

A Simple Guide to Being Present for the Overworked and Overwhelmed

“With the past, I have nothing to do; nor with the future. I live now.” - **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

How often are you driving while talking on a cell phone, or thinking about work problems, or the errands you have to do? How often do you eat without thinking about the food you're eating? How often do you drift off while doing other things, thinking about something you messed up on, or worrying about something that's coming up?



Photo courtesy of [geeknerd99](#)

I would submit that most of us are elsewhere, much of the time, rather than in the here and now.

If I could only give one word of advice to someone trying to find peace in an overwhelming and stressful and chaotic world, it would be this: simplify. But if I could give two more words of advice, they'd be: be present.

I can't claim to be perfect at being present. I can't claim that I do it all the time. But I can say this: I've been practicing being present for awhile now, and I've gotten better at it. I've learned a lot about being present, and I'd like to share that with others.

This article came from a suggestion from commenter Mark, after I wrote about [ways to create a peaceful, relaxed workday](#). It's an article I'd been planning to write for some time, but Mark spurred me to do it sooner — so thanks Mark!

Focus On Now

There are three things we can think about:

1. **The past.** Reliving things we messed up about. Being embarrassed about something we did. Wishing we could have something back that is gone. Living in memories of good times past. Being angry about things done to us. You get the idea.
2. **The future.** Worrying about things we need to do later. Worrying about what might happen, or a big event coming up. Being anxious that things might go wrong, or that we might mess up. Hoping for something wonderful. Dreaming of great things to come.
3. **The present.** What is happening right now, at this moment. What we are doing now.

It is inevitable that we will think about all three. We cannot stop ourselves from thinking about the past or the future. However, with practice, we can focus on the present more than we already do.

But why should we do that? What's wrong with focusing on the past or future? Nothing's wrong with it. It isn't

wrong to think about past or future. However, there's nothing we can do about things that have already happened, and worrying or agonizing about them doesn't usually do us much good. I'd suggest analyzing what happened, learning from it, and moving on. It's much healthier.

We also can't control the future. It's impossible. We can do things that will change the future, but they might change the future in ways we cannot anticipate. Or they might not change things at all. And the only thing we can do about the future is do something ... now. In the present. So focusing on what we do now is the best way to improve the future. Not thinking about the future. I'm not saying you shouldn't have goals or shouldn't plan — but goals change (I know this first-hand, as my goals at the end of 2007 were completely different from what they were at the beginning). Plans change. We must be prepared for that change not by overplanning, but by being in the moment and rolling with the punches.

There's also the problem of missing the present. If we spend most of our time thinking about the past or future, we are missing life itself. It's passing us by while we're elsewhere. You can't get the most out of life unless you learn to focus on being present, while things are happening. Thinking about your childhood, or your kid's future, is useless if your kids' childhood is passing by without you being there.

Benefits of Being in the Moment

I've noticed a ton of benefits from my increased focus on the present. Here are just a few to consider:

1. **Increased enjoyment.** I find that I enjoy life more if I'm present rather than having my mind elsewhere. Food tastes better, I have more fun with my family, even work becomes more enjoyable.
2. **Reduced stress.** Worrying about the past and future gives you stress. But being present is almost like meditation. There are no worries. There is just experiencing.
3. **Better relationships.** When you really commit yourself to being with someone, to listening to them, you are being a better father, husband, friend, daughter, girlfriend. You have better conversations. You bond.
4. **Get things done.** I find that focusing on what I'm doing, rather than trying to multitask or multithink a million different things at once, I actually complete what I'm doing, do a better job on it, and get it done faster. I don't necessarily do more, but I get things done. Focus tends to get things done, in my experience, and when your focus is split among a lot of things, it is less powerful.

The Magic of Flow

There's a concept called Flow that's been pretty popular among productivity circles in the last couple of years. I'm a big fan of it myself. In a nutshell, it's basically losing yourself in whatever you're doing — reaching that magical zone where you forget about the outside world and are completely doing what you're doing, whether that's writing or drawing or coding or whatever.

