

# IMPROVE YOUR LIFE BY PLAYING A GAME

*Learn how to turn your life activities into lifelong skills!*

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First edition 2021 by Thinkers Publishing  
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All sales or enquiries should be directed to Thinkers Publishing, 9850 Landegem, Belgium.

Email: [info@thinkerspublishing.com](mailto:info@thinkerspublishing.com)  
Website: [www.thinkerspublishing.com](http://www.thinkerspublishing.com)

|                              |                              |
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| Managing Editor:             | Daniël Vanheirzeele          |
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| Proofreading:                | Danila Krivec, Bob Holliman  |
| Software:                    | Instatext                    |
| Cover Design:                | Bojana Fortuna               |
| Graphic Artist:              | Bojana Fortuna, Miran Krivec |
| Production:                  | BESTinGraphics               |

ISBN: 9789464201024  
D/2020/13730/43

# IMPROVE YOUR LIFE BY PLAYING A GAME

*Learn how to turn your life activities into lifelong skills!*

Jana Krivec

Thinkers Publishing 2021





*Written for all curious minds who never stop exploring.  
Dedicated to chess and to the people  
who made it possible for me to play chess.*

*You've made my life!*





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*"Chess is life in miniature."*

(Gary Kasparov, former World Chess Champion)

There are numerous similarities between playing a game of chess and living in the game of life. This book describes how psychological aspects that occur during chess playing or any other activity can be used to improve everyday life. Garry Kasparov writes, that self-awareness is essential in order to combine your knowledge, experience and talent and thus enable you to reach your peak performance (Kasparov, *How Life Imitates Chess*, 2007). He says that very few people ever take the opportunity to do this kind of analysis.

As an active chess player, woman grand master, doctor of psychology and university professor, I frequently monitor my thoughts, feelings and behaviour. In doing so I see that I combine experiences and insights I have gained in playing chess with my current academic work. Many times in my life I have realized that my behavior can be traced back to earlier experiences in chess. I have decided to write this book acknowledging and describing all the benefits that chess has brought to my life.  
**Chess has made me who I am!**

This book is partly designed as an autobiographical experience focusing on the processes that arise in the life of a chess player that have be translated into everyday life. In part, the book incorporates psychological theories that generally explain these processes, but overall it can be seen as a guide on how to use any activity to learn skills that will enrich your life. There are several activities in life which can be seen in the same way if we know where and how to exploit the opportunities. The truth is that all aspirations are interconnected when we keep an eye on the thematic links. I believe that this book will give you a new insight into how any ability can be transferred from a particular activity to the universal wisdom of life. It will awaken your networking skills and teach you how to turn life activities into lifelong skills that will improve your well-being.

The course of the book follows the typical process of playing chess, starting with training, followed by the tournament situation, the course of the game, the time after the game and the tournament. Since I am not a poet, I have often borrowed some quotations from famous, imaginative and clever people from all over the world. I believe that these valuable thoughts have enriched the book.

One thing I ask you to do while reading this book is to open your mind and enjoy the inner journey. So let us go and try to become aware of the processes behind our life activities. Let us find out what and why we do what we do in our daily lives.

## FOREWORD by Dr. Matej Guid

The process of acquiring chess skills and gaining a deep insight into the thinking of chess masters has always been an exciting topic. What are the special skills, talents and habits that distinguish great chess players from club players has long been the subject of intense discussion. Little scientific work has been devoted to this question, and there are practically no books that would combine knowledge of psychology and the development of strategic thinking skills in a textbook of high educational value. The greatest obstacle was that most psychologists who dealt with this question were not strong chess players themselves and therefore had no direct access to the mental processes of chess at the master level. On the other hand, it is also difficult to find first-class cognitive psychologists among the chess players. Dr. Jana Krivec is a unique exception to this rule: a strong chess player, a woman grandmaster with extensive experience in competitive chess, and a university professor in the field of cognitive psychology, who devoted most of her research to understanding cognitive processes in the minds of chess players.

