

A Zillion Chess and Life Hacks

Maria Manakova

A Zillion Chess and Life Hacks

Author: Maria Manakova

Translated by Alexei Zakharov

Typesetting by Andrei Elkov

Photos in this book are provided by Yulia Manakova, Lev Makarshin, and Boris Dolmatovsky, as well as taken from the author's personal archive

Artwork, including front cover, by Maria Manakova using Midjourney

© Elk and Ruby, 2024

Follow us on Twitter/X: @ilan_ruby

www.elkandruby.com

ISBN 978-1-916839-11-3 (black and white paperback); 978-1-916839-12-0 (black and white hardback); 978-1-916839-37-3 (color hardback)

Contents

Index of Games	8
How it All Began	9
Psychology	11
Chess	12
A Zillion Hacks	14
Vanya	17
This Book in a Nutshell	19
Acknowledgements	22
Before the Game	24
Go to the game with a fresh mind and in a good mood	24
Be positive, and you'll attract success	29
Prepare for battle	30
Psychological Preparation for the Game	33
We really have to win? At any price?	34
How pros get in the mood	36
The Goal	39
Sit at the board to win, not "to avoid losing"	39
Get ready to create problems for your opponent, not to solve yours	40
Crush your opponent	41
Dominate	42
Distance yourself from your opponent's behavior, maintain your own rhythm and mood	44
Remember!	45
Learn to be a champion	46
Give your 100%	48
The "Forty Good Moves" formula	50
Manage your luck	50
Don't create a system of excuses	52
Demons	54
The fear demon	54
The worry demon	55
The computer demon	58
The superstition demon	59
Chess players have their own religion	62
Analytical Preparation	65
Preparing for your opponent	65
Opening choice	66
Nobody ever "plays against the pieces"	67

Avoid too much preparation.....	69
Who is your opponent, anyway?	69
Women’s chess.....	72
So, how should you play against a woman?	75
On Your Marks	79
Allow 5–10 minutes to pump yourself up before the game	79
During the Game. Alertness	81
Cooper’s Color Code	81
Do not slip into unconsciousness	85
Work on mindfulness	87
Control	89
Control the time, yourself and the game	89
Controlling Time	90
Time trouble is the absolute evil.....	91
Play rapidly.....	94
Give yourself permission to play rapidly.....	95
Some lifehacks for time control	98
Spend time wisely	101
Save time in the opening	103
Train the “player” in you.....	103
Brilliances require time	104
Chess perfectionism	105
If you are out of practice	107
If you spend more than 15 minutes on your move. Remember!.....	108
Whatever you choose, it will be a mistake	109
Time-trouble moves shall be erased from history.....	110
If you have an advantage but little time on the clock, don’t take risks ...	111
If you have gotten into time trouble grab these tips.....	112
When your opponent is in time trouble.....	113
The magic 40 th move	115
After the 40 th move, don’t rush, chillax!	119
Moves 41 to 43: don’t snooze, you’ll freeze to death!!!.....	120
Control of Your Inner State. Concentration	121
Maintain concentration	121
The root cause of blunders is loss of concentration.....	123
What should you do if you blunder?.....	124
Emotions	126
When an emotional burst happens.....	127
Catching excessive emotions in yourself is half the battle.....	129
Don’t make decisions in a state of panic	130
If you can’t calm down.....	131

Energy	133
How to conserve energy	135
Study yourself: when does your energy double?.....	141
Resigning in a drawn position.....	141
Learn to reset your mind and body during the game	144
Freeing the Unconscious	145
Creative trance.....	145
Intuition	148
Psychological Problems	150
Think only about the game or don't think at all	150
The game only ends after the clock is stopped.....	152
Get ready for a marathon game	154
Be able to readjust psychologically.....	155
Be flexible.....	155
Be persistent	157
Control of the Game	160
A look from the “outside”	160
Nobody can teach you correct positional evaluation – you have to learn it yourself	161
The seventh sense	168
Choosing a Move	170
Chess practicality: rather than searching for the “best” move, choose a move that leads to victory	171
Forget about brilliancies!!!	173
When you have too many options, make the most useful move	176
Before thinking deeply, find a “reserve continuation”	177
To risk or not to risk	177
Don't fear ghosts	179
No passivity!!!	182
Pose your opponent problems with your every move	182
Every move must have a point	183
Make natural moves, avoid flashy ones	184
Play tough.....	185
Calculate 2–3 moves ahead, not more	187
Do not abandon the line	187
You should always be ready to make a crucial decision	188
The position in your head and the position on the board are two very different things	190
Don't hurry	191
There are no plans	194
Trust yourself	195

