

THE FRESHLY SINGLE MAN'S  
GUIDE TO HOUSEHOLD SURVIVAL

*(How to Become a Single Man in a Woman's World)*

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By Jeff Bruner

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## INTRODUCTION

I have coined the term “Freshly Single Man” to include any man who finds himself on his own for the first time. In that regard, there are different ways to wind up freshly single: moving away from home for the first time, divorcing or losing a spouse. In my case, two and a half years before I started writing this book, my wife of 25 years died of brain cancer. I say “died,” not “passed away” or “passed.” Those terms are meant as euphemisms to try to make the survivors feel better about the event. She died, with all of the finality and grief that death could possibly bring. I have two sons, who were 14 and 18 years old when she died.

I came from a family of three boys and a stay-at-home mother. I guess that they used to call these mothers “homemakers.” What it meant for me, my two older brothers and my father was that we always had someone to take care of us. Breakfast was always waiting for me when I got up. I always had a lunch packed for me with two sandwiches and a precise number of fruit pieces (always 12 cherries), and a hot dinner on the table at 5:00 sharp. My clothes were always washed, pressed and hanging in my closet or folded in my drawers. When I was sick, there was always someone there to give me the correct dosage of the most effective medicine. The house was always immaculately clean. Sure, I had to pick my room up (by this I mean occasionally pick clothes up off of the floor so that my mother could vacuum), but everything inside the house was Mom’s responsibility. As a result, I learned nothing about household chores! In fact, the few times that I worked up the courage to touch one of the major appliances, I was sternly warned of the consequences that might ensue from pushing the wrong button or turning the wrong dial. There was always my father’s

story of “I remember one time I ...” that ended with “it cost ... to fix it.” Not only did I learn that my father, brothers and I should perform more “manly tasks” outside, such as mowing the lawn, but I became scared to death of what havoc I might cause by “crossing the line” and performing a household task.

After college and graduate school, I was married to a wonderful woman of Polish descent. We met in law school. As far as I can tell, her upbringing was very much the same as mine (except for the weird dishes that her mother made on holidays) in that she and her mother did inside things and her father and brother did outside things. However, my wife came from a different generation than her parents did. She was educated and career minded! After we were married, we moved to Houston, where we both practiced law for eight years. During that period of time, new generation or not, we both fell into the same pattern as our parents. She did all things inside the house and I did all things outside the house. Added to her inside duties was bill paying. After all, bills are opened and checks paid at the kitchen table, last time I checked, inside. As a result, I learned nothing about household chores!

After eight years in Houston, we had our first child and I lost my job, right in the middle of a horrible economic downturn in the Houston economy. After many months, I finally found a job in Connecticut, but we had a very tough choice with respect to my wife’s career. Should we stay in Houston where she had a good job in a law firm but where I had no job, or should we move to Connecticut? My new job won out. The consolation to my wife was that she could stay at home and raise our new son. We were now in exactly the same family pattern as we had both been raised in. I worked and did everything outside the house; she raised our son and did everything inside the house.

As the years passed, we had a second son. Both were raised in the same inside/outside family mentality. In fact, we lived in a suburban neighborhood, where nearly everyone else did the same. It is true that mothers as well as fathers were well educated, but most mothers made the choice to be what is now called “stay-at-home moms,” at least until their children were raised and off to college. So for another 20 years, I learned nothing about household chores!

And then, my wife was diagnosed with brain cancer. It goes without saying that I was shattered emotionally. But, more importantly for the purposes of this book, I was terrified beyond belief. I woke up at night in a full sweat wondering how I would survive and raise my two sons.

My wife had many girlfriends and they were all full of ideas on how to help, mostly involving psychotherapy for me, a nanny for the kids, a cook and a cleaning service. I was not feeling good about where I was, and more importantly, I was not willing to admit to myself or to my kids that I was totally helpless. And so began my journey toward self-sufficiency.