The book *Improve Your Life by Playing a Game* takes us on an exciting journey through a wide range of topics from psychology and explains these topics by putting the reader in the role of a tournament chess player. Gaining a deeper understanding of the mind of a chess player during training, playing and analysing chess games suddenly takes on a different dimension when explained through the lens of modern psychology. Even non chess players can now deeply understand the famous quote that chess is life in miniature. Throughout the book life, chess and cognitive psychology are so intimately connected that the reader is given plenty of food for thought and valuable life lessons.

All this makes this book surprisingly interesting for a very diverse audience including:

- students of cognitive psychology who want to deepen their knowledge through case studies from real life
- students of business administration and economics who want to develop and strengthen their strategic thinking skills
- trainers and coaches in various sports (including chess, of course), who are aware that psychology plays a decisive role in every competition
- chess players who want to improve their game by better understanding the role of psychology on their way to mastery.

Finally, we should not forget all those curious readers who are constantly searching for ways to become true masters in the game of life.



Dr. Matej Guid  
(University professor and FIDE master)



**FOREWORD by Dr. Sonja Čotar Konrad**

The comprehensive scientific monograph *Improve Your Life by Playing a Game* by Dr. Jana Krivec brings new insights into the connection between psychological concepts and chess. She focuses in detail on various aspects of chess and combines them meaningfully with various aspects of the psychological functioning of an individual in daily life. It covers both cognitive and non-cognitive areas of human functioning. It combines the cognitive aspect of chess with an individual's ability to identify a problem and analyzes the ways and methods of searching for and evaluating the solutions. In doing so she illuminates the concept of decision making and the question of facing up to wrong decisions. The author originally relates the rules and required skills in chess to the non-cognitive characteristics of the individual. The correct handling of emotions in solving problems and possibly wrong decisions is only one of the personality traits she considers to be extremely important for (chess) success in life. The author adds that a successful person (and chess player) is certainly characterized by a high degree of self-reflection, perseverance in overcoming obstacles and achieving their goals. However, the latter are not only set in form of learned techniques and strategies, but they conceal within themselves a curious individual who is always searching for the meaning of his work. In this scientific monograph, Dr. Jana Krivec, a psychologist and women's chess grandmaster clarifies new insights and presents them in a new way for the psychological field. The monograph thus represents an important milestone for various applied aspects of psychological knowledge (e.g. pedagogy, clinical psychology) and provides new insights for the professional and lay public.



Dr. Sonja Čotar Konrad  
(University professor of psychology)

