



MINDFUL MUSINGS

Collective Writings

by

ALFRED JAMES

This book comprises 24 popular posts from my blog. Some are inspired by my everyday experiences and personal life hacks, and others are simply musings that started in my mind and ended up on paper.

Thank you for reading.

Alfred James
Pocketmindfulness.com

Contents

1. What Clearing Out the Attic Reminded Me About Letting Go of the Past
2. The Story of Two Monks and a Maiden
3. Understanding the Monkey Mind & How to Live in Harmony With Your Mental Companion
4. 6 Mindfulness Exercises You Can Try Today
5. How to Escape Being a Victim of Time & Truly Live in the Present Moment
6. The Beginner's Pathway to Successful Meditation – in 5 Conscious Steps
7. How One Morbid Affirmation Will Transform Your Life Right Now
8. 21 Mindful Habits You Can Adopt Today
9. How Self-Help Prevents You Finding True Happiness (& What to Do About It)
10. How a Fish Taught Me the Meaning of Life Over Lunch
11. How to Change the World in Just 1 Second
12. What If This Is a Dream? Why My Dad's Answer Changed My Life

13. 10 Easy Ways to Snap Out of a Bad Mood & Find Instant Mental Peace
14. Why There's No Greater Success Than the One You're Experiencing Now
15. 6 Ways Anger Changes Who You Are & 5 Simple Steps to a Calmer Mind
16. How to Quit and Still Win Comfortably
17. Why It's Perfectly Okay to Have Regrets
18. How to Stop Worrying – the Mindfulness Approach
19. It's Never Too Late!
20. "What Will You Do With Your Life", Said the Career Officer
21. I Don't Want to Die & Realise I Haven't Lived
22. The Funny Thing About Fear
23. How I Eliminate the Stress of Having 'So Much to Do' (in Just a Few Words)
24. 12 Simple Ways to Feel Inspired & Happy Right Now

What Clearing Out the Attic Reminded Me About Letting Go of the Past

I'm good at letting go and moving on from past events, and had a fair bit of practice at this over the years. But today I was reminded of how hard it is to let go of the past. We get stuck in that mental prison of *what ifs* and *why dids*, and it's hard to move on from particular life events.

It all started with a clear-out at my mum's house. I had a ton of stuff in her attic that needed sorting through to either throw away or move to my place.

You know the deal: You go around there thinking it's a two-hour job at most, and five hours later you're still sitting on a box in a crowded attic sifting through memory boxes, old school reports, birthday cards, remnants of past hobbies and all sorts of knick-knacks.

*I can't throw that out! Hmm, but I haven't used it in 15 years.
I'll go through all this stuff when I'm older and enjoy it then.
Or maybe I won't, because it'll remind me of just how young I
once was!*

But having a clear-out is much more than deciding what to throw away and what to keep. It's a non-stop roller coaster of emotions as you traverse the valleys of years gone past.

For example: I found letters from previous girlfriends, pictures of holidays with friends who've moved on to new pastures, presents

from my father dating back 25 years, childhood toys and a hundred and one trips down memory lane.

Suddenly you find yourself immersed in a material narration of your life's history, your senses guided through the journey by visual nostalgia.

But what's strange is that these things you've collected – things absent from your life for years, lying in a cold attic, unmissed and seldom thought about – suddenly take on new meaning in the present. What's stranger is that the events associated with the material reminders don't exist any more. These moments can't be revived. The feelings you had at the time cannot be felt again.

As you become purposefully trapped in a matrix of memories, the grasping nature of the mind is presented with a perfect opportunity to attach itself to the past, a place it will happily reside, drifting in and out of positive and negative associations until you are knee-deep in those *what ifs and why dids*.

The magnetic pull of the past is so powerful that you almost forget where you are, and forget all the wonderful blessings currently in your presence. Nostalgia then becomes the mind's crafty servant, evoking an often romanticised and exaggerated narrative of past experiences that sneakily seeks to stain the present with an air of averageness and lesser sense of self-actualisation. We know this to be true because we grow up with constant reminders from our elders that "things were better back in the day". We then become those elders.

Whether sitting down pondering thoughts of times gone by, or going through old things and stirring up memories, it's inevitable that memory lane will stir up mixed feelings about the present.

And that's what I found happening to me, right there in that attic. As I looked at a photo of my university football team taken after we won the cup final, I was reminded that I'll never be that good at football again. My legs aren't as quick now and I will get slower as years pass.

As I cleared through the boxes, I came across ornaments and games that used to reside in our family home when my parents were married, something that has long since changed and triggered a bunch of crazy events over the years.

As I stumbled across a photo of an ex-girlfriend, I was reminded of a person's problems I couldn't seem to help or solve no matter how hard I tried, and the fact that her life hasn't gotten much better since we parted.

As I stumbled across certificates and trophies I was given for various things I achieved as a young boy, I was reminded of missed opportunities due to the fickleness of my youth.

I went from "*Wow, look at this*" to feeling a tad sombre about a number of things that have happened over the years.

I decided to take a tea break.

As I sat drinking my tea, an invaluable thought crossed my mind: None of the blessings I currently have in my life would exist had it not been for those memories. Everything that has happened, good, bad, happy or sad, has been instrumental in creating the life I have now.

Seen in one way, these memories are separate events hashed together in an indiscriminate way. Seen in another, they all comprise of one perpetual, perfect moment, playing out exactly as they should and scoring the musical that is my life. In a nutshell, everything that happens is an interdependent, interconnected result of everything that happens before it.

A trip down memory lane can be a beautiful ride, filled with blissful memories and heart-warming thoughts. It can also be a painful, sad experience that leads us to darker places we'd rather not visit. That said, the latter can be positive too, forming a necessary part of the healing process that assists us in breaking free of our demons and enabling us to embrace life in the present.

Either way, once the attic door is shut, we must sever our ties and step back into the only moment that exists, the only moment that matters, the only moment that can help us thrive and be happier and more content with what is – This Moment.

A trip down memory lane exposes the grasping nature of the mind and its propensity to cling desperately to happy memories, and often negative ones too. Mentally exposed in this way, we gain access to clarity of mind that helps us better understand and

appreciate the transitional, temporary nature of existence. We have no choice but to allow ourselves to flow with its harmony.

Even if the past seems like it was better than the present, the reality is that the past doesn't exist. Living in its memory won't change anything in the now. The past is therefore able to teach us to let go. Anyone who has suffered bereavement knows this to be true. To carry on with life and rediscover joy, you have to let go. You won't forget, and neither should you try, but sanctuary can be found if you allow that person to rest and live through their memory, not become trapped inside it.

Always remember that for all the *what ifs and why dids* your mind loves to toy with now and again, and everything you miss about times gone by, the fact that you're alive in the now means you have a wonderful opportunity to create a better you that consists of more amazing moments. That means greater achievements, greater relationships, greater acts of love and kindness, greater happiness and a greater appreciation of life itself.

The Story of Two Monks and a Maiden

I am writing this looking out over the winding waters of the Mekong River in Luang Prabang, Laos.

As I sip my coconut juice, I allow my mind to become engaged in the array of beautiful sounds emitting from nature's bounty: the trees whistling in the sunlight, the warm breeze pushing the current downstream, the sound of a small lizard scuttling across fallen leaves, the birds chirping in the shade and the sound of fishermen casting their nets as they wade in the shallows.

This is a blessed corner of the world I've found today, one where I feel free of distraction. It takes a trip to a place like this to really be able to let go: to let go of nagging thoughts of bills, things I need to do, things I should have done, people I need to contact, work I know is around the corner.

Today I feel like my mind is defragmenting; I am just letting it all go.

My day started early. I got up to give alms to the monks as they carried out their daily parade through the street. It was 5am as I stood watching them walking down the dusty roads, blessing each person who'd made it roadside before the waking of the sun. As they gracefully passed by, I was reminded of a story I heard many years ago, a story which ties in nicely with this day of letting go and re-centring my energy in the present.

One day, two monks set out for a temple in a valley beyond the woods. While cutting a pathway through the woods, they came across a choppy stream they needed to cross. There, standing by the bank of the stream, was a beautiful young maiden dressed in silk. She was clearly at a loss as how to cross without getting muddy and wet.

So, without thinking twice, the elder monk gestured he could carry her. Shocked, she obliged. He put her over his shoulder and waded across to the other side. The younger monk followed, dismayed and uneasy at what he had witnessed.

Upon reaching the other side of the bank, the elder monk put the maiden down gently. The maiden paid her respects and walked on. The monks continued to the temple.

As they navigated through the forest, the younger monk, still troubled by what he'd seen, asked, *"How could you do that? We aren't even supposed to make eye contact with women, let alone pick them up and carry them!"*

Without a thought, the elder monk turned to the younger monk and said, *"Oh, are you still carrying her? I put her down when I reached the other side of the stream".*

And with that, the elder monk turned and continued leading the way through the forest, leaving the younger monk to contemplate his words for the remainder of the journey.

The compassion of the elder monk to put the needs of the maiden before his own spiritual practice's needs, and his mental ability to then let go of the fact that he had strayed from the path of his personal commitment without feeling guilty or disappointed is a lesson for us all.

We mustn't allow yesterday's actions to affect today's progress, because letting go of the past is necessary to truly thrive today. We must also accept the transient nature of life; that Mother Nature will demand us to adapt and change when she sees fit. This will involve personal sacrifice for the greater good, as it did for the elder monk in this story. To resist this transience will only bring about mental suffering.

Understanding the Monkey Mind & How to Live in Harmony With Your Mental Companion

We all have the mind of a monkey. This analogy - slightly humorous though it may be - is actually quite salient. Consider that we humans have around fifty thousand separate thoughts each day, many of them on the same topic. You might imagine that each thought is a branch and you - or at least the attention of your conscious mind - is indeed a monkey, swinging from thought-branch to thought-branch all day long.

This might sound somewhat fun but in our troubled human way, the thoughts that are often in our minds are concerned with the fears and pressures of life. *What will happen if I lose my job? I wonder if my partner might be unhappy with our relationship? What if I don't have enough money when I retire?*

Irrational fears perhaps, but made real by our own constant attention. How infuriating and exhausting it becomes.

The Buddha, who coined the word some two and a half millennia ago, labelled this mental state "*Kapicitta*." Of course, he defined it best when he said 'just as a monkey swinging through the trees grabs one branch and lets it go to seize another, so too that which is called thought, mind or consciousness arises and disappears continually both day and night.' Beautifully and poetically put, but why does this monkey rule our thoughts when we are supposed to be in charge?

Causes of the Monkey Mind

Under the spark of awareness, we are accompanied by the ego – the chattering monkey of our internal monologue. With the noise of this monkey going on, it becomes near-impossible to be present and focused on the moment we are in. Instead we are carried away through the treetops!

Because of our innate capacity for thinking, it is easy for the Monkey Mind to feed on stimuli. When we give our attention to too many things at once, when we spend our lives rushing from one appointment to another, when we focus on what we are yet to do instead of what we are currently doing, these are like dozens of trees with enticing fruit for our monkey to chase.

Amazing! Look at him go! There he is worrying about your date next Tuesday. Oh, now he's up that tree criticising your performance in work last week. Then he's reminding you that the car needs servicing. The point here is we actually need the monkey on our side. He's useful in our busy lives to keep on top of things. The problem occurs when, like all small monkeys with lots of things to do, he's quite excitable.