I began by asking questions of friends. Two things immediately became apparent to me: you can’t ask men because they generally don’t know, and women think very differently than men when it comes to household chores. I make this last statement with no thought of sexism. It is not that this difference in thought process makes one sex better or worse or weaker or stronger, it is just different. For example, when I would ask my wife’s girlfriends about doing laundry, they would ask several questions as to the type of material that I was washing, the color, whether the washing machine has certain cycles, etc. I then got a long, complex answer on the appropriate soap, cycle and drying technique that I should use. I, and I am convinced the majority of men, just do not think this way. I think in generalizations. I start with, “I have a big pile of dirty, smelly underwear and I want to know how to get this big pile reasonably clean, odor free and in my closet as quickly as possible.” Granted, I may end up using the exact same soap, cycle and drying technique as women might suggest, but my thought process in getting there will be significantly different. There is no better example of this than cooking. While women can fastidiously follow precise recipe instructions, I have never known a man that follows a recipe. You throw a steak on the grill and you cook it until it is done. You might have some idea of how long this process is likely to take, but it is done when it is done, and you just know when it is done.

When I first came to suspect this difference in approach, I asked myself whether it might be only me and my stunted upbringing. Surely, other men helped their mothers around the house growing up and, as a

result, learned to think of household chores in the same way that their mothers did. I must have been the only man that didn't know anything and couldn't get anything right around the house. I was certainly told this by my mother, as well as by my wife. I tested my theory. I was recently at a neighborhood block party. While there were several couples at the party, there were two men who had also lost their wives and who had gone through the same learning process that I had in order to cope with household chores. It was remarkable how similar their description of this process was to mine. They also had to learn from generalizations rather than from specifics. In fact, many of the wives that were present further confirmed that "they just can't teach their husbands to do anything around the house."

Back to my journey. I learned the hard way. I asked a few questions, but mostly, I experimented. As a result, I made mistakes: a few shirts that now will only fit the dog, a few hideously burnt meals, and a few late bills. But I learned. Slowly but surely I learned. In the middle of this process I asked myself why someone hadn't put all of this together in writing. It would have saved me a lot of trouble. And it dawned on me that they had, but the material out there was put together mostly by women for women. Think Martha Stewart. There was nothing that I could find written to teach men how to survive around the house.

So what is the significance of this difference in the man/woman thought process? It means that men must be taught differently when it comes to learning how to survive at home. It means that I will not teach you to do laundry by laying out a long list of questions to ask yourself before you wash your pile of underwear. I will start out with "you have a big pile of dirty, smelly underwear, let's get them clean, odor free and in the closet so you can go play golf." It means that I will not provide you with a bunch of recipes, but rather I will teach you to cook certain basic foods in certain ways that you can then decide to alter to your taste by experimenting and throwing in a few extra spices or ingredients. It means that I will teach you to run your home like a man!

Relax, you can do this.

I have written this book so that each chapter can be read independently, without having to read it from cover to cover. In other words, if your immediate problem is how to cook dinner, feel free to go directly to Chapter 2. Having said this, I encourage you to read the entire book, at some point, to fully appreciate all that it has to offer.

## CHAPTER 1

# SOME BASIC RULES

(Just remember, you have to f--- up pretty bad to cause permanent damage)

I was sitting down one day having lunch with my son, who was home on break from college. I was feeling a little smug about my mastery of some major appliance and let my son know so. His response, in a rather smart ass voice, was that he, too, had mastered that appliance at school and that what he had learned was that “you have to f--- up pretty bad to cause permanent damage” to that particular appliance. I thought about this for a moment and realized that he was exactly right. Throughout my childhood and early adult life, I was taught that you never mess with major household appliances. This myth was likely born from the fact that early appliances were much more susceptible to major problems. Although they were built like tanks, they were controlled by mechanical switches that did not fare well if used incorrectly. For example, I remember my mother’s dishwasher was controlled by a mechanical dial. You had to turn the dial clockwise to the correct spot and pull it out to start the dishwashing process. One thing that you never did was turn the dial counter clockwise. To do so was to put the machine in a dishwashing never-never land that, at best, ended up requiring not only a completion of that washing cycle, but a rewashing to reset the mechanism.