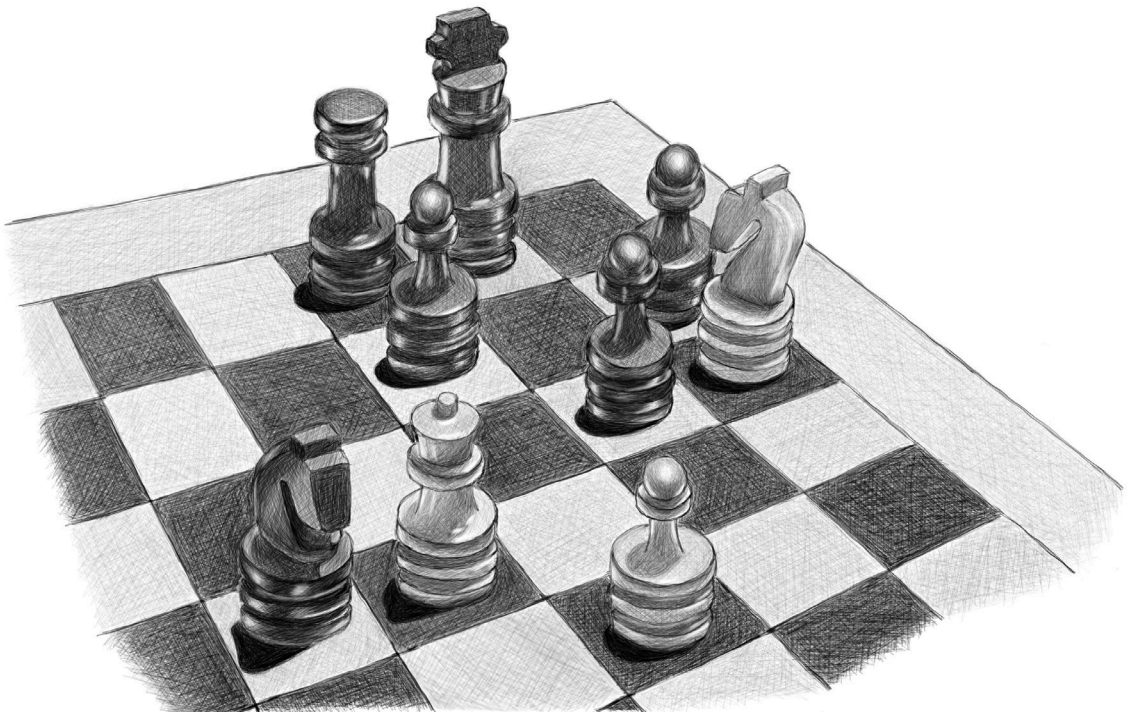


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*It seems like a quiet place...*



*...but its just the tip of an iceberg in the rough sea.*





*"The roots of education are bitter but the fruit is sweet."*

Aristotle





# 1. TRAINING

*"Sixty days a year I play in tournaments, five days I rest and 300 days I work on my game."*

(Akiba Rubinstein, chess player)

## Chapter summary

- When starting an activity properly set a goal.
- When setting goals follow SMART model.
- Find your active values, develop your internal motivation and need for achievement.
- Self-examination leads to improved performance.
- Talent is developed by hard work, discipline and persistence.
- Use modelling and positive comparison with successful people.
- Understand and master your memory.
- Find patterns in the information you receive.
- Let AI and modern technology be your friend not your enemy.
- Learn how to delay the gratification of your work.
- Don't be too cocky too soon and remember the Dunning Kruger effect.
- Never give up on exploring new things even if the results are not seen instantly, they will inevitably appear.

Typically, chess training consists of learning chess openings, solving chess problems in order to become familiar with different motifs, analyzing games of top grandmasters, and learning endgames. During the training process a chess player has to go through several different phases of his development. Some of these phases improve his knowledge while others focus on personal growth. Garry Kasparov stressed how important it is for your future to understand and use your past, to learn things for your future life.

In life, as in chess, you have to be practically productive. Without pain nothing is gained - or better said, nothing is achieved without goals, focus, motivation, intelligent learning and personal growth. All this leads to the development of your own personality and to the right foundations for a successful and fulfilled life. Let us take a look at the skills that develop during chess training.

*"A strong memory, concentration, imagination, and a strong will is required to become a great Chess player"*

(Bobby Fischer, former World Chess Champion)



## 1.1 GOAL SETTING

*"Great minds have purposes, others have wishes."*

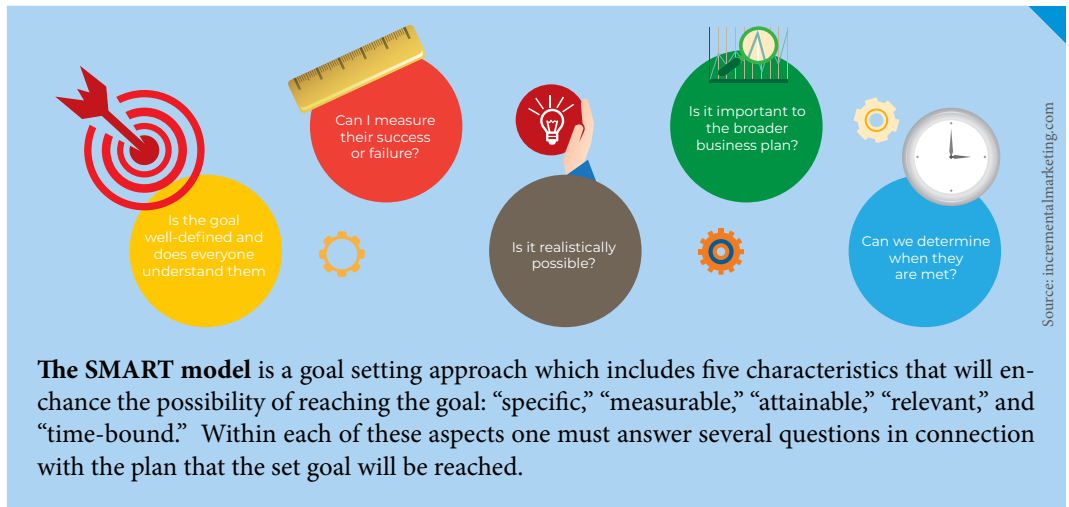
(Washington Irving, American author)