Going Ape!

The result of the Monkey Mind– which has not been adequately trained – is mental and physical fatigue. We've all had days where it feels like we've achieved nothing and there's a mountain to climb tomorrow, and yet we can't relax. Because we cannot relax, the monkey mind says, "Hey, why aren't you relaxing? You have

another BIG day tomorrow!” Is it any surprise that cases of depression, anxiety and stress disorders are on the rise?

The problems human beings faced in the days of Buddha are still with us, and while we have perhaps advanced in some ways since then, we are the same fragile species. What is clear is despite our technological achievements we have yet to master *being* in the world.

Taming Your Monkey

The problem is, you cannot fight the Monkey or castigate it into submission. But you can understand it, tame it and live in harmony with your furry companion.

The Buddhist perspective recommends quiet meditation. Through understanding of the Monkey Mind, the monkey feels like he is being listened to, and understood. If his fears (your fears) are slowly reasoned with, when your mind is calm through meditative techniques, it turns out that the terrible consequences of not being enough are actually not that terrible.

The future is always uncertain; none of us know what is coming tomorrow. We all have plans, dreams and goals we are working towards. Approaching the new day with anxiousness inhibits our ability to be in the moment and truly love the journey that we are undertaking.

Other techniques that can be used to harmonise with your monkey include moving meditations such as Qigong, Yoga and Tai Chi.

After all, sitting quietly and not thinking is hard for us to do at first. With the focus relocated from mind to body, these internal arts allow us to use our physical forms to cultivate the intrinsic stillness of the soul. The endorphin rush of physical exercise, such as running, similarly quietens the Monkey Mind.

In accordance with the ethos of maintaining physical health to attune mental health, we should also eschew stimulants, food that is high in refined sugar, and alcohol.

Finally, there is investigation occurring into brainwave entrainment, which has been asserted to tune our brainwaves into the states usually achieved through long hours of meditation practice. Personally, I enjoy meditation too much to replace it entirely, but when I am working or writing, Theta and Alpha binaural beats music seems to induce a heightened degree of presence and awareness, and a correspondingly quiescent Monkey Mind.

The first step to living amiably with your Monkey Mind is becoming aware that it exists. It is part of you, but doesn't define you. The Monkey doesn't need to cause suffering every time it swings through your forest. The Monkey lives within us, but it does not control us if we are aware of its presence. Through reading this post, you have taken the first step towards changing your wild monkey into a graceful deer.

6 Mindfulness Exercises You Can Try Today

In this busy world of ours, the mind is constantly pulled from pillar to post, scattering our thoughts and emotions and leaving us feeling stressed, highly-strung and at times quite anxious.

Most of us don't have five minutes to sit down and relax, let alone 30 minutes or more for a meditation session. But it is essential for our well-being to take a few minutes each day to cultivate mental spaciousness and achieve a positive mind-body balance.

So if you are a busy bee like me, try using these simple mindfulness exercises to empty your mind and find some much-needed calm amidst the madness of your hectic day.

1. Mindful Breathing

This exercise can be done standing up or sitting down, and pretty much anywhere at any time. All you have to do is be still and focus on your breath for just one minute.

Start by breathing in and out slowly. One cycle should last for approximately 6 seconds. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body.

Let go of your thoughts for a minute. Let go of things you have to do later today or pending projects that need your attention. Simply be still for one minute.

Purposefully watch your breath, focusing your senses on its pathway as it enters your body and fills you with life, and then watch it work its way up and out of your mouth as its energy dissipates into the world.

If you are someone who thought they'd never be able to meditate, guess what? You are halfway there already! If you enjoyed one minute of this mind-calming exercise, why not try two or three?

2. Mindful Observation

This exercise is simple but incredibly powerful. It is designed to connect us with the beauty of the natural environment, something that is easily missed when we are rushing around in the car or hopping on and off trains on the way to work.

Choose a natural object from within your immediate environment and focus on watching it for a minute or two. This could be a flower or an insect, or even the clouds or the moon.

Don't do anything except notice the thing you are looking at. Simply relax into a harmony for as long as your concentration allows. Look at it as if you are seeing it for the first time. Visually explore every aspect of its formation. Allow yourself to be consumed by its presence. Allow yourself to connect with its energy and its role and purpose in the natural world.

3. Mindful Awareness

This exercise is designed to cultivate a heightened awareness and appreciation of simple daily tasks and the results they achieve.

Think of something that happens every day more than once; something you take for granted, like opening a door, for example.

At the very moment you touch the doorknob to open the door, stop for a moment and be mindful of where you are, how you feel in that moment and where the door will lead you. Similarly, the moment you open your computer to start work, take a moment to appreciate the hands that enable this process and the brain that facilitates your understanding of how to use the computer.

These touch point cues don't have to be physical ones. For example: each time you think a negative thought you might choose to take a moment to stop, label the thought as unhelpful and release the negativity. Or perhaps each time you smell food, you take a moment to stop and appreciate how lucky you are to have good food to eat and share with your family and friends.

Choose a touch point that resonates with you today. Instead of going through your daily motions on autopilot, take occasional moments to stop and cultivate purposeful awareness of what you are doing and the blessings it brings your life.

4. Mindful Listening

This exercise is designed to open your ears to sound in a non-judgemental way. So much of what we see and hear on a daily basis is influenced by our past experiences. When we listen mindfully, we achieve a neutral, present awareness that lets us hear sound without preconception.

Select a piece of music you have never heard before. You may have something in your own collection that you have never listened to, or you might choose to turn the radio dial until something catches your ear.

Close your eyes and put on your headphones. Try not to judge the music by its genre, title or artist name before it has begun playing. Allow yourself to get lost in the journey of sound for the duration of the song. Allow yourself to explore every aspect of track. Even if the music isn't to your liking at first, let go of your dislike and give your awareness full permission to climb inside the track and dance among the sound waves.

The idea is to just listen, to become fully entwined with the composition without preconception or judgement of the genre, artist, lyrics or instrumentation.

5. Mindful Immersion

The intention of this exercise is to cultivate contentment in the moment and escape the persistent striving we find ourselves caught up in on a daily basis. Rather than anxiously wanting to finish an everyday routine task in order to get on with doing something else, take that regular routine and fully experience it like never before.

If you are cleaning your house, pay attention to every detail of the activity. Rather than treat this as a regular chore, create an entirely new experience by noticing every aspect of your actions. Feel and become the motion when sweeping the floor, sense the muscles

you use when scrubbing the dishes, develop a more efficient way of wiping the windows clean. The idea is to get creative and discover new experiences within a familiar routine task.

Instead of labouring through and constantly thinking about finishing the task, become aware of every step and fully immerse yourself in the progress. Take the activity beyond a routine by aligning yourself with it physically, mentally and spiritually. Who knows, you might even enjoy the cleaning for once!

6. Mindful Appreciation

In this last exercise, all you have to do is notice 5 things in your day that usually go unappreciated. These things can be objects or people – it's up to you. Use a notepad to check off 5 by the end of the day.

The point of this exercise is to simply give thanks and appreciate the seemingly insignificant things in life, the things that support our existence but rarely get a second thought amidst our desire for bigger and better things.

For example: electricity powers your kettle, the postman delivers your mail, your clothes provide you warmth, your nose lets you smell the flowers in the park, your ears let you hear the birds in the tree by the bus stop, but...

- Do you know how these things/processes came to exist, or how they really work?

- Have you ever properly acknowledged how these things benefit your life and the lives of others?
- Have you ever thought about what life might be like without these things?
- Have you ever stopped to notice their finer, more intricate details?
- Have you ever sat down and thought about the relationships between these things and how together they play an interconnected role in the functioning of the earth?

Once you have identified your 5 things, make it your duty to find out everything you can about their creation and purpose to truly appreciate the way in which they support your life.

In Summary

The cultivation of moment-by-moment awareness of our surrounding environment is a practice that helps us better cope with the difficult thoughts and feelings that cause us stress and anxiety in everyday life.

With regular practice of mindfulness exercises, rather than being led on auto-pilot by emotions influenced by negative past experiences and fears of future occurrences, we harness the ability to root the mind in the present moment and deal with life's challenges in a clear-minded, calm and assertive way.

In turn, we develop a fully conscious mind-set that frees us from the imprisonment of unhelpful, self-limiting thought patterns and

enables us to be fully present to focus on positive emotions that increase compassion and understanding in ourselves and others.

How to Escape Being a Victim of Time & Truly Live in the Present Moment

The easiest way to explain living in the present is to start by explaining what it means to not be present, since this is the state we have become habitually used to.

When you aren't being present, you become a victim of time. Your mind is pulled into the past, the future, or both. Your thoughts are of the past: What has been, what could have been, what you thought happened versus what actually did happen. Or, your thoughts are of the future: what will be, what could be, what might be if...

Of course, it's natural to spend moments of thought in the past or in daydreams of the future. Identifying impending dangers through associations with things that have happened in the past is important for self-preservation. But when our lives become dictated by thoughts and emotions attached to past events and potential future outcomes, standing peacefully rooted in the present becomes increasingly rare.

Our routine and our habit is to be off in our heads somewhere mulling over negativity and struggles of the past, or becoming anxious and fearful of the future. Seldom are we fully "here", neutrally centred to see through life's lens with clarity and naked awareness – a state that assists us in finding contentment and understanding in ourselves.

Habits quickly become the norm and – as we know from many of life’s other vices – just because we’re used to doing something regularly doesn’t mean it is good for us, or the right way to live. An easy way to break this habit of being a victim of time is to identify time for what it is. Time is a human concept. The watch on your wrist and the clock on the wall mean nothing to Mother Nature. To her, life is one evolving moment – a perpetual cycle of interdependent impermanence. Time is a metric we use as a reference point for organising our lives and documenting history. It doesn’t actually exist. Really, it doesn’t. Ask a scientist.

Time is an illusion, which makes being controlled by time somewhat delusional. The past doesn’t exist and neither does the future. The only true reference point we have to this moment in time – and to this thing we label “existence” – is a feeling of presence, of being here in this body, of seeing the world through these eyes. This is all that can exist, because this is what you feel right now. You can’t feel the past or the future, but you can feel what it feels like to touch something right now, to see something, to hear something.

The concept of time deludes us into concerning ourselves with its passing and impending arrival. This stops us enjoying this “presence” we feel. We are duped into remaining in one of two states: The first, one of dwelling in the past and mulling over what has happened. The second, one of waiting and constantly anticipating what is to come, if and when...

For example:

- How often do you enjoy your work? Or are you too busy thinking about getting it finished by the deadline to give yourself a chance to enjoy it?
- Are you so stressed out trying to do your best work to impress your boss that you prevent yourself being able to perform at your highest potential anyway?
- Are you so distracted by thoughts of Monday morning that you spoil the time spent with your children on the weekend?
- Are you so caught up in regrets of the past that you prevent opportunity blossoming in the present?
- Are the opinions of others, formed through actions you took in the past, stopping you being who you want to be in the present?

We are all unavoidably victims of time to some degree, because it has become the accepted state of norm in our fast-paced, highly motivated and highly-strung society. And for this reason it is important that we understand that to not be present is to be torn between two worlds, the past and the future, neither of which exist. To constantly reside in this state prevents us enjoying life and finding happiness.