Draws	197
Never play for a draw!	197
Draw offer as a psychological trick	198
Famous players only offer draws in lost positions	202
Never agree to draws at all!.....	206
Your Opponent	208
Prophylaxis.....	209
Be respectful towards your opponent	211
Underestimating a low-rated opponent	215
Overestimating your opponent	215
Don't trust titled players.....	219
Use your advantages when you play against someone titled	221
Ignore your opponent's antics – they may be suffering.....	222
Cheating suspicions shouldn't make you paranoid	223
Lifhacks During the Game	225
Don't be bored when it's your opponent's turn to move, do something!	225
When your head is tired, play with your hand.....	226
After the time scramble, finish off your opponent with your confidence	226
Record the game neatly –	
this will help you better control your internal state	228
Don't forget to snack during the game	231
Should you run to the toilet in time trouble?.....	233
During the game, light neck exercises are useful	
because your neck can easily become a bottleneck for energy	234
Play in your most comfortable clothes	236
Clothing style	237
Acting Tricks Deployed by Chess Players	239
Acting ruses against a weak opponent	240
The theatrical nature of pretty woman players.....	241
Various acting tricks	242
The Rules of Chess	243
Demand that your opponent adhere to the rules of the game.....	243
Examples of correct and incorrect reaction.....	244
In controversial situations, stop the clock	
and simultaneously raise your hand to call the arbiter.....	248
As a tournament participant, you have the right.....	249
Losing	251
You simply need to survive this evening	252
If you can't come up with an excuse for losing you're not a real man....	255
List of excuses for losing. Choose any that you like!	256
If your friend lost	258

The Tournament	259
Professional deformation	259
The right tournament regimen	260
Eating before games	262
Catch the wave!.....	262
If you don't play well at a tournament, give yourself a shock.....	264
Use your rest day wisely	265
Don't neglect your body during the tournament	266
Ingenious exercises for life	268
Two useful formulas	271
Stress relief after the game.....	272
How to fall asleep when it's impossible?	273
Do not seriously analyze games during tournaments	275
Journalists, photo reporters, interviewers, fans.....	276
Communication and social media	278
Harmful Lifehacks	281
Harmful tournament conditions.....	281
Buying a point or a title? My pleasure (in other people's leisure)	282
Other funny things that happen in chess:	
prearranged games, thrown games, score manipulations	284
Cheating in chess	286

Index of Games

Game	White	Black	Opening	Year
1	Vujcic	Manakova	Fragment	2022
2	Manakova	Goletiani	Fragment	1999
3	Manakova	Pein	Petroff Defense	2023
4	Z. Mamedjarova	Manakova	Fragment	2018
5	Caruana	Giri	Fragment	2022
6	Rapport	Deac	Fragment	2022
7	Manakova	M.Muzychuk	Fragment	2014
8	Rapport	Caruana	Fragment	2021
9	Khademalsharieh	Zhukova	Fragment	2016
10	Manakova	Parvanov	Fragment	2023
11	Manakova	Hapala	Fragment	2018
12	Nguyen	Manakova	Grunfeld Defense	2013
13	Carlsen	So	Fragment	2018
14	Jovanovic	Manakova	Sicilian Defense	2023
15	Szily	Bronstein	Fragment	1949
16	Manakova	Pap	Fragment	2021
17	Kramnik	Deep Fritz	Fragment	2002
18	Khakpoor	Dolmatov	Fragment	1978
19	Goering	Anderssen	Fragment	1877
20	Manakova	Buervenich	Fragment	1992
21	Svidler	Anand	Fragment	1999
22	Moradiabadi	Manakova	Slav Defense	2010
23	Brankov	Manakova	Sicilian Defense	2021
24	Bosiocic	Manakova	Fragment	2015

How it All Began

God knows why, but I somehow wound up as a chess player in my childhood. I learned the game at the age of four, and I did it by myself, just like Capablanca. I carefully watched my dad play with his friends, and then asked to play a game against him. He said, “But you don’t even know the rules!” “I saw you play and figured it all out.”

At the age of eight, I enrolled in a chess club, and I got a little bit crazy: I saw the whole world as a chess game, people and events looked to me like pieces and combinations played out between these pieces.

The smell of chess sets in the old Pioneers Palace on Stopani in Moscow, the pieces (varnished, known as “Grandmaster chess sets”), the ticking of the clock in the silence, the glare of mirrors in the playing halls – all this mesmerized me with its atmosphere, and I got stuck in this magical virtual world.

Back then, I didn’t know that it would be for life.

In my childhood, I was a classical *Wunderkind*. One of those who go “wide” instead of “deep”. Those who easily master anything we set our sights on, but after achieving a bit of success we drop it and search for something new. Nevertheless, after being touched by chess, I got seriously stuck on it for some reason. Perhaps because back then, there was not much competition in girls’ tournaments, so I quickly started winning cups and medals. Besides, I was constantly surrounded by boys, traveled everywhere without my parents, played in endless tournaments and won... isn’t that the perfect recipe for happiness?

Interestingly, despite having tons of talent, the fate of the *Wunderkinds* (i.e. us) is usually hard: only a few achieve real success in life. One reason, as I already mentioned, is a constant change of interests. But there’s another, bigger reason – pathological laziness, a conviction that anything can be achieved without much work, simply by doing it. But completing projects – no, that’s totally uninteresting. And while the *Wunderkinds* simply enjoy life for years, their peers work very hard and overtake them in all spheres where they shone brightly not so long ago.