### Key takeaways

- Always define your goal
- A specific goal enhances your motivation
- Your goal should not be too easy or hard
- Follow the SMART model

When we begin to get seriously involved in an activity we must set ourselves the goals we want to achieve. Goals give us purpose and motivation to train. A clear goal keeps us on a defined path where we are less likely to be distracted. Of course they can change during a career, but at every stage they must be set correctly and motivate a person.

Not every goal deserves a name. Let's say we have a goal: *"I want to be happy"*. This is an overly broad objective that does not fulfil any of the above mentioned functions of goal setting.



When defining goals, it is advisable to follow a known SMART model. The SMART model guides you through the following steps of goal definition:

## Specific

When you set a goal it is very important to define the content precisely. Ask yourself the following questions: “*What exactly do I want to achieve? What are the conditions and limitations? Who is involved in the plan? How and where will the activities be carried out?*” Identify requirements and constraints. For example, a general goal would be: “*Get in shape*”. A specific goal would be: “*Join a gym and train 3 days a week.*” When you set goals, also include your creativity. For example, success does not always mean winning a game or a tournament, but it could be playing well, fighting, playing a new opening, managing time properly, etc.

## Measurable

Measurable goals mean that you determine exactly what you will see, hear and feel when you reach your goal. Establish concrete criteria to measure progress towards each goal you set. This means that you break down your goal into measurable elements that produce concrete evidence. Being happier is too general. Better would be to define what “*being happier*” means, for example: “*I will have predominantly positive thoughts during the course of a day, other people will notice that I smile more often, I will be more energetic and therefore engage in more daily activities, my close relationships will be more satisfying, I will get involved in fewer arguments, etc.*”. Ask yourself questions like “*How much? How many? How do I know when it will be done?*” Measured results give us a kind of feedback: it is important that we receive feedback. This way we know whether we are going in the right direction and reduce/eliminate errors. This encourages us to continue the fight for the ultimate goal. The feedback must be objective, positive and concrete.

## Achievable

Goals should always be within the scope of your own abilities. If I set myself the goal of becoming World Chess Champion, it would exceed my possibilities to achieve it. Similarly, it would not be right for me to set myself the goal of winning at least one game in a tournament if I could win more. If your goal is realistic, with hard work and determination, you should be able to achieve it.



*“When I play, I always have goals that I know I can achieve. However, I am aware that something might surprise me. Already at the beginning of the game I think about which endgame structures I want. Then I choose the opening strategy that gets me there most likely. If my opponent is making a counterattack or has a skillful defense, in most cases I’ve already considered it, studied it in similar historical games, and created my own response.”*

Susan Polgar, former Women’s World Chess Champion

Photo: Lennart Ootes

You should recognize the difference between focusing on realistic goals (e.g. winning the game) and the forces that could dissuade you from your goal (e.g. too strong of an opponent, unfamiliar opening). Even if you cannot fully predict the future or do not know whether unexpected obstacles will arise, it is still possible to assess whether your goals are reasonably achievable or whether the obstacles preventing you from achieving them are simply too high. When formulating realistic goals, you should not forget to think about the possible contingencies and how to deal with the possible obstacles.