If you allow yourself to be a victim of time – a victim of the past and a slave to a future that is yet to unravel – you will carry with you a sense of unease. You will be susceptible to stress, agitation and feel generally uncomfortable in life.

There is no redemption to be found in time.

So surrender to what is right now.

Wherever you are, commit to being there, completely. Life will take care of the rest.

The Beginner's Pathway to Successful Meditation – in 5 Conscious Steps

If you're reading this, then you're probably interested in meditation, and have probably heard lots of good things about the benefits. But you've also probably wondered how monks manage to sit still for so long during meditation. Hours on end, day after day, year after year.

Don't they get bored? Don't they think about that next meal, and what if they need the toilet in the middle of meditation?

It is enough to put you off wanting to try.

The short answer is no, they don't get bored, nor allow thoughts of food to distract them. No doubt occasionally they need to pee, but they work their toilet habits around their practice – Monks are human, after all.

The thing is this, when monks meditate, they just do – because that's the point. There is nothing else to do, no place to go except to be there meditating.

But with all due respect to the tradition, forget about meditating like a monk for a moment. Forget about monasteries, Tibet, the Dalai Lama and all those wonderful things that seem so far removed from your world. You need to learn how to meditate as 'you' and not try to imitate a monk or anyone else.

Meditation is for everyone, not some exclusive club for those who have mastered the art of not thinking. It is a personal experience

that will reward your life every single day. But first you need to get started, and you'll need a guiding hand. And if I may, I'd like to lend you mine for a while...

Step 1: Remember why you want to meditate

Objective: Consistency

Remember all the good stuff you have heard and read about the benefits of meditation? Remember noticing the glow and zest for life of those who do it regularly? Remember that article where scientists proved that five minutes of meditation could zap a chunk of disorienting noise in your head and help you focus and be ten times more productive?

Have these reasons ready in your mind. Better yet, memorise them like love poems. See every reason as a photographic image in your head.

This will help you start your practice, and as we know, all together now, "Practice makes perfect".

Practice can be boring, but it's the fastest way to improve.

Remember that it takes just one reason to start, and just one excuse to never begin. For every excuse, there is a bunch of very good reasons to not skip your daily practice, come rain or shine. And guess what? One day, you won't even need to think about it. Your body will already be asking for it, automatically settling into to meditation mode when it's required.

Step 2: Feelings are just feelings

Objective: Pure Attention

Being aware of the now means being aware of the internal events going on inside of you while you meditate. These events may be physical or emotional or even ambiguous. Yet, while in meditation, we don't pay heed to them.

Feelings are just feelings, they come and go. They're fleeting. They can motivate and escalate until they make you want to do magical things, and also lead you into stress and anxiety. During meditation we don't use our feelings to guide us. Instead, we detach. Essentially we are taking a break, allowing the mind to rest. Observe your feelings as if they are passing strangers and learn to not react to them or follow to where they lead. This doesn't mean that you are disconnected from yourself, far from it.

Meditation is the objective observation of thoughts, feelings and emotions. If it feels like happy, blissful vibration is arising from within, well, that's great. But bluntly, label it for what it is and let it go. Meditation is not the time to indulge in positive emotions. If it feels that sadness and anger are arising from within...well bluntly that's unfortunate, but again label it for what it is and let it go. Meditation is not the time to indulge in negative emotions. By taking this approach, we detach from the ego – the “my, mine, and I” – and we create a space within ourselves to grow larger than the scope of the simple stimulus-reaction-stimulus-reaction response that imprisons the mind.

With practice, feelings will cease being milestones in meditation. You will develop the mental habit of acknowledging internal events without the reflexive need to constantly react to them. You will cease being the puppet of your emotional and mental changes. This is what we call “pure attention” and “clear seeing”.

Step 3: Taming the Cravings Monster

Objective: Inner Peace

During my early years of meditation, the hardest thing I had to deal with was the cravings. Cravings to eat, talk, exercise, the list goes on. I’d think about whether or not I was hungry before meditation, and went into my practice wondering if was about to feel hungry. I’d get the urge to talk, and get frustrated that I couldn’t get up and leave. It could be really distracting, and the more my mind focused on these things the more angry the “Cravings Monster” would become.

At times it felt like this whole system did not allow me to do as I wished. I kept telling myself that I couldn’t help it; feelings are feelings, right? At the same time, I couldn’t help reining in my feelings or telling my mind to “shush” – the noise just kept escalating and growing louder and louder in my head.

This is normal, my teacher told me. Think how many years you’ve lived with the constant chatter in your skull, and now all of a sudden you’re asking your mind to be quiet. He told me not to fight it with my mind. “Just let go and breathe. Remember, you only have to fight if you participate in the war.”

So eventually I just gave up and surrendered. The Cravings Monster who pranced and hopped here and there in front of me, angrily demanding attention, eventually ran out of steam. Eventually he spent his rage and curled up by my feet. He had nowhere else to go. We were both there in that moment, together.

You see, the whimsical Gods of Distraction do not send these monsters to ruin our meditation, but to test our faith and inner strength. And so you see, meditation is not solely about cultivating peace and calm within, but gaining inner strength and self-belief too.

When distractions hit during meditation (they will do so in deliberate abundance), be firm but gentle. Know that even the angriest Cravings Monsters are part of you. They (you) will appreciate that a delay in gratification does not equate to abandonment or a threat upon survival, but a practical lesson in discipline and fortitude.

Step 4: Stick to the path

Objective: Mindfulness

Compared to our consciousness, the subconscious is a memory-hoarding monster. By the time we reach adulthood, the subconscious comprises thousands of layers of emotional, physical and intellectual events. The structure in which these memories are kept can disregard logic, chronology or any sort of order. With meditation, these mangled, jumbled memories might arise into the consciousness in strange and sometimes unfriendly forms.

There is nothing inside of us that we have not already seen and survived through. Even the hardest of experiences has played a role in making us a smarter, stronger and more resilient species in general, and as individuals performing functionally in our day-to-day roles.

Like the angry Cravings Monster, arising memories too are events that might take part during meditation. No matter how overwhelming these memories can be, they wouldn't have risen to your consciousness if you weren't ready to face them.

As these memories arise during meditation, imagine using them as your mirror for self-reflection – in front of you, yet apart.

If it gets difficult to remain in the now, return to your anchors. Clench your hands in tight fists. This will bring back your awareness to your palms. You can use this technique to work all the way up through your body, from toe to head, clenching and releasing each body part as you go. Noticing every inch of your body will bring your awareness back to centre.

Practice deep breathing for a few minutes: Take long, deep, watchful breaths, noticing how the stream of oxygen fills your body and leaves it so powerfully yet so effortlessly. Become one, here and now, with this life force. You might like to repeat a deeply reverberating mantra, such as, “I am here. I am present. I am one with the earth”.

As long as you remain mindfully aware of everything, nothing, no matter how deeply hidden inside can hurt you (anymore).

Step 5: Metta

Objective: *Loving-Kindness*

To wrap up everything we have covered in this post, *metta* is the tool that will smooth the rough edges and soothe whatever conflicts that may have risen, whether during meditation or away from it.

‘Metta’ is a multi-significant Pali word meaning loving-kindness, friendliness, goodwill, benevolence and fellowship. Metta can be cultivated through the practice of meditation, and is a practice that overflows into daily life as a result.

Think of your emotions like fluid energies. Imagine taking droplets of love and rubbing it on your sores and bruises, both emotional and physical. Dab some on your cravings and desires, on the visions you feel uncomfortable with during meditation and on your well-serving, long-seated stiff limbs and joints.

When you’re done lathering yourself with that love, imagine spreading it above like a canopy over the people closest to you. Then spread the canopy of love a little wider to fellow meditators, to strangers and sweethearts, to the sick and sad and sorry, to all sentient beings.

There is no good deed that is lost. Practicing metta, or visualising the spread of love, will return to you in multitude from every being who has received your offer of loving-kindness. And that is a lot of love and protection and fuel to confirm you on this path, to free you from mental suffering.

How One Morbid Affirmation Will Transform Your Life Right Now

There are few absolute truths in life, but one that is undeniable is this – the only thing that has any substance is the ‘now’. That is to say that this moment, happening right now, is the only thing that matters. It is the only thing that exists and has any relevance to our perceived existence.

The reason for this is that nothing can be happening in the past or in the future; things can only happen in the present. Nothing can exist in the past, and any perception of the future is a non-reality because it is yet to happen, and probably won’t happen, at least not in the way we imagine it will.

Seen in this way, this is an incredibly simple teaching, and one that deep down we all know. So then why do we have such trouble acknowledging and accepting this truth? For example, why do we constantly allow the past to dictate how we feel in the present? The reason is identity.

Our identity is comprised of thoughts – and the subsequent emotions they stir up – stored in the brain.

If we choose to completely disregard the past, we effectively lose our identity: the friends we knew at school, the sports we were once good at, the people we cherished, the first car we owned, the degree we completed, the awards we won. These things give us a sense of self, a confirmation of who we are – an identity. These are the things we believe represent and equate our worth in the world.

We also collect memories of the past to further support this identity – think pictures, videos, diaries, objects. These are all reminders of what once existed and subsequently contributed to the person we are today. These memories are the roots of our identity, roots we often romanticise and persecute and allow to distort our perception of the past and control our potential in the future.

It is no coincidence that the older we get, the more sentimental we become over the past. “Ah, the good old days”.

Youth pushes us forward towards the next challenge, as we seek to learn, understand and succeed. I remember being so excited to make double figures when I was 10 years old. For me it couldn't have come soon enough. Yet as the years mature, we anxiously try to hold on to wilted branches that support our identity and reassure the ego of our relevance and capabilities. Is that natural human instinct? To some degree, yes, I'm sure it is.

For reference, have a quick look on Facebook. At 37, I still consider myself pretty young. Yet all my school friends are posting pictures from the playground, talking about reunions, how good music from the late 80s was and how the dreaded “40” is just around the corner. “I can't believe how old we are!”

This is compounded by the fact that as we age, more people we know die. Four people I knew from school have died in the last year, and as I enter my 40s, 50s and 60s, that number will naturally escalate.

So while our identity is based largely on the past, it is also based on our fear of facing the future.

The future means getting older, which brings with it the prospect of having to face our mortality. We know deep down that we'll end up looking like those people we used to call "old" when we were kids and teens, we'll be less mobile and more prone to injury and eventually we will get sick and die.

We graduate from kids who can't wait to be grown-ups to adults fearing the future and tightening our grip on the past. But the past can't comfort us, because it doesn't exist.

The result is that we end up living in a limbo of sorts. We become straddled in a fearful, nostalgic state, for which the only exit is to embrace death as the high cost of living and move forward in its sanctuary of certainty.

Life is for living, and going back to what I wrote at the very start of this post, the "now" is the only reality we have. If you are not living in the now, then you are not truly living.

Don't let fear of the unknown lead you to hide in the valleys of your past. Instead, cultivate a positive acceptance and appreciation of life and the inevitability of its interdependent cousin, death.

How? By saying this one simple affirmation:

"One day I will die".

That's it. There, I said it. Now it's your turn.

Say it. No really, say it out loud.