No more! Modern major household appliances have benefited from the electronics revolution. They are incredibly durable. As a result, it is

really hard to f--- them up. So, **Rule 1: If you make a mistake, you are still alright.** You can still reset that dishwasher.

What follows in this chapter is a list of some additional basic rules for you to remember in order to make your life a little easier.

**Rule 2: There is no magic to household chores.** Time after time I have been shopping in the grocery store when I have seen men on their cell phones with their wives, girlfriends, or (hopefully not) their mothers. They have two boxes of something and they are nervously asking which one they should buy. Come on! There is no magic here. Whether you get the generic store brand or the more expensive name brand is of very little consequence. Likewise, whether you buy spaghetti noodles or angel hair pasta is really not going to matter much; one is just a little fatter than the other. They both taste the same and are made of the same basic ingredients. If you get the spaghetti (the thicker noodles) and don't like it, get the thinner noodles (angel hair) the next time. Just make a choice and stick with it.

**Rule 3: Read a few directions, but don't overanalyze.** My son and I were putting together a Christmas toy one year. We were struggling to figure out which pieces went where. I suggested to him that perhaps we should read the directions. His response was “No, I am more of a hands-on guy.” I think that in general, men tend to be more “hands on.” They are not big on reading an English translation of a set of directions that was originally written in Chinese. For the most part that is alright. I am a firm believer that if you are in the least bit mechanically inclined, you can figure most things out without directions, and that directions can become nothing more than a source of frustration. However, every man has his limits. There comes a time when you have to read directions. For example, as you will learn in Chapter 5, it is essential to read clothing labels to determine the appropriate washing cycles and temperatures. On the other hand, don't stress about reading every direction for every action you take. It is not necessary to read the entire washing machine manual.

**Rule 4: If you have a choice and don't know the answer, pick “normal” or “medium.”** The first time that I faced the dishwasher, I was horrified by all of the buttons. There were buttons labeled “pots,” “heavy duty,” “rinse and hold,” “light,” “normal” and “start.” My God,

all I wanted to do was wash a load of dishes. I had no time to try to find the dishwasher manual and decipher what all of these buttons did. I made the decision then and there that “normal” was the way to go. I hit “normal” and then “start.” Everything worked out fine. I have found that all of the other buttons on the dishwasher are useless for my purposes. I don't need them. They are clutter. For the most part, the same is true with other appliances. Stick to the buttons labeled “normal” or “medium” and 99% of the time you will be just fine.

**Rule 5: You have to keep things clean to keep from getting sick.** When you are on your own, it is extremely easy to get sloppy. When you have a million things to do after working all day and fixing dinner, washing the dishes does not seem all that exciting before helping one of the kids with homework. Do not let yourself go down that road! It is important both physically and emotionally to keep a clean house. It is important physically because filth breeds germs, and germs breed sickness. Believe me, the last thing that you need is to be doing all of your household chores when you are as sick as a dog. A little bit of prevention (cleanliness) goes a long way. It is also important to keep a clean house from an emotional standpoint. Being independent is all about never giving in to that downhill slide. Letting your house get sloppy is like starting a snowball down a hill; it picks up size and speed as it rolls until it buries you. Don't get buried!

**Rule 6: You have to eat right to feel right.** There was a documentary a while back about a guy who ate nothing but fast food from a fast food chain not to be named (but beginning with a “Mc”) for one month. According to the news report, “A few days into his grand experiment of eating all [Mcs], all the time, for 30 days straight, the New York filmmaker Morgan Spurlock started complaining of headaches and other unpleasant side effects: listlessness, depression, chest pains, shortness of breath, sexual dysfunction and more.”<sup>1</sup> The point here is that you have to eat healthy food at reasonable intervals to stay healthy and to feel human. But, that is not hard to do (I will show how in Chapter 2), and it is much cheaper than going the fast food route.