The years go by, but I still “sing the summer away”. If you are... actually... reading this book now, this means that, for the first time in my life, I did the impossible – I finally pulled myself together and *followed through* with my 10,000th project to the very end. And this is a true achievement, an even greater one than gaining the WGM title, which essentially happened by itself, without any special effort by me.



Maria Manakova in childhood.

Photo by L. Makarshin

Psychology

I have a researcher's mind – according to socionics (i.e. in Jungian terms), my psychotype is ENFP (bonus points if you know what that means). One of the characteristic features of that psychotype is an interest in psychology: the passion for studying people and social groups, physiognomy, gestalt and similar sorcery.

I've been reading psychology and neuroscience books since I was ten. At the age of 14, I attended the Young Psychologist School of Moscow State University (MSU); at 15, I made contact with certain people to obtain a pass to the Brain Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences; and at 17, I lied about my age in a questionnaire to take part in a psychological training program for adults named "Prologue" (of course, they immediately saw through my ploy, but still allowed me to participate because they were charmed by my determination!). I finished school by writing a paper on biology – a paper on the human brain – and the subject of my thesis in the journalism school was manipulation and ways to combat it.

My mom wanted me to enroll in the MSU School of Psychology, but I always did what I, not others, wanted ("That's all because your dad and I never spanked you, but we should have!"). As I finished school, I got so deeply sucked into the chess world that psychology, among most other interests, played a distant second fiddle to it. Every day, my mom pestered me about higher education, and I once asked her, "Will you finally get off my back if I become a grandmaster?" She promised that she would. And so, I had to win the title. Still, my fascination with psychology stayed with me for my whole life. (I did obtain a higher education, too, but a bit later.)



Hosting a chess festival in 2011 at Luzhniki stadium. I'm playing against a chess computer with a robotic arm designed by Konstantin Kosteniuk, the father of Alexandra Kosteniuk. Photo by Y. Manakova

If I, as a grandmaster, was only interested in chess matters (such as, what's the strongest reply to ♖c8 on the 23rd move of the Cambridge Springs Variation of the Queen's Gambit), I would have become the world champion a long time ago. Among both sexes, you know. But I was always fascinated by something else – *non-chess* matters surrounding the game – while the moves themselves were rather secondary to me.

***I don't believe in psychology. I believe in good moves.
– Bobby Fischer***

And recently, I got thinking: why did this talented chess player face such trouble, why were my priorities so skewed? And then I realized. In addition to my fascination with psychology (and esoteric passions which I haven't yet mentioned), simple laziness was to blame. Yes, the same desire to enjoy myself that has played a defining role in my life.

I grew up on fairy tales and always wanted to find the genie in the lamp, the fairy godmother, or, at the very least, the golden fish, and have these friends grant all my wishes... or at least three... or one. Per week. I wanted to dig and dig, and then dig up a treasure – a magic key that could help me win tournaments without much effort, simply because I wanted to. A key which would work like this: I get into a proper mood before the game, and then I win easily.

Funnily enough, this happy-go-lucky approach *did* actually work while I was young: my energy supply was boundless, I felt like I could take on the whole world and win. I wouldn't touch chess at all for three months, then show up at some tournament completely unprepared and still score brilliantly because I was in the right frame of mind. I could eschew the tedious study of pawn endgames, which I hated; I didn't know them, but I instinctively avoided them in play because I was "in sync with my intuition".

However, when I got to forty, I realized that neither "self-improvement", nor the secrets of "psychological battles", nor the fiercest attitude at the board works without painstaking, well-structured chess prep. I am sure that the material I have put together for this book will be very useful in your chess journey, and not only, but it's still ancillary to the main ingredients – a passionate love for chess and serious, regular study.



A Zillion Hacks

*My biggest advantage over Nepomniachtchi is
that I am better at chess
– Magnus Carlsen*

Lately, my students and others have been asking me a lot: “How to eat properly before the game?”, “How to get rid of unnecessary tension before the game?”, “How to calm down after a loss?”, “How to prepare, how to get into a proper mood, can you exert psychological influence on your opponent and how to ‘repulse’ their influence on you, is it normal to roam around during the game, or do you need to sit there without moving at all?” etc. etc. I answered all those questions individually, but then I felt that a book answering all of them at once would be highly useful! And recently, one “chess mom” told me, “I read that it’s useful to eat protein before the game, do you agree?”

Really, I can’t stand it anymore! So someone once scribbled or mumbled something about eating protein before the game, and now this phrase is passed from parent to parent like a precious diamond! But what about me?! Me?!!! I’ve been asking my coaches and grandmaster friends questions on these matters for years. And I didn’t just write down their advice and learn it by heart, I actually applied it in my practice, and also “did my own research”.

Therefore, I thought, the time has come to gather a collection of useful tips (life hacks), where not only my students and their family, but all chess fans at large will find answers to these questions.

When I started to conduct my research for this book, I studied a huge number of tomes and online articles and saw that nobody else had thought of writing such a book. There were some individual tips in books, in social media, in magazines, on chess sites. I even found a book of short recommendations by an American chess journalist. But there was no fundamental work that encompassed *all* non-chess aspects of the struggle.