Most would label this a morbid affirmation, but accepting this truth is a fundamental part of fully embracing life and seizing the moment. If death isn't enough to motivate you to throw off your self-made shackles and hug someone you love then I don't know what is.

I don't know about you, but right now I plan on living forever. "Now" is all I have, and so far so good.

I have accepted that I will die. When my ride is here, I will get in gracefully. But it's not part of my plan today, and nor will it be any other day.

When you liberate yourself from the past and accept the only inevitable fate of the future, life suddenly looks very different. Stress, worry, fear and negativity dissipate because they have no grounding to take hold. Suddenly the world radiates a powerful energy that makes you feel almost reborn. You fall awake into the world.

A tree never grows downwards. It reaches upwards towards the sun. Be that tree.

I'm not going to sit around thinking about how good life once was: how I used to have hair and wrinkle-free eyes, how I used to run 100 metres in 13.5 seconds, how I used to be so happy playing with my brother on our yearly family holiday when I was nine years old,

how my parents once loved each other dearly, how great it was when my group of male friends were footloose and fancy-free.

None of that exists. It is just old data on the hard drive.

Sure, I can access that data if I dig around in the archives, but I'd sooner set up a new folder, open a new document and create a new file.

I'm winning. And so are you.

Every day the light comes in through the window and my eyelids peel back into my head is a win. And when you're winning a race, the worst thing you can do is stop and look behind you at who might beat you to the line.

Don't get me wrong, it's cool to reminisce about fun times; I love a good catch up with the guys to laugh about the stupid stuff we did way back when. But the good old days can't beat better new days, and it's up to us to create them.

My identity is whoever I am in this moment. I cannot be identified by who I was a year ago, let alone ten. Don't judge yourself or anyone else by who they were yesterday. To do so will only create another tie to a past and identity that no longer exist.

The chance to be a great person: to be happy, successful (whatever that means to you), kind, loving, honest and generous does not fade with time. We have the amazing ability to do all that in this moment.

This is the power of now, something ever so more powerful than the past or the future.

21 Mindful Habits You Can Adopt Today

Mindfulness is a state of purposeful attention in the present. When you are mindful, you observe your thoughts and feelings without judging them as good or bad.

Mindfulness is to step into the moment, the here and now, to cultivate a pure awareness of the true nature of things, unspoiled by the mind's persistent evaluation and judgment.

In turn, this gives us a more reliable, compassionate, contented state of being with which to steer our ship through life's difficult waters, helping us escape the rampant desire and self-limiting fear that causes us mental suffering.

Mindfulness is something we can all benefit from, something that with daily practice can lead us towards sustainable inner peace and loving oneness with the world.

Life is anything but predictable, and never exists at a single, steady pace. It is a roller-coaster of change and emotion, and just when you think you've managed to get things under control, a hurricane of stimulants sweep through your mind and your positive habits are thrown into disarray.

This is where the beauty of mindfulness comes into its own. There's always this moment – right now – to start again and cultivate a more profound awareness of the person playing this role in this sitcom we call life. And soon enough, from under the rubble

of repeated confusion and despondence, bloom buds of greater self-awareness and self-understanding.

So step into the present moment today with these '21 Mindful Habits' and begin your journey to a better understanding of your purpose and place in the world, and a greater compassion for your shortcomings and those of others. But remember to take your time, for the more patient the practice, the greater the reward.

1. Develop one habit at a time

The first habit is to start your journey slowly. Choose one positive habit and keep at it until it becomes so natural that not a day goes past without it naturally arising.

2. Practice gratitude

It is important to take daily notice of the blessings we receive; it reminds us to find joy in the smallest of things. As we practice gratitude, we become increasingly aware that there's always something to be thankful for, even in the bleakest situation.

3. Feel your feet and palms

Clench your hands into tight fists and release. Clench. Release. Clench. Release. Do the same thing with your toes. And if that's too much dexterity, just wiggle your toes. This is one of the physical anchors of self-awareness capable of bringing you into the present moment.

4. Notice the environment

You don't have to react or manipulate your feelings and surroundings to stay rooted in the present moment; just take notice of what's going on, and move on.

A great way to re-centre in the present is to take a walk in the park, by the sea or any nature-blessed area. Allow your mind to let go and just notice all the wonderful smells, sounds, objects and movement going on. Observe how everything is just as it should be, and remains so no matter how much you evaluate its presence and purpose.

5. Set a cyclic alarm

Set an alarm to ring every few hours to remind you to stop what you're doing and detachedly observe how you are thinking and feeling for a minute or two. This is a simple way to bring your awareness back to centre and prevent you being swept along on autopilot.

6. Breathe deeply

Yoga teachings say that the longer the breath, the longer you live. Inhale and slowly count to three, then exhale and do the same again. Employ your entire torso: your nostrils, throat, collarbones, ribcage and diaphragm. Feel the rush of fresh, oxygenated blood fill you with renewed life.

7. Prioritise

Mindfulness is a practice that needs prioritising. It needs to get as close as possible to the top of your mental awareness, assuming the role of gatekeeper for your daily tasks.

8. Turn down the noise

Turn off your gadgets for a couple of hours: your TV, your smartphone and your tablet. Once you get used to being without these things for while, you'll find that you don't miss the noise, and it certainly won't miss you.

9. Listen, don't just hear

A conversation costs not only your time and attention but someone else's too. It's a precious privilege to be able to listen intently and interact in this way with others. Being mindful of that privilege means offering your undivided attention for the duration of the conversation and being as mentally present as possible.

10. Watch what you eat

Literally look at, sniff and taste your food properly, and don't do anything else while you eat. Dietary regimes teach us to watch what we eat, but mindful eating makes things much simpler than counting calories. The mindfulness approach triggers a natural ability to identify which foods the body thrives on and those that are just convenient, quick fixes. While eating, consider where your

food came from, how it grew and its journey from the land to your plate.

11. Take a shower

Workers in the creative fields swear by this. There's something wholly mindful about washing away the cobwebs (so to speak), and emerging fresh and ready to flourish. There's also a fair few mindful activities going on while you shower too.

12. Delete time-wasting mobile & computer apps

If you haven't used an app for more than a month, chances are you don't need it. And if you don't need it, it's wasting resource and space. Ever wondered how much time you waste searching through the pile for an app that you actually do need?

13. Read

Reading is a form of meditation, and a wonderful way to bring the mind home. Reading triggers some of the same effects as meditation: a slowing of thoughts and calming of the mind, reducing heart rate and heightening ability to focus.

14. Break your day into parts

Why? Because if you are mindful about how you spend a day, you'll naturally progress to being mindful about how you're spending your life.

15. Meditate or queue up

And if you can't meditate because you're short on time, choose the longest queue in the store. Having to wait is one of the best ways to accept your place in the moment.

16. Nap

Whether a few minutes or half an hour, naps are an awesome way to just "be" for a while.

17. Smile to strangers

There's a Sufistic saying that "*one should be kind to strangers, lest they may be angels in disguise.*" Say no more.

18. Listen to your intuition

People who practice mindfulness can, after some time, better connect and learn to trust their intuition. Mindfulness helps hone one's inner guide, that voice we often ignore because it contradicts logic, but is the very pathway to inner peace. Start listening and trusting your intuition. The results will speak for themselves.

19. Choose your words

Begin taking note of how you speak with others. Often preconceptions and misguided beliefs lead us to come across in a

way that doesn't truly reflect our inner person. Moreover, our personal frustration, insecurities, fears and anger shape the whip of our tongue. Do you speak kindly to others, or have you fallen into an autopilot pattern of speaking in a harsh tone? Do you come across as critical or judgmental?

20. Speak kindly to yourself

We can only be as kind to others as we are to ourselves. Take a few moments to notice how you speak to yourself. What is the inner commentator saying? Is he or she cheering you on as you surmount life's challenges, or does he or she criticise you unfairly? Be patient with yourself, praise yourself in your efforts and forgive yourself in your shortcomings. You are but a human.

21. Cry

Crying creates a connection between our feelings, thoughts and physical reactions. Not only is it an act of bravery whereby we expose our weaknesses, it is a wonderful release of emotion - both negative and positive - that rejuvenates the soul and helps us come into the present moment.

How Self-Help Prevents You Finding True Happiness (& What to Do About It)

The self-help world can be a deceptive and contradictory landscape, one that purposely pulls your mind from pillar to post, promising that the next method will be better than the last, and deceiving you into believing that your lack of progress is due to not “manifesting” or “visualising” enough.

The rinse and repeat approach to keeping people from finding sustainable contentment in life is a multi-billion dollar industry that uses a simple, cyclical formula:

- Set goals.
- Visualise success.
- Take action.
- Attract abundance.
- Repeat.

Not working for you? Still feel like something is missing in your life? Still unhappy? Still stressed, anxious, sleepless?

The self-help industry offers up a plethora of systems, programs and entrepreneurial gurus to follow. While all are accompanied by varying positive marketing messages, a large number of these products are deceptive.

And here’s why...

A large percentage of self-help brands package “spirituality” as a vehicle to amassing material wealth. Success is equated by your ability to continually achieve bigger and better things, the majority linked to financial gain. Rather than liberating your mind, the goal is to imprison it further by feeding the ego, until you are drowning in a cycle of desire that is in absolute contradiction to elevating your consciousness to a better understanding of self.

Contentment in life transpires when we let go of the grasping, when we stop chasing the next best thing and conditionally attaching our happiness to the acquisition of material goods and superficial goals, when we seek love and selflessness, cultivate internal and external compassion and let go of the vacuous rampancy of the untamed ego.

To discover contentment, we must turn the search inwards. We must learn to be unconditionally present to see the true nature of what is. Only then do we cultivate the mental clarity required to achieve a neutral understand of our purpose and place in the world.

Only when we begin to feed on the nectar of inner contentment does life begin to effortlessly fall into place. Only once we have set foot upon the pathway to self-acceptance do we discover that there is no magic system for unlocking “success” and “happiness”. We begin to naturally grow into ourselves and become everything we need to be, or should I say already are, albeit unrealised.

As a result, the opportunity, prosperity and mental contentment we seek independently transpire and manifest in our consciousness.

But instead we have a tendency to chase the delusion. We are fooled by the constant evaluations and judgements of the mind. The self-help industry preys upon this delusion, convincing us that our dreams and soul-fulfilling happiness is just out of reach. However, with their new and proven step-by-step method, you can have all that your heart desires.

The paradox of “self-help” is that it keeps us rooted in the same cycle of mental suffering we are seeking to escape. The same desire we seek to satisfy is used to keep us investing our time and money, with the promise of fulfilment always so close but just out of reach.

Metaphorically speaking, no matter how expensive the metal bars, and how attractive the room’s décor, a caged bird never finds joy in its imprisonment. And if we are not careful, self-help can trap us in a mental cage, in the illusion that we’re “almost there”. Just one last step and you can set yourself up for one more disappointment, over and over again.

Don’t get me wrong here; I am not putting down those who spend their lives helping others. I am personally in touch with many wonderful people who use mindfulness, CBT and other holistic methods to help people overcome anxiety, depression, ADHD, anger problems and other behavioural and mental health issues. I have great admiration for these people.

Moreover, in this digital age, whatever the nature of our business, we all need to engage in some level of self-promotion to connect with those we wish to establish relationships with. Therefore none of us are immune from getting caught up in our own PR at times,

including me. For example, to reach more readers I ask people to subscribe to my newsletter. My books, by nature of the beast, have to be promoted if they are to have any chance of finding an audience.