<sup>1</sup> [The Independent](http://TheIndependent.com), June 19, 2004 ([www.independent.co.uk/.../the-man-who-ate-McDonalds-acirc6167](http://www.independent.co.uk/.../the-man-who-ate-McDonalds-acirc6167)).

That is not to say that fast food does not have its place. We all need a greasy burger now and then to protect our manhood, but don't overdo it (sexual dysfunction sounds pretty nasty). Fast food is for emergencies (you have absolutely no time to cook a meal) or that occasional indulgence. It is not a staple.

**Rule 7: Focus on the big stuff, but don't let the little stuff become big stuff.** I discovered early on that surviving in the house is like surviving any other major undertaking: there are a ton of tasks that have to be completed and decisions that have to be made each and every day. But, thank God, not every task or decision is of equal importance. Therein lies our strategy.

I was in the emergency room of Bridgeport Hospital in Connecticut on a Saturday night (another long story related to my eldest son). For any of you not familiar with this hospital or this area of Connecticut, there is a tremendous amount of action on a Saturday night. That night there was the usual lineup of drug addicts trying to talk the doctors into writing them prescriptions for Percocet (I cannot imagine that this ever works, but apparently the doctors have to examine them before telling them to go home), a few cut hands and a multiple knife wound victim. Now, an emergency room does not work like a deli. You do not take a number to ensure first come, first served priority. Each patient is quickly evaluated or triaged. The triage process involves a quick assessment of the injury and an ordering from first to last based on the seriousness of the injury. This process works well to allocate a limited number of resources (emergency room doctors) to a potentially limitless demand (patients).

What does this emergency room experience have to do with surviving around the house? When you are thrown into the experience of keeping a household, you will suddenly have a seemingly limitless number of tasks and decisions that need to be addressed on a daily basis. Take a lesson from the emergency room: triage. Look at the issues, assess which are the most important, and determine an appropriate order of attack, beginning with the most significant and ending with the little, trivial stuff. While you are attacking each problem, focus on that problem, just as the emergency room doctor is focusing exclusively on stitching up the knife wounds before he moves his attention to the

cut hands (we will discuss an exception to this single focus rule when we discuss multitasking in Chapter 7). Now, this is not to say that the cut hands can be ignored (or for that matter the junkies). Ignoring any problem, even the smallest, will more times than not result in a small problem becoming bigger. Using the emergency room analogy once more, the cut hands will eventually lead to blood loss or infection issues. But, using the triage method in the emergency room as well as in dealing with household issues provides a useful way of addressing each issue in a logical order without becoming overwhelmed with worry as the issues begin to pile up. So, when grease is burning in a frying pan on the stove, and your kid comes in and tells you that the dog just had an accident in the living room, grab a lid and extinguish the fire before going for the shovel.

**Rule 8: Establishing a routine is the way to save time.** I have found that the majority, if not entirety, of household chores are simple, boring and extremely repetitive. Each week the laundry needs to be washed, the plants watered, the trash taken out, the bills reviewed . . . But the repetitive nature of these tasks is what makes it easy to put them into a routine, sort of like putting them on auto pilot. This not only makes it easier to remember to do each of the tasks, but more importantly, it makes doing them far less time-consuming. For example, I know that Thursday morning the trash man picks up the trash. So, I know that every Wednesday night all of the trash has to be collected and to the curb. I have decided that every Thursday night I will water the house plants. Friday night I collect all of the laundry. Saturday morning I go over the bills and start the wash. In most cases it does not matter when I perform each task, but rather that I have developed a routine to perform each task more or less at the same time on the same day of each week. Now, I often ski on the weekends. I obviously can't be doing the wash or the bills. The routine has to be flexible enough to accommodate disruption. So, if I know that I will be skiing, I move up some of the weekend tasks and catch the rest up when I get home. But I get back on schedule. We will discuss this more in Chapter 7.



