

Chapter 11

ENJOY THE PRESENT MOMENT

Although most people would agree that it's better to enjoy the moment than to ruminate about our past difficulties, current problems or future worries, it can be difficult to do this for a variety of reasons. One is that most of us were not taught this crucial skill by our parents or in school, outside of a small number of schools that teach mindfulness. Another is that we are socialized to believe that our worth is based on our accomplishments, social status, etc., and we fear that we will not reach our goals unless we are moving full-speed ahead at all times.

Finally, the biggest obstacle to being happy and peaceful in the present moment is our mind. Although our mind is useful in many ways, such as helping us solve complex problems or remember important information, it also is the source of the unhelpful thoughts and judgments that create most of our unhappiness. Therefore, the more we identify with our minds, the more emotional pain we experience.

This pain magically disappears when you transcend your mind and simply focus on the pleasures or meaning of the present moment. As Bruce Springsteen (one of my heroes) sings in his classic song, "Thunder Road," "You can hide beneath your covers and study your pain." However, he encourages you to instead venture forth into the wonders of the moment and "Roll down the windows and let the wind blow back your hair."

Our problems exist largely within our minds and are consequently only as real as we make them. This is not to say that we do not sometimes face serious challenges in our lives that we need to take action to overcome, if we can. However, our success in changing any life situation is contingent on what we do rather than how much we define it as a problem or ruminate about it. At the risk of sounding a bit simplistic, unhappy people spend their time thinking about their problems and happy people focus on solving them or transcending them by simply being present.

The Power of Now

Eckhart Tolle writes about the process of shifting from our minds to the moment in his uplifting book, *The Power of Now*. He states, "As soon as you honor the present moment, all unhappiness and struggle dissolve, and life begins to flow with joy and ease." He also reminds us that the past and future do not exist outside of our minds. Finally, he advises us to free ourselves from the grip of our minds by embracing rather than resisting the now and then deciding whether we need to take any action to change it.

When I first read *The Power of Now*, I so strongly identified with my mind that I had a difficult time grasping what Tolle was encouraging us to do. I read certain sentences over and over as I pondered how I could enter the now. I eventually realized that the only thing I needed to do was to stop thinking about what I needed to do and there I was: in the moment. In fact, this is the only place I have ever been and was just too caught up in my thoughts to know it. What a simple and profound truth!

Highly cerebral people who have been able to use their powerful minds to develop new ideas and achieve a high level of professional success often struggle to enjoy the moment because they overvalue thinking at the expense of being. Consequently, when they experience unhappiness, they analyze why they are unhappy, which drives them deeper into the realm of thought and further away from whatever possible pleasures the present moment has to offer.

In contrast, my daughter, Nikki, savors the moment as well as anyone I have ever known. Whether enjoying her favorite foods, gazing at the fire in our fireplace or listening to the birds at our family cabin, she almost always has a look of satisfaction and peace on her face. It is unfortunate that many people are unable to see beyond her cognitive challenges and recognize how much she has to teach all of us about being in the moment and simply enjoying life, with no judgments, concern for the past or worries about the future.

Portals to the Present

There are a variety of portals into the moment that are accessible to everyone. One is to switch our focus from our thoughts to what we are experiencing through our senses, which opens up an entirely new world from the one we experience when we limit our reality to simply what is going on inside our heads. Whether we enter this world through eating fresh blueberries, actually smelling the roses or listening to Beethoven's 7th symphony (my favorite), we experience the gifts the present moment has to offer.

I recently worked with a client who exhausted himself by obsessing about all of his perceived shortcomings. I asked him to try an experiment by thinking intently about one thing he did not like about himself and then quickly switching his focus to looking at the trees outside my office window and watching the leaves swaying in the wind. He was amazed by his immediate sense of greater inner peace as he left the world of his mind and ventured into the moment. I reminded him as he left our session that he always had the capacity to change his focus from the torments of his mind to the rewards that each moment has to offer.

In fact, I routinely encourage my clients not to think about their problems as they drive away from my office. I advise them to instead focus all of their attention on what they are experiencing through their senses as they listen to music, notice the world

around them or simply feel their hands on the steering wheel. The greater peace and presence they experience provides them with a much needed emotional lift and an opening to an inviting world which exists beyond their troubles.

Lose Yourself in the “Flow”

We can also “lose ourselves” in an activity that so fully captures our attention that we leave the realm of thought. When we are in this place, which is often referred to as “flow,” we transcend our worries and our awareness of time. We are totally immersed in the moment and operate from the most expansive and creative parts of ourselves. The happiest people I know maximize their opportunities to pursue their passions within this wonderful state, which is one of the best antidotes to boredom and depression.

Whenever I am working with clients who have difficulty enjoying the moment, I ask them to identify activities that enable them to get outside of their heads and into this sense of “flow.” Frequently mentioned activities include gardening, reading or watching a captivating movie. I then discuss with them how they can rearrange their lives so they can spend more time doing whatever brings “flow” into their lives.