Furthermore, I don’t just talk the talk, I walked the walk, too – from zero to the highest title there is, Grandmaster. Well, OK, I’m not the best GM there is, I’m actually “only” a WGM, but I honestly strived to reach the greatest heights of mastery! I’m still striving 😊. I know how the life of a professional player looks from the inside, not only from the tales of my chess-playing colleagues, but from my own career, too.

I have played at Olympiads, at both team and individual world and European championships, and I’m still an active player. I was a European champion and vice-champion in team tournaments. As an individual player, I won the



With Veselin Topalov at the 2016 candidates tournament, where I worked as a journalist

Moscow and Serbian women’s championships, and also played in the Russian Women’s Championship Superfinal.

I didn’t reach the greatest heights in chess because my head was always full of thoughts about love, art, esoterica, some “research” and other things entirely unrelated to sport (I also always had trouble – catastrophic trouble – with self-discipline). I can’t give you any deep analysis of an opening variation or complicated endgames – that would be desecration. But I *can* share some information on what happens beyond the board, which will help you both to achieve success in chess and develop as a person. I’ll do the best I can.

I borrowed a lot of quotes and tips from various celebrities, chess players included. First of all, I simply like quotes – not all, of course, but non-standard, witty stuff – and, secondly, I simply won’t be able to express an idea better than them.

But I would like you to know that there’s nothing in the book that I haven’t encountered personally, based on my own experience. Like a true scientist, I have studied every lifehack presented here, and I guarantee that *they work* (in some isolated cases, where the lifehacks haven’t been properly tested, I warn the reader, in which case further research is necessary).

The book doesn’t purport to be an academic work, because all the issues are covered in a popular format, without getting too deep. It’s more like a

compilation of tips and reminders that guide the readers, and they are welcome to study a particular subject academically should they have the desire.

This book is also intended for those people who are interested not so much in chess moves, but in the chess world and its inhabitants, because I discuss the latter's problems a lot, describe them and their life, and consider some real-life cases.

There are a few chess games and fragments in the book. In rare cases, I used them as examples. On the other hand, there's a lot of chess jargon in it. Don't be afraid, I'm sure it'll come in handy in case you ever find yourself in chess-playing company. Chess professionals speak that jargon exclusively, and you'll be able to pass as "one of the guys" rather than resembling a fish out of water. I'll explain the meaning of especially weird-looking terms.



Demons



The fear demon

You're not the center of the universe. No, actually: every person is a center of the universe. Everyone has the same feelings as you, everyone has their own fate, concerns, anxieties, fears, joys and sorrows. When a person says something, the sentence is born inside of them and is absolutely determined by their life up to then, and even genetics. It's the same with actions. But all people, without exception, want to be happy. Deep acceptance of other people with all their quirks helps develop an important quality – wisdom.

There is no surer method to encourage your enemy than to seem to fear him.
– James Fenimore Cooper

Named must your fear be before banish it you can.

– Yoda

Do you fear your opponent? Sure that you will lose to them? Here's a magic formula that will help you get rid of this feeling:

Everyone fears everyone

And a bonus one:

RELAX YOUR BOOTY!

Alas, I learned these magic formulas too late. Like many others, I thought that the whole world revolved around me, that I was the sole center of the universe, that I was the only one who experienced good and bad feelings. But then I suddenly learned that other players can be anxious too, that they also fear me (oh, such a sweet feeling!).

Your opponent is as human as you are: they can pretend to be calm, but there's actually a storm brewing inside them. An upset stomach, an entire collection of lucky charms, point counting, long preparation, consultation with the coach... If they are 300 points above you, don't believe your eyes if they seem calm to you. They are simply more experienced and skilled in faking their emotions. They may even feel worse than you: a draw is not a satisfactory result for them, therefore, their task is much harder.

So, memorize this magic phrase and remember it every time you feel fear.

Let's repeat again: *everyone fears everyone*.

The worry demon

Being worried before an important task isn't simply normal – it's even positive. It shows that you actually care, and that you will be really invested in the task. This is adrenaline, it's your friend. If there's too much adrenaline, and it paralyzes you or pushes you in the wrong direction, burn it with exercise. If this doesn't help, study yourself closely: you may have ascribed too great an importance to the task.

Everyone is nervous before a performance, not only you. And this is good: it means that you do care, that you're not a vegetable. But sometimes chess players get so nervous that their arms and legs tremble, and their heads are totally empty. In such cases, they can even play 1.d4 instead of 1.e4, despite the

latter being what they prepared at home. Or push the clock on the neighboring board instead of their own. They can't do anything right, their brain is turned off. Sometimes, to hide their worry, these poor souls play lightning-fast in the opening, and when they finally come to their senses, they look at the work of their hands with horror.