## CHAPTER 2

# COOKING AND KITCHEN SURVIVAL

(You, not the bacteria)

There is nothing more intimidating than facing the kitchen for the first time. Sure, we men have grilled a few steaks and rinsed a dish or two before putting them in the dishwasher, but that hardly qualifies us for what lies ahead! Grow a pair. You will do just fine. Let's break it down and attack.

### Supplies that You Will Need

First, I am assuming that you have a stove with an oven, sink, microwave oven and refrigerator. If you don't, man, you need to think about moving to a place that does! The following is a basic list of additional things that you will need to get started in the kitchen. Each of these items can be purchased at any home goods store or department store. The food-related items, such as salt and pepper, can be purchased at a grocery store. You might consider joining one of the "big box" stores like BJ's or Sam's, particularly if you are cooking for a family. The prices are generally cheaper. You can get more creative with the items below as you gain experience, but start with this relatively short list:

1. Basic silverware (butter knives, forks and spoons) and plates
2. Two sharp kitchen knives (one with a 4–5" blade, the other with a 6–7" blade)
3. Two frying pans (one about 8" in diameter, the other 12–14" in diameter), preferably lined with Teflon
4. One oven broiling pan (nothing fancy, a rectangular, approximately 24" x 18" flat pan with a 1" lip all the way around)
5. A pasta strainer
6. A mixing bowl (approximately 10" in diameter), preferably stainless steel
7. A medium size (approximately 12" in diameter and 6" deep) stainless steel cooking pot with lid
8. A crock pot (also called a slow cooker)
9. Crock pot liners (purchase them in the plastic bag section of the grocery store)
10. An oven mitt
11. A toaster
12. A blender
13. Two wooden spoons
14. A small plastic spatula
15. A two-cup measuring cup
16. A whisk or whip (looks like a bunch of loops of wire connected by a handle)
17. A box of aluminum foil (it comes in a box with a roll of foil inside)
18. Steamer bags (basically small plastic bags that can be purchased at a grocery store and can be put in the microwave oven), or a steamer insert that fits into the bottom of the cooking pot

19. A potato peeler
20. A potato masher
21. A spice bottle of black pepper
22. A spice bottle of kitchen salt
23. A large bottle of olive oil
24. A bottle of liquid vegetable oil (preferably canola oil)
25. An aerosol spray can of cooking spray (for example, canola oil)
26. 2–3 medium size plastic storage containers (made by Tupperware or Glad)
27. Several rolls of paper towels
28. A can of household disinfectant spray (for example, Lysol)
29. A bottle of liquid hand soap
30. A bottle of dishwashing liquid
31. A dishwashing wand (this sounds a little fancy, but it is a 6" long hollow plastic handle that has a replaceable sponge attached to the end. You fill the handle up with the dishwashing soap)
32. A scouring pad
33. Dishwasher soap squares (usually come in a cylindrical container that contains individually wrapped packets of dishwasher soap and rinsing agent, example brands are Cascade or Electrosol)
34. A spray can of oven cleaner
35. A dish towel
36. A box of kitchen trash bags

If you have a problem finding any of these items, just ask a store clerk, preferably a female. I have found them very helpful, particularly

if you are a man appearing helpless in a grocery store. They will find you pathetic and help you find anything.

## Grocery Shopping, Storing Food and Getting Started

Now that you have your basic kitchen setup, it is time to go to the grocery store and pick up some food. I place grocery stores into three categories: box stores (think BJ's or Sam's), health food stores (think Trader Joe's or Whole Foods) and regular old grocery stores. There are advantages and disadvantages of each. The box stores require a membership and an annual fee. Prices are usually significantly cheaper, but items are sold in large quantities and there is no staff to help you find things—great for large families, not so good for one or two. Health food-type stores have very high quality fresh products, but are usually significantly more expensive, and many of the products do not store for very long. Grocery stores are a good compromise. I have a box store membership and shop there for paper products and frozen foods a couple of times a month. I buy everything else at the good old grocery store. If I need something special, I might even venture into a health food store.