What I am referring to specifically are the self-help brands and shrewd entrepreneurs that have emerged through the web in the last 10 years, those who bombard people with emails containing the underlying message that they aren't good enough, but could be if they do X, Y, and Z.

I am specifically talking about the marketers selling mindfulness, meditation and spirituality in general as a means to acquire financial wealth on a par with their own, as a means to become as "successful" as they have become.

The contradiction in this can be immediately identified by anyone who has experienced and understands the nature of these personal tools, which is in short, a profound awareness of just how fruitless living a life in sole pursuit of material wealth and the admiration of others is.

In fact, the theme at the root of nearly every troubled person who asks for my advice is one of *not being good enough*. Their stress, anxiety, depression or simple discontentment in life is driven by a feeling of not having delivered to the expectations of others, be it family, friends or society as a whole. In nearly every case, they are searching for an elusive, tangible something that can cure their perceived lack of success and personal fulfilment. A person in this mind-set is a self-help marketer's dream subscriber.

Of course, the answer is not another system, but instead to turn the search inwards. Because taking an external lead from those who ultimately have a self-serving agenda – those teaching others to indulge in delusions of grandeur and artificial, fleeting happiness – will never provide any lasting contentment.

This is where mindfulness practice thrives. It provides a spiritual compass that switches the mind's emphasis from outwardly searching to inwardly seeking – from one of material, superficial gain to that of first learning to be kind and compassionate to oneself, and then to spreading loving-kindness to others.

If you find yourself caught in a cycle of self-help delusion, turning from one magic solution to the next, in the hope that you'll one day achieve wealth and success beyond your wildest dreams and live happily ever after, stop a moment and consider this:

The self-actualisation you are seeking through superficial valleys won't lead you to the top of the mountain. Like a carrot dangled in front of a donkey, the anxious journey will never end.

The self-wholeness you unconsciously want to feel will not be fulfilled through a constant desire for more money, or an increased ownership of material assets.

The panting will not stop at the next goal post because there is no finish line in this race. The constant desire to feel worthier, to feel ever more accomplished and accepted, will lead you to disappointment and emptiness every time. You will end up right back where you started.

The truth is that you don't need to do anything. No programs, no systems, no secret techniques.

Before you fall into the trap of believing the answers reside in changing yourself to align with the ideas and methods of others, start by turning the search inwards to begin understanding who you are, and who this person with all these thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions really is.

We all want to prosper in life: We all want an enjoyable job, to have a loving family, to take lovely holidays, to save lots of money and enjoy our retirement. But life is not a template, and we are not clones of each other. What is good for the goose may not be good for the gander. We need to understand who we are we, what it is we really want and what actions are capable of filling these insatiable cravings that never let the mind have a minute's peace.

What is the point in arriving at what was sold to us as the vital piece of the puzzle, the final link in the chain, only to ask, "Why am I here"? And, "Why do I still feel the same?"

The doorway to inner peace is always unlocked. But only you can open the door and walk through it.

Step away from the judging, the wanting and the anticipating for a moment. Let go of past grievances and future expectations and stand naked in purposeful awareness for a while.

Come home to yourself.

Everything you need is right here.

How a Fish Taught Me the Meaning of Life Over Lunch

Yesterday I sat by a pond to eat my lunch. A particularly peaceful spot, there were some *koi* carp circling the pond's perimeter.

As I sat in quiet contemplation munching on my pasta and vegetables, a surprising thing happened. A fish swam around the pond. When it reached the point at where I sat, did a quick roll onto its side and darted off.

At first I thought this was just a one-off, until two other fish followed suit in a game-like fashion. I realised that this was probably what they did to attract the attention of potential feeders standing nearby.

I had no suitable food to offer them, but the event brought my lunchtime to life, and my solitary contemplation was suddenly blessed by an impromptu relationship; a surprise connection with some hungry fish.

What struck me was their apparent awareness of my presence and inclination to perform this display. Now, I'm sure someone far more intelligent than I will explain that this is a learned behaviour of association and fish aren't conscious of such individual interactions. Either way, the connection between our two species at that moment, whatever scientific form it may have taken, was very real.

My thoughts took a turn to the interconnectivity of life, to the way in which life is always complemented by relationships. In a way, we

are never alone, never living an individualistic existence, no matter how much we may try, or disconnected we may feel.

In essence, the 'I' doesn't exist. If you look around there is always a 'we', no matter what, be it someone near you, the sound of a bird singing in a tree, or indeed a fish joining you for lunch.

I digress...

When we consider life to be an individual pursuit of survival, happiness and success, it is easy to cast a blanket of pointlessness over everything we do and label life as meaningless.

Without knowing what is beyond our present consciousness, we must accept that each one of us is just a conglomeration of atoms making up a very small part of a much bigger picture. It doesn't matter to Mother Nature which physical body her energy manifests itself within. The host is irrelevant. She requires only that it exists. Human or fish, life is random in this way, a birth lottery. It is indifferent. In the eyes of Mother Nature, we are all part of the same interdependent cycle.

Yet we defiantly choose to look at the individual picture, identifying and categorising by status, colour, religion, political persuasion, etc. Mother Nature, on the other hand, looks at the bigger picture – that every life source is an equally valid contributor to her perpetual cycle of life. Every source of energy has its rightful place, regardless of gender, demographic data or species.

My encounter with the fish reminded me that existence is always relational, and this is what gives it beautiful meaning. Look around and you will see that everything is in a relationship with something else. From the galaxies and solar systems to the sub-atomic structure of matter, everything is interacting, supporting, facilitating and co-operating.

And so it becomes clear that to individualise one's existence in an attempt to create greater individual meaning (success) is a vacuous pursuit that works against the very principle of the universe.

When life is seen in this way, the mind is freed from individual suffering and a collective consciousness is awakened within. An energy arises that brings us closer together, enabling us to share our resources and create a better existence for all. We are reminded that we are all experiencing the same obstacles, fears and insecurities. When shared, things are far easier to cope with.

If we look at life through the lens of Mother Nature, through the eyes of one consciousness, the individual experience dissipates and is replaced by a higher collective experience that binds everything together.

When we see the world in this way, life begins to shift the focus from the "I" to the "we", to the bigger picture. The bigger picture is a liberating realisation that lifts the weight from the shoulders of the internal individual battle and allows us to connect with the wider consciousness that exists outside of the ego.

And so we see that the individual existence we perceive is not pointless because it has no meaning, but valuable because it makes a contribution to life that lives on in everything else when comes to pass.

So what else is there to do but to submit to Mother Nature and live life through her lens of truth, which is encouraging us to reach out and connect with each other, to share good fortune, to lend a hand, to enjoy happiness collectively and work towards being the best that “we”, not “I”, can be.

How to Change the World in Just 1 Second

You know that moment when you have an urge to show some love, when you're consumed by feelings of kindness, compassion and empathy and want to do something selfless.

We all feel it occasionally. It swells from somewhere deep inside and compels us to reach out and take positive action for the greater good. There doesn't have to be a trigger, either. I mean, we don't need to see a charity collection box, a person struggling with a disability or bear witness to a tragedy to feel like reaching out and touching someone's life in a special way.

This feeling emanates from the soul. It stirs when we let go of the daily striving and reunify the mind with the one interdependent consciousness binding us all together. In that moment, we want to help, to understand, to appreciate, to listen, to show love.

This intention takes just a second to arise independently from within, and a second to act upon and truly make an effortless difference to the world.

But all too often we pull out at the very tip of that moment – usually unintentionally. We get distracted by the daily responsibilities nipping at our tail: the phone rings, your child is calling you, the dog wants to come back in from the garden, something on the news catches your attention, the dinner needs cooking, you realise you forgot to email that client back. Whatever it is, the intention dissolves amidst the distraction.

So yesterday, when I caught myself just about to pull out of my intention, I stopped everything I was doing and did two things: First, I acted.

I had been meaning to call someone I hadn't spoken to in a long while; someone I knew would love to hear from me. In previous weeks, every time I imagined how lovely it would be to chat, and how thrilled that person would be to get the call, I let life's perpetual motion drag me off somewhere else.

Having the thought felt great, but the fantasy was preventing the reality from taking place. So instead of thinking about it, I just did it. And it was so very rewarding.

The second thing I did straight after the call, was begin writing this post as a reminder to stop letting future intentions dissolve into zero action.

As I began writing and breaking down in my mind what it takes to make a positive impact on the lives of others and the world at large, the reality became very apparent – it takes just a second. We know this already, don't we? And that's a huge part of it. We absolutely know what a difference a second can make, but we just don't take enough of this positive action because we're too busy letting "life" get in the way. And whether the action is an act of kindness to yourself or someone else, the positive energy that arises as a result benefits everyone in and around the interaction.

For example, let's say you can see the sun going down out of the window and have a beautiful thought about running outside, sitting on the grass and witnessing day turn to night, but instead you close the curtain and carry on surfing the web or doing the washing up. If you had taken a second to make that intention (thought) happen, you'd be a happier, calmer person for the rest of the evening and probably well into the next day, which would no doubt benefit your life and, because of your improved mood, that of those you come into contact with.

Similarly, maybe an image of the old lady down the street pops into your mind. She's sitting alone watching TV in her chair, the same chair she sits and watches TV every day in. You think about how it would make her feel if you rang the doorbell and asked if she'd like to come over for a cup of tea and get out of the house for a while. But you don't. The thought dissolves without action. A wonderful opportunity slips by.

We all think about such things, but how often do we take a second to act?

If we act on these imaginary intentions of good, no matter how insignificant or fantasy-like they seem holed up in our minds, we could collectively change the world. We'd trigger a pinball effect of kindness that would bounce between us and simultaneously raise everyone's happiness and appreciation of each other.

So, to remind myself to take a second to turn these mental intentions into realities, I wrote a poem (sort of) about the power of being able to change the world in just one second through a

simple act of kindness or appreciation. Unsurprisingly, I called this “Just a Second”. Maybe it will inspire you to do the same.

Just A Second

It only takes a second to call on another, your neighbour, your friend, your sister, your brother

It only takes a second to make someone smile, to offer your kindness, your friendship and stay just a while

It only takes a second to say that you’re sorry, for causing that hurt, that pain, that worry

It only takes a second to make a small change, to offer a hand or ask someone’s name

It only takes a second to make someone’s day, to say you look great or simply say “hey”

It only takes a second to open your mind, to show some compassion and stop being blind

It only takes a second to turn darkness to light, to see with your heart and do what feels right

What If This Is a Dream? Why My Dad's Answer Changed My Life

I was seven years old when I said something that my Dad says has stayed in his memory for life, something he still remembers word for word like it was yesterday.

I remember it vividly too.

I was sitting in the back of my Dad's car, driving to the corner store where we'd stop on a Sunday. Dad would get his paper and buy me a comic or magazine of my choice. I remember really wanting to be a fan of *Beano* and *Dandy*, but always found the desire of wanting one of those comics more intriguing than the read.

In hindsight, I think it was more the creativity of the comic I admired rather than the stories inside, although I did quite enjoy *Roy of the Rovers*, and became a collector for a while. It wasn't long though, after having expressed an interest in the wonders of the world, that my Dad bought me a subscription to *National Geographic*. I remember only reading the text snippets and not the full articles, but thoroughly enjoyed the fabulous photography of the natural world.