Something like that happened to me at an Olympiad, together with my opponent. By the way, there are two kinds of people when it comes to worrying: the first kind become catatonic when they worry, they are completely paralyzed, they can't think straight. People of the second kind begin to scramble for something to do, rush purposelessly and can't think straight either. My opponent, like me, belonged to the second kind: we hid our worry with erratic actions. In our case – with chess moves. When we finally came to our senses after this “nervous attack”, we had already made about 12 moves, the position was completely incomprehensible, but only then did we start to play properly.

One of my students, a grown man, described his problem rather vividly. He asked what to do with adrenaline during the game, and complained that he had a similar problem with ducks. Yes, the actual ducks that fly and quack.

He's a hunter, and he often draws parallels between chess and hunting. He says, “Here I see the ducks, I hide and wait for them to take off, and I start shaking so much that... it's just impossible to hit a flying bird in such a state! And if your hands are shaking at the board, it's not that much of a problem (you can still grab the correct piece and somehow put it onto the correct square), but if you try to shoot in such a state, you will certainly miss. And my student often misses his quarry because he cannot control himself.

Of course, it's much better to watch your opponent shake nervously rather than be driven mad by your own worries. But the thing is, nobody can avoid worry, even you. Almost all chess players have experienced this. You simply need to understand what to do, how to work with it.

Let's see what Boris Postovsky says on the topic. His advice is directed less to players and more to their coaches:

You need to calm the pupil down, so that they go to the game in a good mood, understanding that they are being treated well, and they are off to do their favorite thing, and there's a hard, serious struggle ahead... First of all, walks are important, and certain conversations during those walks, too. It's often important to remind the anxious player of a brilliant win of theirs: “See how you crushed him?” This will reduce their worry. I also think that it would be good to sit with them half an hour before the game and drink some tea with lemon. The most important thing is to calm them down, make them less worried. And it's important for the player to understand that the result is not a tragedy, that they have to enjoy the game. What are we playing for, anyway? Perhaps none of them will become

a professional chess player, and thank God – the fate of a chess professional is very difficult. As well as in any other sport. This is a really tough job, and a tough career. But, as Botvinnik used to say, if you can't live without it (like Ivanchuk or Shirov), then it's normal.

But what should you do if you come to the tournament without a coach? Who can help you? Who can share that cuppa with you and hold heart-to-heart talks? Moreover, it's all, *all* rather simple and obvious: “playing for your enjoyment”, “not a tragedy”, “hard work”... But how to calm down?!

Here's how.

1. Repeat all these platitudes about enjoyment and not caring about the result. Process is everything!
If this didn't work, go to 2.
2. A cuppa with cookies, your favorite music, meditation (if you know how to meditate. If you don't, learn how), a pleasant walk, and life is great!
If this didn't work either, go to 3.
3. Burn the adrenaline with exercise. You are so worried because there's too much adrenaline in your system. Too much adrenaline blocks the thinking process. And I'm sorry to say, but it's hard to win a game without thinking.

In the old days, dudes usually worked off stress by chopping wood, now they usually hit the gym. Actors do some push-ups or squats, walk in circles around the theater or squabble with their colleagues before going on stage. Actors and entertainers also have another lifehack: if you're in public, and it's too embarrassing to do squats and too late to pick a fight with somebody, then you can rub your earlobes or squeeze one of your hands hard with the other – this also seems to help.

It's tough for chess players to overcome anxiety before a classical game: of course, you'll come around eventually, but there'll be more than enough time to commit so many mistakes that your position will be unsalvageable. It's a bit simpler with blitz and rapid: this is a kind of “exercise” in and of itself. Your hand is in constant motion, your body is in constant motion, and this burns adrenaline. You get back to your senses after a few moves.

My body discovered its own way of burning adrenaline – turning up late. I chronically arrive late everywhere – for planes, for trains, let alone for chess games! Disheveled, tousled, I run to the board (or onto the plane), and I fear nothing afterwards. I got there just in time for take-off.

But you should not follow my lead. The body is late, but the mind fights against that. Because being late is rude and unprofessional. I am sincerely ashamed. But I repeat this conduct again and again.

If doing all of the above does not work, go to 4.

state, to fully relax. They freeze for a bit, and then the second control suddenly approaches. Yes, your body needs rest from the intense bursts of Orange or even Red activity between the 30th and 40th moves, but you can't give it more than five minutes of rest (time control at big official competitions is 30 minutes until the end of the game with a 30-second increment). And to return the body into a working state quickly, you need fitness, a well-trained mind and the competitive ability to force yourself.

Do not slip into unconsciousness

Nature has allocated a special time for the “unconscious” state – sleep time. Do not “sleep” while you're awake. First of all, you are wasting your time, and, secondly, this is simply dangerous. (There's only one exception – when your energy batteries are exhausted. In this case, you need a short rest in a safe place.)



Here are the symptoms that show that you played a game (or a part of the game) in an unconscious, “White” state:

1. You cannot recall the game properly and mix up the moves.
2. You say, “I don't understand what I spent all my time on.”

How can you catch yourself in such a state during the game? Of course, it's not easy: the brain is so relaxed that it's ready to do anything to prevent anyone from waking it up. It will deceive you in various ways: for instance, it will pretend to calculate lines. Or it will suggest to you that it would be "important to meditate" over the position, so that the solution "comes up by itself". Or it will attempt to convince you of the importance of calculating a concrete line and all its variations for 20 moves.