There is a reason why people set their goals too high or too low - low self-esteem and low self-efficiency. If I set myself a goal that is extremely easy to achieve, my self-esteem is safe. In a way my self-esteem is also safe when the goal is almost impossible to achieve such as *"I want to be a world champion"*. We often hear people say: *"Well, I'll try, I have nothing to lose"*. However, if I set myself a goal that is achievable but still not so easy to reach, I might succeed or fail. In the latter case, my self-esteem will suffer. If it is already low, we could have a problem. When we set goals that we never or always achieve, we have to ask ourselves about the reasons and challenge our self-worthiness. Tafarodi and Swan (2001) claim that there are two concepts behind self-worthiness, namely the feeling of being competent and the feeling of being accepted (by other people). I agree that the threats come from these two directions. Whether we fear that we are not loved/accepted by society or that we feel powerless. Marisa Peer propagates the statement *"I am enough"*. It refers to numerous potential dangers of the self-thought *"I am not enough"*. Not being worth enough is definitely something we want to avoid, and if that feeling is too intense it can also affect goal setting. Remember that goals should always be a challenge, not a threat! You are (good) enough and the action that lies ahead of you will not change that. Here it helps to seek external advice whether from a friend, family member or professional advisor. Make sure that you distinguish between a realistic goal and a wish.

### **Relevant**

Why do you want to achieve this goal? Will the achievement of the goal meet your expectations? What is the objective behind the goal and will this goal really achieve it? I could imagine that winning a particular game will change my chess career, but will it really? Understand why the goal is important for you. Will it bring you financial benefits, will you do it to become famous and respected, or will you be fulfilled because you have mastered the special chess technique?

### **Timely**

A goal should be grounded within a certain time frame. With no time frame involved, there is no sense of urgency. If you want to lose 10 kg, by when do you want to lose them? *"Someday"* won't work. However, if you anchor it within a time frame, *"by May 1st"*, then you have set your subconscious mind in motion to work towards the goal. It is all the more important to set goals at a time when a person has a full schedule. After all, a day has 24 hours, and if you want to do many things, you have no time to daydream, procrastinate and waste time. The schedule forces us to reserve time during the day for each activity. If there is a time frame, it is easier to fill it with actions just as it is easier to draw a picture when you already have a sketch.

SMART goal setting can be used in all aspects of life. From founding a company to refining existing processes; from finding the perfect partner to staying together. It brings clarity to your plans and gives you energy to achieve your goals.

Table 1. An example of time management for 1 day.

|             | Day 1 - content   | Checking the results  | Threats  | Solutions  |
|-------------|---|---|--|--|
| 8:00-9:00   | Wake up, breakfast  |   |  |  |
| 9:00-10:00  | Working on openings<br>– Caro Kann: check the last world class tournament | Analyzed at least 10 games from the last tournaments from the strongest players | I cannot find this opening / many games are from blitz | Search for older tournament / additional analysis with computer or trainer |
| 10:00-10:15 | Break   |   |  |  |
| 10:15-13:00 | Working on openings<br>– Caro Kann computer analysis                      |   | Loss of motivation                                     | Play a “game” where you compete with computer on guessing the moves        |
| 13:00-14:00 | Lunch   |   |  |  |
| 14:00-14:30 | Coffee Break  |   |  |  |
| 14:30-16:00 | Playing a match with my coach   | Played 10 blitz games   |  |  |
| 16:00-19:00 | Free  |   |  |  |
| 19:00-20:30 | Jogging with my gym trainer   | 10 km ran   | Tiredness  | Motivate yourself with positive techniques. Once a week a small award      |
| 20:30-24:00 | Free  |   |  |  |
| 24:00:00    | Sleep   |   | Ruminating the chess openings                          | Use of relaxation techniques   |

### A minute for self-reflection

Define one of your goals following the SMART model.



## 1.2 MOTIVATION

*"Nothing is easy to the unwilling."*

(Gaelic)

### Key takeaways

- Develop your internal motivation and need for achievement
- Find your active values
- Sources of motivation change through life

Setting goals is closely linked to motivation. If a person is not motivated, any task can be a burden and the question of dropping it is in the air. Therefore, it is important to be motivated in all phases and aspects of our activities, e.g. training, playing, etc. "To be motivated" is easy to say, but finding motivation is not always an easy task.



