of critical thinking is vital to futurists – but it starts by looking inwards. A critical thinker train self-awareness to know the difference between a rational thought based on careful consideration and an emotional response based on bias. Understanding your own perspectives and biases makes it easier for you to consider those of others. Critical thinking can also enhance language and presentation skills, forming a check and balance that improves the way we express our ideas.

**Curious:** Futurists question everything and a central trait of their mindset is asking “what if?” or “why not?” at every opportunity. Curiosity and imagination are essential to critical thinking and asking better questions. Once your futurist mindset develops, you will find that you won’t be able to switch it off. Talking to people, observing and reading broadly are ways to kick-start the process. Asking yourself: “how might this impact the future?” Then imagine: “what does this mean to me, my organisation, business, policies, community, product, services or the communities we serve?” Over time this becomes a practice that helps you dream big, see things clearer, so that you can shape the future you want to see.

**Daydreamer:** Daydreaming may seem counterintuitive to discipline, our next point on the habits of futurists list, but it’s actually complementary. It is not that we advocate procrastination, rather, time to clear your mind and allow space for random thoughts and ideas to emerge. Scott Barry Kaufman and psychologist Rebecca L. McMillan, talk about the benefits of daydreaming in their 2012 study, *Ode to Positive Constructive Daydreaming*: “Mind-wandering can aid in the process of ‘creative incubation’ and daydreaming has evolved to allow us to let go of the present. The same brain network associated with daydreaming is the brain network associated with theory of mind – it allows us to imagine our future self, but it also allows us to imagine what someone else is thinking.”





Everything can be interesting – look closer

***“Mind-wandering can aid in the process of ‘creative incubation’  
– daydreaming has evolved to allow us to let go of the present.”***

Ode To Positive Constructive Daydreaming – study 2012

**Disciplined:** Free flow of ideas, cultivating intuition and ‘mind-wandering’ are essential to futurists, but we need discipline to keep multiple, often disparate, insights, ideas and things from becoming confused and useless. It is important to organise knowledge and key background material, as it helps us see links and identify the bigger picture. A good system, a sound methodology and a solid process is the sense-making framework to ensure our work is useful and robust.

**Diversity seeker:** New ideas and innovation arise when diversity is greatest. Widening our understanding of different disciplines and voices is key to challenge assumptions. Seeking new perspectives can be hard, but it is ultimately rewarding, so spend time with people who are different from you to inspire fresh thinking.



Studies have proven that being outside maximises the positive effects of break time

**Empathetic:** The essence of empathy comes down to making genuine connections with people and the world around you. Like any skill, empathy can be cultivated through intentional effort. Renowned psychologists Daniel Goleman and Paul Ekman have identified three vital components to empathy: Cognitive, Emotional and Compassionate. The steps below can help you train the aspects that matter the most to a futurist – namely connection.

When you are empathic you:

1. are fully present with others.
2. master the art of active listening.
3. attuned into non-verbal communication.
4. know how to pause.
5. replace giving advice with asking questions.
6. speak in terms of WE, not ME.
7. imagines others' point of view.

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**Energised:** Everything is energy, which is essential for our survival; physically, emotionally, and spiritually. When we go to work, we exchange our energy (talent and time) for different kinds of energy (fulfilment and money). Once we view the world in terms of energy, our overall perception changes. Curiously, you must spend energy to get energy. A brisk walk in nature will energise you, while sitting inside on the sofa can make you sluggish. How we spend our day and our resources, the encounters we have, even our private thoughts, will define our energy levels. Certain experiences will energise us while others deplete us, and our brain always looks for short-cuts to save energy. Habits that become rituals are a good way to conserve and restore energy. The first time you do something new, it will take energy, but once it is a habit, you free up that energy for something else. Replacing a bad habit with a good one helps us restore energy and build agility and resilience for whatever life throws at us.

**Explorer:**

1. Never stop looking at the world around you.
2. Consider everything you encounter.
3. Everything can be interesting. Look closer.
4. Change your course often.
5. Observe closely for long (and for short) periods.
6. Notice the stories happening around you.
7. Look for patterns and connections.
8. Document your findings, both verbally and visually.
9. Incorporate uncertainties.
10. Observe movement.
11. Create a personal dialogue with your environment.
12. Always look for 'the source' of things.