It's a wonderfully productive zone to be in, and a state that also, incidentally, makes you happier. Productive and happier at the same time. Hard to beat that.

However, it can't happen if you're switching between tasks or thinking about the past or the future. It basically happens when you are in the present. So practicing being present will help you get to flow, which makes you happier and more productive. Best argument yet for being present, perhaps.

Practice, Practice

There's no single method that will get you better at being present. I don't have the magical formula, except one word that I often tell my kids when they're learning anything or striving to be better at anything: practice.

You won't be good at it at first, most likely. Your mind will wander, or you'll do a lot of "meta-thinking", which is just thinking about what you're thinking, and whether you're thinking it the right way, and whether there is a right way ... and so on, until you're no longer in the present. That's normal. We all do that, I think.

Don't beat yourself up about that. Don't get discouraged. Just practice.

So what's the magical method for learning to be present? Practice.

You do it in the morning. You practice it while eating lunch. You do it with your evening jog or walk. You do it while washing dishes after dinner. Every opportunity you get, practice.

And you'll get better. I promise.

One Month Challenge

The best method I can offer for learning to be present, the best method for practicing, is to focus on it for one month. Make focusing on being present a habit. If you make it your only focus, I guarantee you'll get better at it, and more importantly, you'll get into the habit of remembering to focus, of remembering to practice, of being more aware.

Do a one-month challenge. It's the best method for forming new habits, and it works for being present. A good way to do this is join the monthly challenge on the [Zen Habits forums](#). Then do the following:

- Tell people on the forum what your monthly challenge will be (focusing on being present).
- Log in daily to report on your progress. This gives you the accountability and motivation needed.
- Do the tips below every day for a month.

"The living moment is everything." - **D.H. Lawrence**

Tips On Being Present

You just knew I couldn't end this post without a list of tips. So here are things that have worked for me ... pick and choose the ones that you think will work best for you:

1. **When you eat, just eat.** The best way to think about being present is this: do just one thing at a time. When you are eating, don't read or think about something else or iron your clothes (especially if you're eating something that might splatter on the clothes). Just eat. Pay attention to what you're eating. Really experience it — the taste, the texture. Do it slowly. Same thing with anything else: washing dishes, taking a shower, driving, working, playing. Don't do multiple things at once — just do what you're doing now, and nothing else.
2. **Be aware.** Another important step is to become more aware of your thoughts. You will inevitably think about the past and future. That's OK. Just become aware of those thoughts. Awareness will bring change.
3. **Be gentle.** If you think about the past or future, do not beat yourself up about it! Don't try to force those thoughts out of your head. Just be aware of them, and gently allow them to leave. Then bring yourself back to the present.
4. **Zazen.** Ah, you were wondering when Zen Habits would have anything to do with Zen, right? Zazen is basically the center of Zen practice. It's simply sitting. It's a form of meditation, but really it's just sitting. You don't have to contemplate Zen koans or the meaning of the universe or chant anything. You just sit, and focus on sitting. I haven't done this much recently, but when I have, it has been very useful practice for me.
5. **Exercise.** These days, exercise is my zazen. Running is my sitting practice. I run, and try to only run. I focus on my running, on my breathing, on my body, on nothing but the present. It's great practice.
6. **Daily routines.** Anything can be your zazen. When you wash dishes, this is practice. This is your meditation. When you walk, focus on walking. Make anything you do become practice.
7. **Put up reminders.** A reminder on your fridge or computer desktop or on your wall is a good thing. Or use a reminder service to send you a daily email. Whatever it takes to keep your focus on practicing being present.
8. **There is no failure.** You will mess up, but that's OK, because it is impossible to mess up. The only thing that matters is that you practice, and over time, if you keep doing it, you will learn to focus on the present more often than you do now. You cannot fail, even if you stop doing it for awhile. Doing it at all is success. Celebrate every little success.
9. **Keep practicing.** When you get frustrated, just take a deep breath. When you ask yourself, "What should I do now, Self?", the answer is "keep practicing".

"I never think of the future. It comes soon enough." - **Albert Einstein**

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