Anyway...

My creative mind must have been on high alert that day. I remember staring out the car window and suddenly saying, "*Dad, what if this is all a dream, and when we're asleep, that's the real*

world? Or, what if this is all a dream, and one day we will wake up in another world?"

In a child-like way, I was referring to the possibility that the physical world is not the reality we presume it to be, and that the dream world is in fact the real world, or indeed another world that we are yet to discover.

My Dad simply answered, *"You might well be right, son, that's a great thought."*

I'm sure there was some conversation after my Dad's answer, but neither of us can recall what was said next.

This moment in time popped into my head the other night, as I was about to fall sleep. I didn't think too much on it as I was dropping off, but when I woke the following morning the thought was immediately with me again. And so I explored it over breakfast. As I pondered, it struck me that the thought process I had in the back of that car was of massive importance to my life progression.

Here's why...

My Dad could have used science to reason with me as to why my speculative philosophy was probably wrong. Indeed, he could have explained how and why dreams occur, and how highly unlikely it is that we are going to wake up one day in another world. Being an atheist, some might have expected him to offer his firm viewpoints on life and educate his son in the same way he thought about life.

Instead, my Dad recognised that this was more than just a random thought process. This was the culmination of my previous pondering and observation. He recognised that I had started an important journey, one that without doubt has contributed to my teenage and adult interest in the inner workings of the mind, books I've read and people I've taken an interest in, and one that has influenced my involvement in the creative industries, travelling, starting this blog and a whole host of other things I have done thus far.

With his simple answer, my Dad empowered me to believe that my thoughts, all be it far-fetched in the eyes of some, were valid and had basis for further research. His answer nurtured my mental growth and my critical mind. In that moment he let me be free.

Thinking about that philosophical epiphany at seven years old has also gotten me thinking that, no matter how old we get, we should never do ourselves the disservice of believing our mind to be full, or even half full for that matter. Leaving the mind open to life's possibilities is essential for personal and spiritual growth. The imagination is a wonderful thing, not least because what can be perceived can be achieved, as they say.

Who knows what's out there? Who knows what's coming next? While it's true that I don't need to know, I shall remain as I was in the back of that car at seven years old, happy to use my imagination to drive the potential of possibility.

10 Easy Ways to Snap Out of a Bad Mood & Find Instant Mental Peace

A bad mood can be a pretty difficult thing to shake off. Often we have no idea how we ended up in such a miserable pickle, and how to snap out of it.

Bad moods have a horrible habit of lingering around, making us feel uneasy, stressed, cynical and angry at the world.

Sometimes a bad mood can hang around for days, affecting our work, sleep and relationships. The more we vent our frustrations and project our moans onto friends and family, the deeper the mood seems to manifest itself and drag us down.

Luckily a bad mood isn't an illness, and most of us experience one every couple of weeks. Usually they are caused by a blend of negative triggers such as a heavy workload, being overtired, bored, worried and in general being led astray by the Monkey Mind that jumps from thought to thought provoking our fears, anxieties and grumbles at life's unfair shenanigans.

The good news is that I've got a host of easy, holistic cures designed to help you find a sanctuary of mental and renewed harmony with the world. So next time a bad mood knocks you out of sync and narrows your field of vision, try one or more of these simple actions.

1. Walk it off

Simple but incredibly powerful, exercise is a proven way to release stress and get those endorphins flowing. But this type of walk is about more than just exercise. Going outside and reconnecting with the earth is a spiritual action that will dissolve negativity in mind and body. The idea is to keep walking until the bad mood walks itself away. Don't do anything except walk and notice the world. Keep a steady pace and embrace the weather, be it rain or shine. Feel the wind in your face, the sun on your skin or the cold snapping at your ears. Get out there and let your "primal self" roam.

2. Create a personal bad mood mantra

Mantras are a powerful way to re-centre the mind and can be as short as one word or as long as a few sentences. As soon as you feel the tentacles of a bad mood poking at your mind, simply recite your mantra, either out loud or internally, to beat back the negativity. I like to use very simple, empowering mantras that act as touch points to take me out of the moment and enable me to see the triviality of my mind-set. For example, when I feel myself getting stressed, I repeat, "Be spacious, be spacious". Develop a couple of mantras of your own to help combat bad moods and general feelings of negativity.

3. Stretch your hamstrings

It sounds strange, but when was the last time you did this? I bet it has been a good while. The hamstrings take a lot of stress from you being on your feet all day, and also get very stiff if you don't do much exercise. Stretching them out releases tension in the legs, stomach and lower back, which subsequently releases tension right up into your neck and head. Try it now. Even if you can't touch your toes, jump on YouTube for some basic hamstring stretches and see how great you feel afterwards. Those who do Yoga or Pilates will know exactly what I am talking about here.

4. Sit outside on your favourite step

Got a favourite step, tree, or wall? Well go sit on it a while. Watching the world go by is a beautiful activity wherever it takes place, but is best done outside in the company of Mother Nature. Having an energy exchange with her ladyship will help you rebalance and recalibrate. But whatever you do, leave your phone indoors!

5. Do some gentle neck rolls

Did you know that your neck bones are connected to much more than the neck? Much of the tension and pain you have in your head and shoulders is related to stiffness in the neck, so when you loosen up your neck muscles, everything else in your body gets looser along with it.

You'll also improve glandular function for the thyroid, pineal and pituitary glands, which in turn will stimulate an increase in mental clarity and alertness that helps you snap out of that haze hovering over your head and contributing to your bad mood. Start by dipping your chin towards your chest and then rolling your head around 360 degrees in a slow and controlled motion. If you hear some clicking and grinding, that's a sign that a neck stretch is long overdue.

6. Take a nap

I'm willing to bet that ninety per cent of the time you get in a bad mood, you know, all stressy and shouty with others, is because you're over tired. So don't fight it, be kind to yourself and take a nap. The more you ignore the desperate calls of your eyelids, the more miserable you will become. Your mind and body are crying out for some relaxation, so find a quiet place, close the curtains and rest for at least 30 minutes. A nap improves alertness and general bodily performance without leaving you feeling groggy or interfering with night time sleep. And best of all, you'll feel all the more positive and happy for it.

7. Exit the digital highway

Even when we are not looking at our phones, often we are subconsciously anticipating a notification, be it an email, message or a call. This constant attachment to our digital companion stops us properly relaxing and being completely engaged with whatever it is we are doing. The same goes for having the TV on in the

background while you are at home, or the laptop lid open or tablet on standby on the coffee table. Try breaking this constant *connection* and steer your mind away from the digital highway for a while. Switch everything off. Eliminate the digital noise, close your eyes and meditate a while.

8. Read a good book

Now there's a revolutionary idea! And something we seldom get to do in our busy, fast-paced lives. Think back to when you were a child and your parents would read you stories, or those books you read as a teenager. It was magical, right? A good book is a passage to another world. Reading is a positive form of escapism and release that takes you out of your mood and into a new, alternative moment.

9. Commit a spontaneous act of kindness

If you feel tense and moody, a fast-acting cure is to simply do something kind for someone else. Do something spontaneous like helping an old person across the road, giving some clothes to a charity shop or donating your time to help someone in need. Whatever comes to mind, just do it. Leave your moody self behind and step into a selfless moment of kindness and compassion. The feel-good factor you'll get from helping someone in need will give you a free, healthy dose of happiness.

10. Be grateful

Bad moods are usually pretty selfish endeavours. We find ourselves like a bull in a china shop, hot-headed and destructive. But if we simply stop everything, sit down (and do one of the above) and make a list of all the wonderful things we have in our lives, we soon see that we should be pretty darn grateful and stop being such a party pooper. Seen in this way, bad moods are a positive way of finding our way back to the true reality of things; a pathway back to mental peace and contentment.

Why There's No Greater Success Than the One You're Experiencing Now

Whenever I refer to “success”, I feel compelled to point out that I’m talking about whatever it means to you personally.

I say this because success doesn’t have to mean getting to the top of a career ladder or earning lots of money, as we have become somewhat programmed to believe. Success should be a personal expression of what makes you feel content and brings joy to your life.

Success can be defined as simply as turning another person’s frown into a smile, or just being able to walk outside and feel the wind in your face. But instead we allow ourselves to be influenced by a marketing narrative, one that primarily attributes the label of success to those who amass material possessions and command the respect of others for their perceived greatness.

If we adhere to this definition, a person who has selflessly given their entire life to working for an orphanage is to be considered less successful than a millionaire property mogul. We see the former as a good person, as someone who is kind and compassionate, but not as successful as the latter.

This strange way of viewing success is harmful to your happiness, because when you compare your life to the gains of others, it is easy to find fault with your shortcomings and label yourself a failure. Even when you accomplish the level of acquisition that you

thought would make you happy, your goal posts are suddenly moved further away by someone who has even more than you do.

This material measure of success we compete for is naïve too. The truth is that even those we perceive to be very successful suffer from the same afflictions as we do. Millionaire or average salary worker, no one escapes the wrath of stress, the difficulties of interpersonal relationships and the constant battle with one's own mind.

But we are bamboozled by grandeur, by the misguided perception of a “fun party” we aren't invited to. We believe that others are enjoying a successful life and we aren't, and that we are therefore failing. Troubled in this way, we only see the surface clutter of the people we compare ourselves to, and have no idea of the emotional suffering they are experiencing.

We know this to be true by simply asking ourselves if we would perceive the same comparison if we were blind; if we couldn't see the way a person looked, or the possessions they owned.

Don't let your eyes fool you, for true success is not a parade of jewels or a party of over-indulgence. Don't go through life measuring success with the external perception of your eyes. Instead, turn the search inwards for a moment and ask yourself what success means to you.

Forget the long-term thinking and outward projection. Forget careers, money, cars, houses, a big retirement pot and the ego driving you to be remembered for your greatness, and consider this: For every aspect of your life you want to improve, comparing

yourself with others and setting expectations based on a movie-like ideology is causing you to miss out on the wonders of your life. No matter how special, how grand, how expensive or how beautiful, you will never be content with anything if you don't appreciate the small wins you achieve every day.

I'm talking about those little pieces of perfect success you choose to ignore while in awe of some greater life that someone else will always be living.

I'm talking about waking up in a warm, comfy bed, being able to walk, see and hear, or even just two of those three blessings.

I'm talking about having a mum, dad, brother or sister to speak to, having a best friend to rely on, having food on the table, having a child, being able to play with your cat or dog or being able to sit outdoors for a while.

I am talking about having an old yet pretty reliable car to go from A to B, having a job that doesn't pay a fortune but that you quite enjoy, or even having a job you hate but at the same time having the potential to leave and find something you do.

I'm sure you've heard the cliché "be grateful for what you have" before, but this is bigger than that.

These things might seem like a given, like self-entitlements, but on your road to those big goals in your life, don't forget to fall in love with these significant successes you are blessed with every day. Because if you don't learn how to nurture and love these nuggets of

happiness in your life, you have little hope of feeling contentment when you reach the top of whatever mountain you are trying to climb.

There is no greater success than the one you are experiencing right now. Live it.