All you need to do in such a situation is to catch yourself lying. White state is forbidden in chess! (As I implied already, you *can* afford five minutes or so in this state after the time scramble, to help your body restore itself more quickly, but only when your opponent has the move.) **Wallowing long in line calculations should serve as an alarm signal to you.**

If you don't see the position clearly when you calculate, stop your analysis. It's a waste of your time and freshness. Moreover, your variations will be full of holes, because you are not mobilized. Pull yourself together, turn away from the board, eat a chocolate, then go back to the position, look at it clearly and tell yourself, "I will now identify three candidate moves!" Determine them and give yourself no more than 10 minutes to choose between them (5 minutes will probably be better, because you have already wasted enough time). After those 5–10 minutes, make a firm decision, without cutting corners.

Here's another useful thing. When your mind is numb after a necessary but long calculation of complicated variations, you could do the following. First, pause for a short time and distract yourself (as I described above), and then get back to the variations, but, instead of simply calculating, silently **verbalize** them. Yes, you can even actually whisper, moving your lips. Why do that? There's a fog in your head, your view is distorted, and verbalizing the moves allows you to perceive better and structure the lines.

Let's say it again. This is important: **full distraction from chess for 20–30 seconds after long calculation provides the brain with a quick energy recharge.**

The eighth world champion Mikhail Tal once recounted a strange story. You probably know it, so I'll mention it only briefly: in a game with Evgeny Vasiukov, in a complex position with countless variations, he needed to calculate whether to sacrifice a knight for the attack. At that moment, Tal's unconscious apparently served him a fantastic way to distract himself. It reminded him of a line from a children's poem by Kornei Chukovsky (Telephone, 1926) about how hard it is to pull a hippo out of a swamp. Indeed, it didn't just remind him, but also challenged him to find the solution. He then spent forty minutes thinking about how to achieve it – with ropes?, or perhaps with a motor vehicle jack? Would they need a helicopter or was a truck sufficient? That's what Tal claimed anyway, explaining why he spent forty minutes over one move. After thinking for the full



forty minutes, Tal claimed, he failed to come up with a satisfactory solution and decided “OK, let it drown.” And at that moment, he decided to go for the sac even though the variations seemed inconclusive.

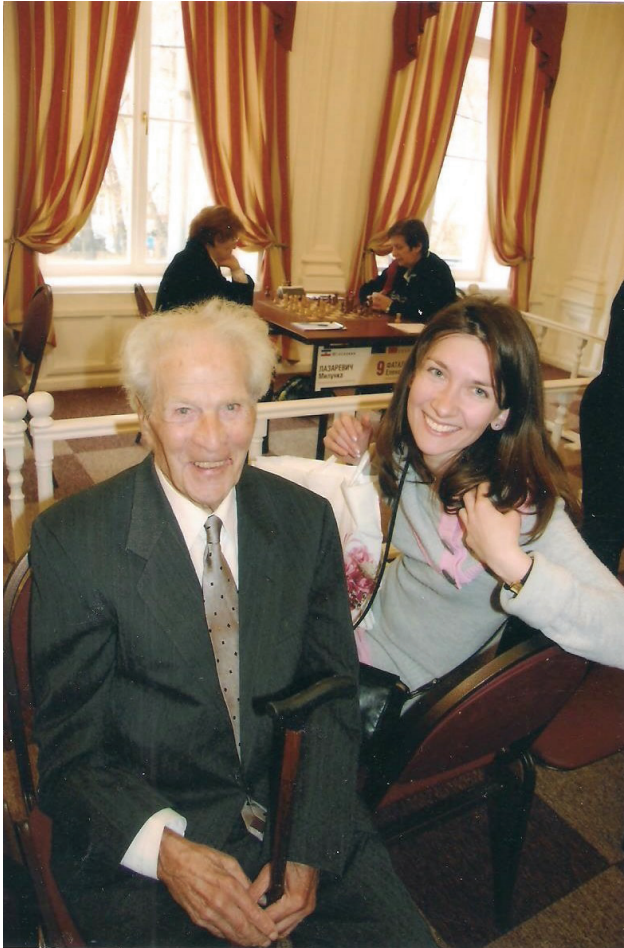
Work on mindfulness

Life as meditation is the ideal state for the Seeker

The ability to enter a mindful state is a very important skill, which can be developed. In fact, it develops on its own as you age and accumulate experience. Driving a car, practicing any sports (especially extreme ones), yoga, martial arts, fishing, cross-stitching, dance — all this helps a person to control themselves and their consciousness. It’s as though you jump out of the pile of junk of your own thoughts and the chaos of random events around you into a “here-and-now” state (welcome to reality!)

Chess is also good for developing this skill, but the reverse is true as well: you'll be able to play chess much better if you play in a mindful state, not by fumbling your way around.