*Adapted from How to Be an Explorer of the World: Portable Life Museum by Keri Smith*

**Go outside:** Go for a walk or do some movement. Go for a coffee or sit outside in silence. We all know taking a break helps us see things clearer or allows space for good ideas to surface. We can't overdo the break time – it brings perspective – and studies have proven that being outside maximises the positive effects.

**Imagine:** Make it a part of your ritual and be specific. Ask: If this? >> Then what? Try to imagine what your observation means to you, the world, people around you, your organisation, your community.





Learning across multiple fields gives the futurist an advantage

**Learn new things:** Neuroscience has found that trying new things is good for our cognitive skills. We have plasticity on our side, meaning the brain is malleable and build new pathways throughout life. Learning new things is connected to reward centres in the brain and memory, boosting both wellbeing and mental agility.

**Learning transference:** Learning across multiple fields gives the futurist an advantage. Each new field explored gives us the ability to learn and relearn things we already know so we can make unlikely connections and see new patterns. A futurist always practices improving their learning-transfer skills.

**Look beyond the fringe:** The periphery or margins are often where significant change starts. What you think is strange or even uninteresting at first can be the next disruptive idea emerging. Imagine how the change represented by these signals could gain momentum and affect the future.

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**Meditate:** Meditating is good for overall wellbeing, productivity and for seeing the big picture. Taking a mental break helps you see the paths ahead more clearly – even a brief five-minute meditation can be useful. There is evidence that our memory, emotional regulation, and mood improve with just 8 weeks of 13 minutes of daily meditation practice.

**Openness:** Being open to everything and attached to nothing is a worthwhile practice to widen our horizon. Openness to new experiences is closely connected to curiosity and creativity and is essential to understanding the world, new societal currents and trends in a wider context.

**Organised:** Make time for thinking about the future – this could be as little as a five-minutes daily practice. Take notes of ideas and thoughts first thing in the morning while your mind is fresh. Plan your day carefully – make a to-do list and then order it in terms of priorities. Ideally, make it a habit to jot down next day's activities by close of your workday.

**Persistent:** Cultivating and practising a futurist mindset is not always easy, so be persistent. And remember, persistence can become a habit too.

**Play:** Playfulness and creativity are closely related. Playing can unlock ideas and help you see connections. It is also beneficial to foster agility. People who play well, learn well and work well. Within organisations, play can help to better wellness and work-life balance to create happier and, therefore, more productive employees. Play means different things to different people. For some, it is physical, for others it is purely in the mind and for others again, it is as simple as a doodle on a piece of paper. Find out what works for you.

**Responsible:** Being responsible for our actions and respectful to people, the environment in which you operate and the subjects you engage with, is essential to being a futurist.

**Sensorial:** Go analogue and train how to rely on your senses for gathering information too. The world is a valuable resource for collection of 'data' – especially when we use all our senses. Take in smells, sounds and textures. Do not automatically mediate input by writing things down or recording them, though this can be useful as well. Use a case-by-case approach when gathering analogue material. Consider the words of Confucius, the Chinese philosopher: *"I hear, and I forget, I see, and I remember, I do, and I understand."*

**Step back:** Simply step back. Take a break. Then look again.

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**Storyteller:** A modern futurist is a narrator of stories of the future. People remember stories, not just facts and figures. When you have identified a trend or a signal, practice telling it as a narrative and imagine how the story could unfold. This is the next step towards scenario planning. Remember, the future is plural, so multiple stories about tomorrow will be key to engaging your audience.

**Time to think:** We have talked a lot about this, but it is important to constantly remind ourselves. Taking time to reflect deeply on what the signs and signals we uncover tell us – thinking about how we got here – help us imagine how potential futures might play out.

**Visually attuned:** Look closely at the world around you and new things will emerge, even from the familiar. We have talked about 'active listening' – making use of empathy and giving someone your full attention – but we can apply the same principles to 'active seeing'. It means we engage fully with the world, rather than responding in a passive and subconscious way. This allows you to spot important signals and signs of change that would otherwise remain hidden. Engaging the conscious part of the brain is harder, but ultimately more rewarding. You can build your skills in active seeing by observing, then drawing something. The seminal book *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* by Betty Edwards will help you understand the difference between looking and seeing and provides great exercises.

***“Creativity is the ability to find new solutions to a problem or new modes of expression; thus it brings into existence something new to the individual and to the culture.”***

Betty Edwards founder of Center for the Educational Applications of Brain Hemisphere Research

# Notes

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