6 Ways Anger Changes Who You Are & 5 Simple Steps to a Calmer Mind

We all have those days when we get to the end of our tether with life: Your partner doesn't appreciate you, your job sucks, bills keep going up, friends are being awkward, life is unfair and you just can't get a break. And to top it all off, you're tired as hell!

Just when you are on the edge of pulling your hair out, someone comes along and rubs you up the wrong way, causing you to erupt like a volcano.

The thing about anger is that we all do it differently. Some people huff and puff under their breath, some people lash out and lose the plot entirely, and others are more passive, choosing to go into silent retreat.

Anger can be very destructive, particularly if it becomes habitual default behaviour, a crutch for dealing with deeper issues we are unable to face up to and fully resolve.

Deep down we all have that primal instinct to attack when we feel backed into a corner; when we feel taken advantage of, humiliated or disrespected. For this reason, we can all benefit from learning to manage our anger in the best interests of ourselves and others.

Anger seldom brings about a positive outcome. It leads us into a delusional state, and the angrier we get the more we lose control of our thoughts and emotions. Anger takes the mind on an intoxicating trip, leading us away from the true nature of the

circumstances and often making things seem a whole lot worse than they really are.

Once we have calmed down, we often feel terrible for the things we've said and done, and for the hurt and pain we have caused, which in some cases is extremely difficult to repair. In hindsight, the wasted energy arguing, shouting and working ourselves up into a hurricane of emotional torment can seem quite ridiculous, especially considering the trivial nature of the circumstances that triggered the outburst.

Yes, it is natural to get angry now and again, but caught in a regular cycle of anger episodes can begin to change the nature of the mind, like a drug of sorts.

Whether you are suffering with anger management issues, or someone who occasionally flips your lid and regrets doing so, you will no doubt recognise the six characteristics below that describe the escalation of anger and how it manipulates your mind into a monster:

1. As you begin to get angry, you develop an inability to accept other people's dislikes and preferences because they conflict with your own standpoint.
2. When a person disagrees with your standpoint, you become caught in a whirlwind of random verbal projections and poor judgements that lead you to a delusional assessment of the situation.

3. You then create a false reality of the situation based on assumptions driven by unfounded judgements of what someone else thinks or has said.
 4. You then begin fabricating associations with past negative experiences and allowing your mind to convince you that the world is conspiring against you (taking everything personally).
 5. You develop an arrogant mind-set that convinces you that you would be better off isolating yourself from others because they don't understand you and lack the mental capacity to empathise with your position.
 6. The result is an inability to see the true nature of the situation and your faults within it. You are rendered unable to apologise and incapable of talking through and resolving issues peacefully.
- This cycle demonstrates how anger takes you on a trip that closes the mind to peaceful resolution, manipulating the way you see the world and interact with others, and isolating you in a lonely, depressed mental state.

But it's not all doom and gloom. By identifying what happens when we let anger get the better of us, we can develop ways of tempering its escalation.

Next time you feel as though you're about to boil over and let the monster out of its cage, try using this 5-step anger management strategy to centre your mind and control the situation for a peaceful and positive outcome.

Step 1: Identify and label the signs

There is a point, way before the worst symptoms of anger kick in, where we can feel that we are being pushed towards our limit; whether by someone's annoying or insulting behaviour or life's tendency to be unfair.

Learn to identify with this feeling of losing control. Take time out when you are in a calm state of mind to write down what it feels like to be nearing the edge.

What does the escalation of anger look like, what physical symptoms occur as it closes in? Perhaps at Stage 1 your breathing intensifies as you become anxious, and then at Stage 2 you begin to raise your voice sharply, and by Stage 3 you begin provocatively pointing and gesturing rudely at the person you are engaged with.

Building a visual collage of your anger's escalation on paper will help you develop a conscious control mechanism that prompts you to recognise which phase of self-destruction you are entering during a cycle of anger. In the early phases of escalation, when you still have a fair amount of control over your emotions, you'll be able to spot these signs and implement the following four steps.

Step 2: Walk away at your chosen trigger point (using your affirmation)

I know, I know, you've heard "just walk away" a hundred times before, and it's not that easy. But having completed Step 1, you now better understand the way your mind progressively controls

your physical actions during the escalation of your anger. Let's face it, you already know that the final outcome is never a positive one once your anger reaches a certain threshold.

The thing is this: we don't just want to walk away at the slightest sign of anger in any situation, because sometimes a limited amount of controlled aggression is required, and of course quite natural for human beings to experience during certain situations that require us to be strong, assertive and a tad forceful.

For example, if someone is trying to manipulate you into doing something you don't want to do, a firm "No" is a positive show of force. In this situation, it is beneficial for you to assert yourself and display strength of character.

What I am talking about is boiling over; when you lose control. Your trigger point for walking away should be at a point where you realise that you are close to the cliff's edge - that is - losing control of your mental ability to reason assertively and your capacity to control your physical actions. So learn where your control comfort zone is, and when you find yourself close to the perimeter and about to step outside, that's your trigger to walk away.

Now, be aware that you don't have to turn your back and walk away on the person you are engaged with without saying anything. Instead, take control of the situation by using a walk-away affirmation. For example, if a debate is getting too heated for comfort, you might choose to put your hands up, with palms facing at the other person (a sign of peace), and say, "I'm not comfortable

with where we are in this conversation right now, so I'm going to step outside and take a walk.

Of course, you can develop different affirmations for different situations, but the 'peace palms' approach is an effective one.

Step 3: Take a long, primal walk

At this point you are probably pretty fired up, and it's going to take you a while to cool off. So I recommend that you walk for as long as you can. Walking is a wonderful, natural way to calm the mind. If you have a park nearby, a trail to walk or any sort of natural setting where you can see trees and grass, that's perfect.

Walk as hard and fast as you need to, and if you feel compelled to run, do that for a while. There's no real template here. Just follow your primal instinct to get the release you need.

Once you feel calmer and have slowed to a reasonable pace, begin emptying your mind by focussing on the immediate environment. The trick here is to notice everything and judge nothing, to just be here: existing, breathing, seeing and smelling. Notice sounds, smells, objects, people, insects, everything and anything. See everything as it is, without attaching any meaning or critical thinking to the process. The only thing you should focus on is putting one foot in front of the other.

Once you feel calmer (give it at least 30 minutes), you might try some stretching, yoga or seated meditation. Don't try going straight into these releases after walking away from the tense

situation you were in; you will need to walk off the adrenaline pumping around your body first.

Step 4: Let go of the negativity and visualise the positive aspects of your life

You are now at the point where you will have calmed down and your mind is seeing somewhat clearer. The most important thing at this stage is not to re-engage with the negative emotions associated with the anger by revisiting the situation over and over in your mind, which we have a tendency to do, especially after an argument.

This will only encourage you to walk back into the situation and repeat the process, often with worse consequences.

For now it is important that you stay out of the angry space. To do this, pick a positive aspect of your life and focus on enjoying visuals surrounding this person or activity. It could be something fairly insignificant like practising your golf swing over and over in your mind, or something very close to your heart like visuals of spending time with your son or daughter.

Shroud your mind in a cloth of visual experiences surrounding that positive subject matter. Every time thoughts of the negative experience try to enter your space, simply take a deep breath and come back to the beginning and start again with focussing on this positive part of your life.

5. Empty the loose ends onto paper and fully let go

You might not reach this last stage until late in the day, or even the following day, but it is the most important part of the release process.

When you are completely free of negative emotions; when the anger has dissipated, the sadness evaporated and the mind is still, begin emptying your thoughts onto paper.

Now, it may be that you don't feel the need to do this every time you get angry, and it is of course largely dependent on the gravity of the situation, but this is a good habit to get into and a really helpful exercise for putting anger to bed for good. In fact, this is a really effective mindfulness exercise for times when you can't sleep and your mind is hopping around like a flea.

Make a cup of your favourite hot drink, find a quiet, relaxing space alone and, without forcing anything, write your post-anger thoughts down on paper. If nothing comes to mind, don't do anything; put the pen down and kick back with your drink. You can come back to writing when thoughts appear and the mood takes you.

Don't try to carefully construct sentences, and pay no attention to your grammar, spelling or writing style. Organise the page as you wish, perhaps separating your thoughts about different people and situations into different columns.

Where your emotions are concerned, try using a brainstorm bubble to create a picture of whatever you feel. You might feel sad,

restless, sorry or hopeful. Whatever you feel simply let the words spill onto the page.

You might be wondering why you need to bother revisiting the situation in this way now that you are already in a happier place. And this is a valid point. After all, the past doesn't exist any more and cannot be changed in any way.

Well, while this is true, we need this last step to completely let go and move on. Think of this as a writing meditation. This final step helps mentally download all the loose ends and put them to rest. If you don't do this and leave these loose ends festering, they will soon burrow themselves into your sub-conscious and niggle away at your new-found positive mind-set. The moment you are confronted with anger again, these niggles will joyfully reappear and galvanise the party.

Writing everything down in this way will give you the insight and perspective you need to see just how sporadic, unreliable and darn right silly the mind can be. In fact, I'm sure you'll end up chuckling to yourself a good few times during this practice - "I can't believe I said/did that!"

Also consider that this isn't just about you, either. You might be surprised to find that amidst the maze of words on the paper, you discover compassion for those who have upset you. In addition to your own shortcomings, you will appreciate that - like you - others too suffer with uncontrollable feelings that they occasionally let loose in a tirade of hurtful behaviour.

Things are said in anger that we don't mean. We become irrational amidst a general build up of stress, anxiety, frustration and tiredness, causing us to say and do things that don't truly reflect our nature. The more we study our minds, we realise this to be true, and in turn realise that we should be more forgiving of our behaviour and that of others.

This whole process is ultimately about forgiveness: forgiveness of yourself, which will allow you to move forward positively with clear seeing, and forgiveness of others, who require the same understanding and compassion that you do.

There are no further steps to guide you from here. Do what your heart is yearning for. If you want to cry, let it out. If you want to pick up the phone and say sorry, do that. If you want to hit the gym and break a hard sweat, do that.

Complete this healing process, move forward and let go. Anger is never helpful. It jades our perception of the true nature of circumstances and is by all accounts a destructive emotion. But remember to forgive yourself for getting angry. You are human, after all.

How to Quit and Still Win Comfortably

We've all been there. In fact, most of us go there at least once a week. You find yourself knee-deep and stressed in work you wish you'd never taken on. Whether it's a project or task you've been given at the office, or whether you've promised someone you'd do something for them and don't want to let them down, you're obliged and determined to see it through.

Perhaps the work is mentally challenging and requires maximum brainpower, or darn right frustrating and annoyingly long. Either way, such tasks put you through a range of emotions that can make you feel like the world is caving in.

Why did I say yes in the first place? Why am I even in this job? I'm not cut out for this! I just haven't got the patience anymore! I'm not capable enough! This isn't for me...

The more stressful a task becomes the more difficult and frustrating it gets. Yet we have a tendency to push on, to get another coffee, to squint at the screen that bit harder, to carry on doing the work in the same exasperating way.

It's the '*quitters never win; winners never quit*' mentality engrained in our brains. If you give up, you automatically become a loser, or at least so we think. So we press on.

It's stressful living like this, especially if your work life is like this day-in-day-out. But we don't need to quit. We just need to know the right time to stop.