Some people are rather impatient: they don't want to wait for years of experience to grant them the desired mindfulness, and they work on it at an accelerated pace (or at least they think they do). These people are fans of the esoteric. They choose a path of mindfulness training with meditation (or even prayer). We'll discuss that some other time.



With Andor Lilienthal, also at the match between the USSR and Yugoslavia, 2007

Controlling Time

Magic shouldn't be sought in the absolute quality of your game these days, but in the speed of making very difficult decisions.

– Mikhail Golubev

At first I wanted to win without using black magic. When my position became untenable, I got into such severe time trouble that there was no time for black magic.

– Aleister Crowley on his 1897 game as the first board for Cambridge University in the annual varsity match. He lost as black, playing the Petroff.

There's a state called the "infinite time mode" (I first heard about it from my teacher, theater director Boris Yukhananov). It's ideal for any creative process. Even more importantly, a true creative process is impossible if it's limited by time. Any thought of "there's too little time" pulls the creator away from the creative process, and it's very hard to get back into it afterwards.

The person immerses themselves so deeply in their art that time, space and their inner state simply cease to exist for them. Only pure art remains.

That's why actors and directors rehearse all night, until the morning, and their "normal" spouses can't stand such a schedule and divorce them. That's why artists, as they create their paintings, stop eating, drinking, washing and sleeping, and their friends have to "revive" them afterwards, helping them eat and wash after creating another masterpiece.

That's how to create works of art. For an outsider, this looks suspiciously like insanity, but this successfully ends when the "baby", borne with so many difficulties, finally enters the world. Some say that chess is art, but it's not. There are some elements of art in it indeed, and elements of science too, but it remains a game, a fight. And this game is strictly limited by time. And, since the game is limited by time, creative masterpieces at the board will be a random occurrence, a "pleasant surprise". If we want a non-random chess masterpiece, it should be created in conditions when you are not bound by time – in home analysis.



In a chess game, Time is one of three most important factors, together with Moves and Energy. Loss of control over time most often leads to defeat.

Almost every chess player (exceptions are rare) is inflicted by “time-trouble disease” from time to time. And everyone fights it as well as they can. Some fight it successfully, while others don’t and suffer from time trouble until old age.

I have studied this topic extensively because I’ve been suffering from time trouble for my whole life. I don’t want to jinx myself by saying that I am totally cured from that disease, but the situation has certainly improved. I can tell you what helped me and share the tips of my coaches and friends.

Time trouble is the absolute evil

You shouldn’t get to the point where you risk having insufficient time. Because then it will happen.

Time trouble is a sign of lack of chess culture, and if you can’t eradicate this altogether for some reason, at least try to reduce its frequency to some reasonable minimum.

– Lev Psakhis

I heard the following commandment from the same Lev Psakhis: “Time trouble is the absolute evil.” This phrase has a strong aura of mysticism, and that’s why I remembered it so well.

And, of course, **lack of culture**, yes.

Once upon a time, as any school kid knows, Wilhelm Steinitz came up with the criteria for evaluating chess positions: the position of the king, control of the center and space, pawn structure, piece activity, etc. Ever since that time, chess players haven’t managed to come up with anything new – the first world champion’s conclusions were so correct and complete. Coaches passed this knowledge onto their pupils, and it has been printed and reprinted in textbook after textbook.

However, another evaluation criterion has become important in the last few decades: time. No wonder – time is one of the greatest treasures in the life of any modern human. A clever chess coach will tell their pupil: the center, the king, the pieces, space... and time. And when the pupil enthusiastically tells them that they had a position “won twenty times over” (which they lost for some reason), an experienced coach will curb their enthusiasm with a single question, “How much time did you have left on the clock?”

The results of most games are decided in time trouble.



Your advert could be here, as they say. Or maybe anti-advert. I wanted to show some time-trouble blunders made by famous grandmasters here. But then I felt so bad for them! Let's omit the examples. Just take me on my word: even you wouldn't have blundered so badly, bwahahah!

Is it so hard to understand that time scrambles are pernicious? Why do people so insistently and voluntarily walk into this slaughter?

Because the reasons for “time-trouble disease” lie in the deep layers of the human psyche: their complexes, fears, illnesses, specific character traits... However, whereas normal, non-chess playing people eliminate their inner troubles with all possible seriousness – they consult with therapists, read books, do exercises – chess players prefer to turn a blind eye to their gluttony for time trouble.

Let's take chronic procrastinators, for instance. They get rid of this flaw with the help of psychologists and long, persistent self-improvement. But the “craving” for time trouble is often caused by the very same reasons as procrastination! You see? Common people get treatment, but chess players prefer for some reason to treat their problem as something that “will resolve itself”. It won't! It never does. So, if you do suffer from “time-trouble disease”, treat it with the utmost seriousness.

Do not confuse procrastination with simple laziness. A lazy person never regrets something they fail or neglect to do, that they wasted time, but a procrastinator feels incredibly guilty and always promises that this will be the very last time. But the same thing happens next time as well: they set a task, then waste an inordinate amount of time, which leads to more suffering and hand-wringing.

I'll leave a place here for a picture about procrastination, but I need to find a nice one. Well, they are all nice. OK, I'll put off this hard choice until later.