*"It is important to train in small doses in order not to lose the joy of playing chess."*

Viswanathan Anand, former World Chess Champion

Photo: Jos Suttmuller

When you try to motivate yourself, it is important to first identify **what motivates you**. In sports, in chess or in life you can strive for different things. Theories define several possible motives that determine your behavior.



*“I am not competitive at all. Even now, if I play tennis or football, I don’t care about losing. I enjoy the process, and it doesn’t make any difference if I win or lose. Instead, I just have this permanent will to become better and improve, and I think that this actually leads to a greater motivation than if I were fixated on the results. If you really like what you do and you enjoy the process, then that gives you a driving force to keep working at it, even when things are stressful.”*

Vladimir Kramnik, former World Chess Champion

Photo: Lennart Ootes

**Need for achievement** (N-Ach) refers to an individual’s desire for significant accomplishment, mastering of skills, control, or high standards. N-Ach enhance intense, prolonged and repeated efforts to accomplish something difficult. It is an indicator failure of work with singleness of purpose towards a high and distant goal. It shows the determination to win. People high in N-Ach are characterized by a tendency to seek challenges and a high degree of independence. Their most satisfying reward is the recognition of their achievements.

Some people are motivated by success and achievement which is important both in chess and in life. Henry Murray (1938) defined this characteristic as the need for achievement (N-Ach). It refers to an individual’s desire for significant accomplishment, mastery of skills, control or high standards. People with a higher need for achievement will set goals that are difficult but not impossible to achieve. They love tasks that differentiate people.

Those with a low N-Ach, on the other hand, choose very simple tasks to minimize the risk of failure or very difficult tasks so that a failure would not be embarrassing. People with a high N-Ach are characterized by a tendency to seek challenges and a high degree of independence. Their most satisfying reward is the recognition of their achievements. The sources of high N-Ach include: parents who have fostered independence in childhood, praise and appreciation for success, linking achievement with positive feelings, linking achievement with one’s own competence and effort (not luck), desire to be effective or challenged, intrapersonal strength, desirability, feasibility and goal setting abilities. All these are qualities that are desirable in competitive environments such as sport or work.

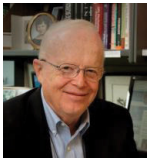


According to McClelland (1958), there are **two types of motivation: internal and external**. Internal motivation is derived from within a person, personal motives and values. Externally motivated people carry out an activity only to receive rewards or avoid punishment. External motivation may be helpful at some point, but in the long run you need to base your motivation on internal motives and values.

Some studies have shown that offering excessive external rewards for already internally rewarding behaviour can lead to a reduction in intrinsic motivation, a phenomenon known as the over justification effect. In one study children who had already shown interest in playing with a toy were rewarded for playing with it. They became less interested in the object after being rewarded externally. However, unexpected external rewards do not usually reduce intrinsic motivation.

### Leaning mostly on internal motivation you will:

- experience fewer motivational fluctuations,
- be less likely distracted,
- be more forgiving of your own mistakes,
- be more focused on learning and improving,
- become more confident and self-sufficient,
- feel greater satisfaction in your achievements.



*“A person’s interest often survives when a reward is used neither for bribery nor for control, but as a signal of a job well done, such as a “most improved player award”. If a reward increases your sense of competence after good work, your enjoyment of the task can increase. Rewards that are administered correctly can motivate people to achieve maximum performance and creativity.”*

David G. Meyers, 2004,  
Professor of Psychology at Hope College, Holland, Michigan US.

There are theories that focus on how a task can be designed to be highly motivating for the individual. Vroom’s expectancy theory assumes that behavior results from conscious choices among alternatives whose purpose is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain (Yourcoach, 2020). It assumes that motivation will be higher if:

- a person expects that the more effort he puts into the activity the better the results will be (so called *Expectancy*)
- a person believes that the particular activity will lead to the desired goal (so called *Instrumentality*)
- a goal will satisfy a persons need (so called *Valency*): if someone is mainly motivated by money, for example, he will not appreciate the offer of an additional holiday.

It is advisable to consider these three components when organizing tasks and work if we want a person to be motivated to fulfill them.