With respect to grocery stores, I have found that certain rules apply to them all. The meat section is always in the back, the bakery is on one side, produce on the other, with frozen foods and everything else in between. They usually have great signage at either end of the aisles and staff that can direct you to any product from memory. After a few visits, you will be shopping like a pro.

You will save yourself considerable time at the grocery store by arming yourself with a list beforehand. Try to prepare the list in an order that starts you on one end of the store and moves you to the other. For example, I always instinctively go in the right hand door and then go to the right side of the store. That is the bakery. So, I start my list with bread and then list the other items as they will be found in the store as I work up and down the aisles, from the right side of the store to the left. You will be surprised how much more efficient your shopping will be if you follow this simple method.

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I began by asking questions of friends. Two things immediately became apparent to me: you can’t ask men because they generally don’t know, and women think very differently than men when it comes to household chores. I make this last statement with no thought of sexism. It is not that this difference in thought process makes one sex better or worse or weaker or stronger, it is just different. For example, when I would ask my wife’s girlfriends about doing laundry, they would ask several questions as to the type of material that I was washing, the color, whether the washing machine has certain cycles, etc. I then got a long, complex answer on the appropriate soap, cycle and drying technique that I should use. I, and I am convinced the majority of men, just do not think this way. I think in generalizations. I start with, “I have a big pile of dirty, smelly underwear and I want to know how to get this big pile reasonably clean, odor free and in my closet as quickly as possible.” Granted, I may end up using the exact same soap, cycle and drying technique as women might suggest, but my thought process in getting there will be significantly different. There is no better example of this than cooking. While women can fastidiously follow precise recipe instructions, I have never known a man that follows a recipe. You throw a steak on the grill and you cook it until it is done. You might have some idea of how long this process is likely to take, but it is done when it is done, and you just know when it is done.

When I first came to suspect this difference in approach, I asked myself whether it might be only me and my stunted upbringing. Surely, other men helped their mothers around the house growing up and, as a

result, learned to think of household chores in the same way that their mothers did. I must have been the only man that didn't know anything and couldn't get anything right around the house. I was certainly told this by my mother, as well as by my wife. I tested my theory. I was recently at a neighborhood block party. While there were several couples at the party, there were two men who had also lost their wives and who had gone through the same learning process that I had in order to cope with household chores. It was remarkable how similar their description of this process was to mine. They also had to learn from generalizations rather than from specifics. In fact, many of the wives that were present further confirmed that "they just can't teach their husbands to do anything around the house."

Back to my journey. I learned the hard way. I asked a few questions, but mostly, I experimented. As a result, I made mistakes: a few shirts that now will only fit the dog, a few hideously burnt meals, and a few late bills. But I learned. Slowly but surely I learned. In the middle of this process I asked myself why someone hadn't put all of this together in writing. It would have saved me a lot of trouble. And it dawned on me that they had, but the material out there was put together mostly by women for women. Think Martha Stewart. There was nothing that I could find written to teach men how to survive around the house.

So what is the significance of this difference in the man/woman thought process? It means that men must be taught differently when it comes to learning how to survive at home. It means that I will not teach you to do laundry by laying out a long list of questions to ask yourself before you wash your pile of underwear. I will start out with "you have a big pile of dirty, smelly underwear, let's get them clean, odor free and in the closet so you can go play golf." It means that I will not provide you with a bunch of recipes, but rather I will teach you to cook certain basic foods in certain ways that you can then decide to alter to your taste by experimenting and throwing in a few extra spices or ingredients. It means that I will teach you to run your home like a man!

Relax, you can do this.

I have written this book so that each chapter can be read independently, without having to read it from cover to cover. In other words, if your immediate problem is how to cook dinner, feel free to go directly to Chapter 2. Having said this, I encourage you to read the entire book, at some point, to fully appreciate all that it has to offer.