Bruce Springsteen validated the power of “flow” when he noted in a 2012 *New Yorker* article that his early concerts would go on for many hours because they provided him with his only opportunity to leave the demons in his mind behind. Unfortunately for both Springsteen and his adoring fans, his concerts eventually had to end.

Thirdly, we can view the moments of our lives as opportunities to be savored rather than stepping stones to the achievement of our goals. Clearly, life is not a race to some distant finish line and when we die, I highly doubt that we are met by some entity with a clipboard that lists what we did not accomplish. Indeed, happy people focus on being as much as doing and use their precious time on this planet to enjoy the present moment rather than simply getting things done.

I love to watch children at play because they are generally so much better than adults at being present and having fun. Whether they are making up a new game, building a sand castle at the beach or just chasing each other around, their glee is infectious. I wish every adult had the ability to be as playful and spontaneous as they were when they were 6 years old.

Find Serenity Through Meditation

Finally, meditation provides us with an excellent portal to leave the tyranny of our thoughts and enjoy the present moment. Although I am not an expert in this time-

honored practice, I have experimented with many different types of meditation over the past 40 years and cherish the inner peace and stillness it brings me.

I begin by breathing deeply, which helps me relax and get out of my thoughts, slow down my physiology and remain attentive to whatever sensations I am experiencing within my body. I then visualize that I am taking an elevator down deep within my psyche to a place filled with expansive, white light. When I am able to remain in this place for an extended period of time, I experience a profound sense of serenity that fills my entire being.

When I first began to experience inner peace through meditation, I used to fear that I had gone in too deep, never to return to the outside world. This caused me to jolt myself out of my bliss. I now know that I have nothing to fear and would actually be content to spend the rest of my life in this wonderful place, although this would certainly cause my mail to pile up and my beloved bulldog, Gus, to go hungry.

The main obstacle to the meditative peace I crave is the thought that there is some way I *should* be feeling that I am not, which blocks my ability to actually be in the moment. The best way for me to rid myself of these judgments is to visualize that they are floating away from my consciousness like released balloons. I am then completely free to be aware of whatever is happening in the moment with acceptance and appreciation.

I encourage most of my clients to meditate and often practice it with them during our sessions. In fact, the power of meditation to find inner peace was illustrated in the experience of a client who suffered from such severe anxiety that making it through each day was like climbing up a steep mountain. However, at the end of one of our joint meditations, he happily reported that he had finally transcended the thoughts that had bedeviled him for most of his life and experienced a peaceful place within that he described as “underneath” his anxiety.

One of the major challenges my clients face when they begin meditating is that as soon as they try to quiet their thoughts, the “noise” in their heads gets louder, as if their thoughts are feeling neglected and demanding more attention. However, this period of heightened mental activity usually only lasts for a brief period of time as long as we focus on entering a deeper and quieter place within. Fortunately, the meditative process usually becomes easier each time we go through it and learn our path to tranquility.

Along with the traditional meditation I practice, I often stop whatever I am doing during my generally busy days, take a couple of deep breaths and enter the place within where my inner peace patiently awaits me. This helps me recalibrate my energy to a slower frequency and more fully relish the present moment. When I return to the outside world, I always feel refreshed and more centered.

An excellent place to practice brief meditations is when you are stopped at a red light. If you are on the way to the hospital to give birth or running late to your wedding, this is probably impossible. In less urgent situations, however, there is no reason to be impatient at red lights. You might as well relax, breathe deeply and enter a peaceful place within, which is as available to you at that moment as it is when you are sitting on a warm, tropical beach. Vacations are great, but why not enjoy a peaceful moment in the middle of a dreary winter day while waiting for the light to finally turn green?

Although the concept of meditation might sound too complex for children to grasp, I have found that they are better at it than most adults with whom I work, who are too caught up in their heads to find their peaceful place within. This was illustrated to me during a recent training I conducted for 3rd and 4th graders on being compassionate to yourself and others. I gave them the opportunity to meditate for 5 minutes and encouraged them to leave the reality of the outside world and plunge deep into their inner selves. They immediately found a comfortable place to lie down on their classroom floor and the room was filled with silence.

When I subsequently asked them where their journey had taken them, their answers were magical. One boy noted that he had been in a beautiful meadow filled with butterflies and flowers and a girl described her experience sitting on the top of a cloud as it drifted across the sky. I was struck by how easily children use their imagination to find a peaceful place within in contrast to most adults who are too burdened by their responsibilities and worries to journey into their inner selves.

It is often difficult for people who have experienced significant trauma to enjoy the present moment because their neurological systems have been wired to be on the alert for possible danger. Consequently, they tend to overthink everything and are hyper-vigilant to any real or perceived threats. They fear that if they relax and relish the moment, they will not be able to adequately protect themselves.