Below, I'll try to list all possible reasons for “time-trouble disease”, both deep and not so deep:

- Lack of self-confidence
- Lack of over-the-board practice
- Lack of self-discipline and willpower, the ability to get a grip on yourself only in extreme need
- Lack of culture of calculating lines (or discipline)
- Lack of chess knowledge
- Dependence on the opinions of others: your parents, coaches, fans. In time trouble, the player gets an “excuse” for their moves
- Addiction to adrenaline and time-trouble excitement, the desire to feel it again
- Bad habit of thinking when you don't need to
- Perfectionism, the constant search for “the ideal move”
- The need to enter the White state during the game because of a pathological desire to enjoy life and do nothing
- The desire to be an artist, not a player (which is tantamount to amateurism in modern chess), which makes one search for “the prettiest” continuation
- *Time trouble is characteristic of “heavy thinkers”, players with poorly developed intuition. (Mark Dvoretsky)*

Poor health, a lack of freshness, strong emotional pressure (for instance, because of the tournament situation) etc. – all these troubles are transitory. They can serve as the reason for time trouble in individual games, but they cannot cause “time-trouble disease”.

As a rule, chronic time-trouble addiction is caused by several reasons at once, and the problem is more difficult than it seems. In addition to serious daily chess training (which expands your knowledge and makes you more self-assured) and regular tournament play, serious work on psychological issues is necessary. And, of course, constant control of your inner state and time during the game, even when it seems that development of this skill (constant control) is detrimental to your results.

But the most important thing is that the player should truly want to kick the habit. Otherwise, it's useless.

As proof of this assertion, I'll show you the maxim by psychologist Mikhail Labkovsky which he uses to make people quit smoking (he'd been a smoker himself for 35 years):

How can you stop doing something that makes you happy, that you like?! It's impossible. It's possible in the short term, but then you'll regress to your previous state. For starters, you should definitely understand that the thing you are doing is evil, and you are a complete addict who got hooked on that rubbish. Only after you realize that can you quit smoking.

There are a lot of grandmasters who spend their entire life in time trouble; they try to kick the habit, but to no avail, because they seem to enjoy time scrambles. They play at a high enough level, but can't progress further. There's even a chess commandment:

You cannot become a great chess player if you're a time-trouble addict.

There's only one exception: Alexander Grischuk. Many say that if he didn't get into time trouble so much, he would have become world champion. Or, at the very least, permanently stayed in the top five – he's just that talented.

Since there are many reasons for "time-trouble disease", and several of them are usually combined in one and the same person, every "patient" should be considered separately. But in this book, I'll try to give some universal advice that can help many. Consider them recommendations for serious individual work.

Let's begin!

Play rapidly

When you are psyching yourself up to achieve a particular result, concentrate on the things that you want to achieve, not the things you want to leave behind. Tell yourself: "I'll be healthy" (instead of "I won't be ill"), "I'll be rich" (instead of "I'll get out of poverty"), "I'll be successful" (instead of "I'll stop being a loser"). Our brain is primitive and ancient like a dinosaur's jaw, it reacts only to the direct meaning of the word. Metaphors, hints, parallels, and other figures of speech are too difficult for it to comprehend.

The main advice is simple: play rapidly. Pay attention to the phrasing: not “avoid time trouble”, but “play rapidly”.

Let me remind you again about the precept of psychologists and various spiritual gurus: if you want to leave something behind or get cured of it, you shouldn't think about this problem or illness – you need to think about *what* you want to get *in exchange*. Let's remember our white monkey formula again:

You cannot stop thinking about a white monkey, but you can start thinking about a giraffe.

And the monkey will disappear on its own.

You want to quit smoking, drinking or overeating? Concentrate on a healthy lifestyle or a life goal. Forget about “quitting smoking, drinking and overeating”! Moreover, your entire lifestyle should be changed – since it is based on your bad habit. It's the same with time trouble. Don't think “My goal for today is to avoid a time scramble!” You'll get into time trouble for sure. Tell yourself instead, “I'm playing rapidly today, like in a rapid game.”

How do you play in rapid tournaments (say, 15 or 30 minutes per player per game)? You get a grip on yourself for the whole game and don't let yourself leave the table or relax. You should play a classical game in the same state. If you're a chronic time-trouble addict and try to play a classical game like a rapid one, you'll suddenly realize that you're still almost out of time! Nevertheless, if you do save some time, then spend it on moves 35 to 40 – the most important ones.

Remember this state and play like that every time. Do not relax. Think of yourself as a chess engine. It's constantly working. It gets switched on before the first move and switched off after the last one. No daydreaming, no “meditations”, no “There surely is a winning move!”

Give yourself permission to play rapidly

Our fears and complexes don't allow us to make the steps we want to make. We simply don't give ourselves permission to follow our intuition easily and joyfully. How should we improve the situation?

(1) Here's an experiment: forget about the result, make peace with the idea that you might lose, but make all decisions quickly and easily, following your inner voice.

(2) Look at the result.

(3) Feel the horror 😊