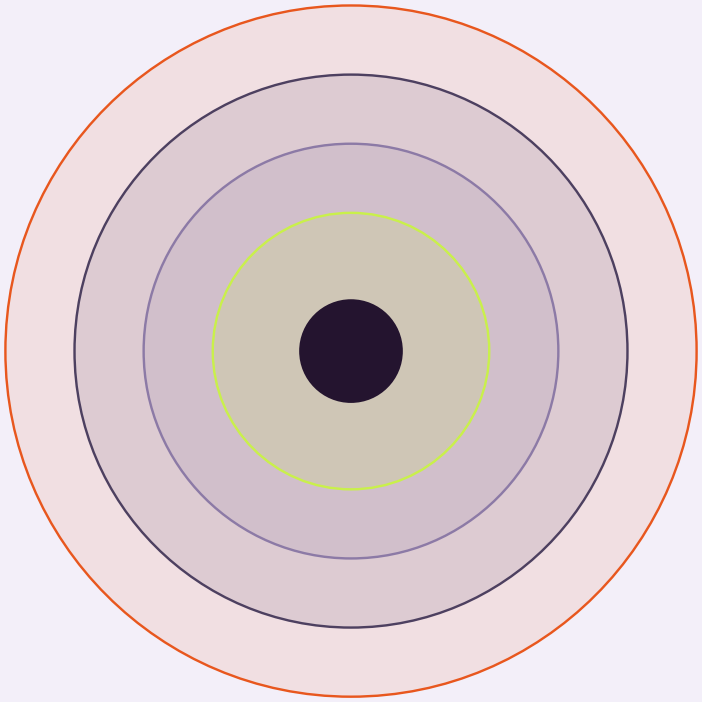


Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst

A reading of the book by Robert M. Sapolsky (2017)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Robert M. Sapolsky is a professor of biology and neurology at Stanford University who spent decades studying wild baboons in Kenya. Behave asks why people do what they do, from violence to kindness, and argues that no single cause, whether a gene, a hormone or an upbringing, can answer it. Its main framework takes one act and steps back in time: the brain one second before, sensory cues seconds to minutes before, hormones hours to days before, then brain change over months, adolescence, childhood and the womb, genes, culture and evolution. The later chapters turn that lens on us-versus-them thinking, hierarchy, morality, empathy, punishment and free will. It mixes lab studies with stories from primatology and history, and carries a lot of footnotes and jokes.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

One act has causes on every timescale at once, from a neuron firing a second ago to selection over millions of years.

This is the book's spine. Each early chapter steps further back from the same moment: the brain, then sensory cues, hormones, months of brain change, adolescence, childhood and the womb, genes, culture and evolution. No level wins, and you cannot explain the act while ignoring any of them.

2 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The frontal cortex is the part of you that does the harder thing when it is the right thing, and it is the last part of the brain to finish developing.

Sapolsky gives adolescence a chapter of its own because the frontal cortex is not fully wired until about the mid-twenties. That helps explain why teenagers take more risks, especially in front of peers. It also means the region doing the most self-control work is the one most shaped by experience.

3 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Testosterone does not create aggression so much as turn up whatever earns status in your setting.

The book reviews studies where testosterone mostly amplified tendencies people already had. Sapolsky's argument follows from that: in a group where standing came from generosity, the hormone would push people toward generosity. The setting decides what the chemistry pushes for.

4 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Oxytocin makes us warmer to our own people, not to everyone.

The hormone helps bond parents, children and partners. The book shows its other edge: in studies it can also sharpen preference for the in-group and wariness of outsiders. Warmth and tribalism can come from the same chemistry.

5 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

We sort people into Us and Them in a fraction of a second, but who counts as Them shifts easily.

The brain reacts to markers of group difference almost at once. Yet people will favour a group formed on a trivial basis, and a shared category, such as backing the same team, can soften the reaction. The sorting is automatic; the categories are not fixed.

6 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Genes are about potential and vulnerability in a given environment, not about destiny.

Sapolsky takes apart the idea that a single gene drives a behaviour. Most effects are small, and many show up only in certain settings: a gene variant linked to aggression seems to matter mostly in people who were abused as children. Ask what a gene does, and in which environment.

7 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

How your ancestors fed themselves still echoes in how you handle insult and obligation.

The culture chapter contrasts collectivist and individualist societies, and herding peoples with farming ones. Where a herd can be stolen in a night, cultures of honour tend to grow, with fast retaliation for insults. The book traces echoes of this in places such as the American South.

8 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The brain reuses old wiring for new jobs, so moral disgust can feel like smelling something rotten.

The insula reacts to spoiled food and also to acts we find morally wrong. Sapolsky argues this is why metaphors matter so much: calling a group vermin or filth recruits that gut reaction. Language that makes people feel physically sick of other people is doing biological work.

9 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Seeing behaviour as caused does not excuse it, but it should change how we think about blame.

In the chapter on justice and free will, Sapolsky points out that seizures were once blamed on possession or sin. He argues that more of what we now pin on character may one day look the same way. Keeping people safe from harm still matters; punishment as payback makes less sense.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Rewind one act you regret
- [ ] Name your one-second-before states
- [ ] Move hard talks out of bad hours
- [ ] Change one cue around you
- [ ] Find a shared Us with one of your Thems

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Ask what happened an hour ago
- ◯ Give three causes before one
- ◯ Catch the disgust words

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Rewind one act you regret

Pick something you did this month that you wish you hadn't.

Walk it back through the nine timescales on this page and write one line at each step.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Name your one-second-before states

List the three body states in which you most often say or do something you regret, such as hungry, short on sleep or rushed.

Keep the list where you will see it.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Move hard talks out of bad hours

Look at the week ahead.

Move any difficult conversation or big decision away from the times you are usually tired, hungry or rushed.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Change one cue around you

Pick one cue that comes in the minutes before an act you want less of, such as a news feed before bed or a phone on the dinner table.

Remove it or move it this week.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Find a shared Us with one of your Thems

Write down one person you tend to file as Them.

List two groups you both belong to, such as parents, a city, a team or a trade, and lead with one of them next time you talk.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Ask what happened an hour ago

When someone snaps at you, ask yourself what their last hour or day might have held before you decide what kind of person they are.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Give three causes before one

Before you settle on a single reason for your own or someone else's act, name three causes at three different timescales.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Catch the disgust words

When you read or say words like filth, vermin or plague about people, stop and rephrase.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
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December 2026

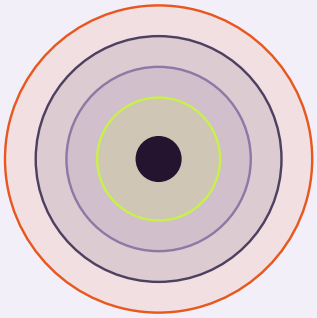
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Every act is one second old and a million years old at the same time.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER ROBERT SAPOLSKY