The impact of childhood trauma was illustrated to me in my work with Tanya, who grew up in a chaotic and violent household. From an early age, she took on the responsibility of trying to keep the peace between her drug-addicted parents and take care of her younger sister. Not surprisingly, she became a highly anxious and overly responsible adult who always put her own needs aside to take care of her children and support her family. The only time she was able to escape her worries was when she was under the influence of alcohol, as is the case with many survivors of trauma.

When I asked her if she had ever been able to simply relax and enjoy the moment, Tanya looked at me as if I had asked her if we could have our next session on the moon.

She explained that she could not afford to take the risk of letting her worry go because it might result in something terrible happening. I assured her that her anxiety did not prevent bad things from happening and that she did not need it to effectively protect and provide for herself and her family. I also encouraged Tanya to take the risk of letting go of her hyper-vigilance to prove to herself that it was not serving her in any way.

Over time, Tanya was finally able to let go of her anxiety without the help of alcohol and surprised herself by developing a previously unknown sense of inner peace. She was relieved to discover that she actually functioned better when her mind wasn't going around in endless circles. Rather than spend our entire session talking about her fears, we began to focus mainly on what she was doing to relish each moment and ended each session with at least 10 minutes of meditation. I shared her deep satisfaction that she had finally put the fallout from her traumatic childhood behind her and learned how to more fully enjoy each moment.

Surrender to What Is

Many people are unable to enjoy the present moment because they are preoccupied with negative emotions about the reality of their lives, the way other people behave or the world around them. Rather than surrendering to what is, they are upset about it and yearn for things to be different, which accomplishes nothing except causing them to experience frustration. In fact, the inability to accept reality is one of the major causes of human unhappiness.

For instance, if your wallet is stolen, you can focus on being angry with the person who stole it or yourself for not being more careful with it. You may also remember all of the other times you have been treated unfairly and work yourself into a lather of negative emotions that does not accomplish anything. It is much more self-compassionate for you to accept the fact that your wallet is gone, make a mental note about how to better protect it in the future, cancel your stolen credit cards and do something special for yourself to revive your spirit.

For most of my life, I resisted the concept of surrendering to whatever reality I faced and hated the term "it is what it is" because I believed it meant that I needed to accept things that were not right rather than try to change them. I viewed acceptance as a "cop out" from my responsibility to make the world a better place or become the best person I could be. I mistakenly believed that resisting reality would somehow make it different.

Fortunately, I have learned experientially that surrendering to what is does not prevent me from doing whatever I need to improve my life circumstances, take better

care of myself or be helpful to others. It simply enables me to focus all of my energy on whatever I need to do rather than wasting it on feeling frustrated or upset.

In fact, whenever my ability to enjoy the moment is impaired by my worry about a challenging situation I face or might face in the future, I ask myself a simple question, “Can I do anything about this situation?” If I can do something about it at that moment, I do it. If I can do something about it in the future, I plan out when and how I will do it. If there is nothing I can do to change whatever is worrying me, I accept this fact and let the worry go.

When I am working with clients who are unhappy about a difficult situation they are unable to change, I encourage them to try to stop thinking about it and simply be present in the moment through the use of the portals I have discussed in this chapter. This appears to be a daunting challenge for most of my clients, particularly if they are in the habit of ruminating about their problems. However, the happiness and inner peace they experience when they are able to be in the moment even for a brief instant motivates them to figure out how to stay in this inviting place for longer periods of time.

I once worked with Sam, who was very upset that his fiancée had broken up with him. When we first began our sessions together, he spent most of his energy trying to figure out how he could get her back. However, when his fiancée did not respond to his repeated e-mails, he realized that she had no interest in getting back with him and that he had no choice but to accept this painful fact. I consequently encouraged him to visualize that he was banging his head against a brick wall every time he thought about his fiancée and focus instead on enjoying each moment and throwing himself into activities he loved such as playing in his rock band and camping. After he stopped trying to change what was, he was surprised by how quickly he recovered from his loss.

I hope you too are able to get out of your head, live more fully in the present moment and surrender to what is. A rich world awaits you!

Try These Strategies on for Size

- Recognize that your problems exist mainly within your mind and transcend them by focusing on the present moment.
- Switch your attention from your thoughts to what you are experiencing through your senses.
- “Lose” yourself in activities that so fully capture your attention that you leave the realm of thought.
- Relish all of the moments of your life rather than simply viewing them as opportunities to get things done.
- Develop a regular meditation practice that enables you to experience a deep sense of inner peace and fulfillment.

- Practice brief meditations whenever you need to more fully relish the present moment.
- Surrender to what is rather than resisting it and know that this does not prevent you from taking whatever actions you can to create the changes you want in yourself or the world.
- Take the risk of letting go of your hyper-vigilance to prove that you do not need it to protect yourself.
- Whenever you are caught up in worrying, ask yourself if there is something you can do about what you are worrying about. If there is, do it. If there is nothing you can do, let your worry go.