When you feel those huffy-puffy breaths coming on, when you start snapping at those who innocently interrupt you, when things get blurry and your brain is struggling to produce the fuel you need to perform at your best, don't force yourself to continue.

What's the point? It is a recipe for stress, frustration, demoralisation and disappointment.

If you can, completely leave the task alone until another day. You are most likely over-tired, definitely uninspired and certainly not at your best. Get an early night and come back fresh the next day.

If you are at work, take a tea break or an early lunch. Go and sit outside for a while and read a book or listen to some music. Tell your boss you need some fresh air for half an hour and you'll make up the time later in the week. Take yourself out of the situation and allow yourself space to breathe.

If you are at home, do what I did today when some work I was doing got the best of my better nature: stop and immerse yourself in something you enjoy, like a hobby, playing with your kid(s) or doing something creative like painting or playing music.

I decided to spend an hour playing with my daughter and, when it was her bedtime, I sat down to write this post and share my thoughts on a page. I feel much better now, and I'll have another crack at that work tomorrow.

Often our environment is part of the problem too. External distractions like your chair being uncomfortable, a workman

drilling outside, or the room being too hot or too cold can easily impact your mood and throw off your concentration. It is better to simply stop, let go of what you are doing and focus on something else to cultivate some mental spaciousness.

One of the hardest things to admit is that much of the mental suffering we endure is our own doing.

For example, I'm sure your boss wouldn't mind if you said, *"I'm really struggling to focus on my work at the moment, I'd like to step outside and take 15 minutes to clear my head"*.

Your boss would know that you are far more likely to produce better work if you took that break, yet you think that your boss will think you want to skive off for a while – when in fact you are just being a human instead of trying to perform like a robot.

Similarly, when you have promised to do something for someone, but begin to struggle because you are under pressure for time and feeling tired, a good friend or compassionate colleague won't mind waiting that bit longer if it means you'll be a happier bunny.

Quitting temporarily is not failure, and it is not really quitting either. It is being kind to yourself. Doing so will enable a more positive frame of mind that will mean coming back calmer, happier and capable of doing your best.

Why It's Perfectly Okay to Have Regrets

I wish I'd...I mean, I don't regret it, but...I hate saying I regret things, but it would have been nice to...

How many times have you said, or heard someone say, something along those lines?

We have a hard time dealing with regret because it's almost like admitting failure. It's like almost admitting we messed up, or did something stupid that now dictates life in the present. In short, we feel as if we've let ourselves down, and that a piece of life is missing because of a mistake or inaction of the past.

We have also come to perceive regret as a wholly negative state of mind. And in a way it is, because it's living in the past, living in *I wish I had*s and *what ifs*?

Agreed, this state of mind isn't in tune with the philosophy of mindfulness, but just because you're trying to be present, putting one foot in front of the other and taking life as it happens, doesn't mean you have to sweep all your regrets under the carpet.

Nope. It is perfectly okay to have regrets.

Here's why...

The first part of this reasoning is quite simply that it's unhealthy to oppress thoughts. You will drive yourself insane telling yourself you shouldn't be thinking in this way or that. In fact, the more you try to put thoughts in a box, the harder they'll fight to get out. It's

impossible to locate and eliminate that neuron triggering that memory that you want to forget.

Thought oppression is bad, period. It leads to further mental suffering. So be honest about regret. Don't keep putting a disclaimer on regret each time you discuss the past. And don't let others tell you that you mustn't have regrets.

Admit regret: face it, embrace it, accept it.

Once you have admitted your regret, it's then time to take action in the present to move on. For example, perhaps you feel deep down that if you'd applied yourself in high school, rather than smoking and chasing girls, you could have been a football player. Perhaps you missed a key trial, or maybe your attitude sucked, and now you regret not being able to be a part of a sport you loved dearly but were too arrogant and immature to grasp the opportunity. Or, perhaps some years back you mistreated someone in a relationship, so much so that you emotionally hurt that person. Now that you're older and wiser, less self-centred and better balanced, you carry around regret for your actions.

In these examples, embracing the regret is an important part of creating a happier present. Sure, these things happened in the past, but to ensure that the past doesn't dictate the future we need to find a way to let the regret go, and not keep trying to push it down every time it rises to the top of the mind.

So, perhaps you're too old to become a professional footballer now, but can you still play? Could you get fit, join a team and enjoy the

beautiful game in the present? If you're unable to play due to age or disability, could you get involved in coaching a local team of under privileged kids? Could you take your son or daughter to games more often and make it something you enjoy as a family?

In this way you find a way to positively become a part of the sport in the present, rather than spending time regretting a past you can't change.

Of course, I'm just using sport as an example here, but think about your own life and apply the same philosophy to an aspect of regret that keeps a corner of your mind rooted in the past.

And then there's that person whose feelings you once hurt. It fills you with sadness that you could be that unkind, that you hurt someone in such a callous way. So why not reach out to that person? Make a phone call or arrange to meet up. Start by saying that you have no agenda, only that you want to apologise; not because it will make everything better or fix what happened, but because you want to admit your wrong doing and offer a genuine apology for the way you acted.

Remember, you aren't seeking forgiveness or sympathy. If that person tells you that they can't forgive you, don't try to change that. This is about you moving forward, and in time that person will find his or her own pathway past this situation too.

The point is this: Regret doesn't have to be this taboo we mustn't admit or succumb to. It doesn't need to be something you "man up" and live with.

Forget “No regrets, no regrets!” Regret is natural. We all have regrets, and there will always be times we wish we could turn back the clock and make a change to our actions.

The important thing is that we appropriate regret rather than letting it rule our lives. We must face regret and find a practical, positive solution to accepting it and moving forward. We must take action in the present to address ghosts of the past.

Mindfulness doesn't dictate that we shouldn't feel regret, quite the contrary.

Mindfulness is about acceptance of the present, identifying thoughts and emotions for what they are and finding a personal pathway to move forward to the next moment with a clearer, compassionate awareness of how you feel and your potential to make positive change in your life.

The problem with our aversion to regret is that it blinds us from seeing the potential for positive growth, which is rooted in the very past we are trying to leave behind but paradoxically holding on to. The truth is: It's never too late.

No matter what has happened in the past, you can change how you feel about it in this moment, right now.

Simply by submitting to regret and facing up to how you feel a clearer awareness will flood into your consciousness and reveal a pathway that leads you through a positive healing process.

How to Stop Worrying – the Mindfulness Approach

Fact: The majority of our worry never amounts to anything more than worry.

Worry is the cause of an earth-moving amount of unnecessary stress and emotional torment. Worry can become habitual, leading to a life plagued by anxiety about what might happen if X, Y and Z...

So Why Do We Worry So Much?

Well, perhaps because there was a time when a worry did come true, when the worst did happen. It only takes for one event to prove our worry a worthy endeavour for us to worry even more. That one event manifests itself in our sub-conscious, emerging to the front of the mind each time we mull over what we believe to be a risky, dangerous or potentially heart-breaking situation.

Perhaps a guy did cheat on you once. Perhaps your work wasn't as superb as it usually is – just that one time. Perhaps a friend did once have an accident after you warned her something bad could happen. Perhaps your son did get sick after not wearing his coat that time.

But then consider all the other times you've feared the worst and nothing materialised except the norm or another outcome that didn't make any real change to the *status quo*. Consider the times things have turned out pretty well, the times that things have turned out favourably and life has been pretty good.

If you're reading this and thinking that life has never been very kind, that things seem to always favour the dark side for you, consider for a moment that perhaps your worry is perpetuating a cycle of negativity. The world is a mirror of energy; if you keep thinking the worst then negativity will gravitate towards you.

The majority of serial worriers live until a ripe old age and then wonder what all the worry was for.

The Mindfulness Approach to Worry

Don't get me wrong: a certain level of worry is part and parcel of life. A little bit of worry before a big life event is natural, and can be a positive factor in getting the adrenaline pumping we require to feel alive and kicking. It is also entirely natural to have some worry (though not obsessively) about getting sick, injured and ensuring we have adequate food and shelter. This is all part of our self-preservation wiring.

But excessive worrying will never lift you out of a danger zone, it will never improve a situation, help you see clearer or aid you in devising a strategy for prosperity.

If you are an excessive worrier, try this mindfulness approach next time your nerves and anxiety get the better of you. Simply recite the following affirmations:

- No one ever worried their way to prosperity in any aspect of life. No amount of worrying will make my situation better.
- This worry is preventing me seeing clearly and taking positive, appropriate action.
- Worry will only lead me to make irrational decisions based on thoughts of things that haven't yet happened and probably never will.
- My worry is infectious. It makes others worry too; causing unnecessary tension and stress.
- Worrying like this is unnecessary and will affect my health and happiness.

It is easy to worry and sometimes impossible to avoid, but for the most part, unnecessary worry can be tempered by simply affirming the above and presenting a logical argument to your state of mind.

It's Never Too Late!

We tend to see life in sections rather than a continuous journey. We box it up and stack its sections in an order that's almost taboo to break.

We set targets by age, and once past a specific age, we convince ourselves that the target has been missed and the opportunity squandered.

"Oh, I'm too old for all that".

"I can't go back to study now".

"Concerts are for young people".

"I'd love to have travelled when I was younger".

"I love it, but I'd feel silly wearing It".

"People will think I'm crazy".

We are pre-programmed with societal restrictions that dictate when we can and can't do things. We then end up judging others by what they are doing at a particular age, using their decisions, hobbies, musical tastes, dress sense, possessions and other defining factors as ways to sum up their achievements, and ultimately their level of happiness.

The reality is that those having the most fun are those who break free of such limitations, those who empty the boxes, throw all the stuff on the floor and follow their intuition down roads that feel inspiring.

When you stop putting your life in boxes, when you stop considering time to be the determining factor in what you can and can't do, looking at old photos saying stuff like, "*I wish I was twenty, thirty or forty again*", when you see life as a pathway upon which you only need to keep walking, you will stop being afraid to put one foot in front of the other, and stop giving a hoot what the neighbours say.

The only rules stopping you living the life you want to live are those you have adopted from the opinions and judgements of others.

Own your life. Take your life back today. Whether you are 25 or 65, stand up right now and say, "*I'm taking my life back*". Put the wheels in motion and take action on that thing you've wanted to do for the past month, year or perhaps even your whole life.

It's never too late: never too late to do, to say, to achieve – to start being you.

Never let self-fabricated, invisible boundaries stop you doing anything you feel capable of doing. Even when you think you might not be capable, give it a shot. You will surprise yourself. I guarantee it.

“What Will You Do With Your Life”, Said the Career Officer

Fourteen years old, about to take what were called “options” back then – a set of subjects that were supposed to define my future – a career officer asked me what I wanted to do when I left school.

But as he asked me this strange, daunting question, a few questions of my own rattled around my head...

A career? Isn't that what my Dad has, and he always seems stressed! How am I supposed to know what I want to do for the rest of my life? I don't even know where I want to go next weekend! Hmmm, how about a private detective, a footballer, perhaps, a DJ, or prime minister?

The job of the career officer was to nudge us teenagers towards some of life's perceived “safe” boxes in the hope we'd pick one and follow it without too much deviation. We finish school, go to college, go to university, travel for a few months, then get a job, climb up the ladder, get a mortgage, a car on finance and a pension. Job done.

The thing about this little chat is that everything from this point on changes. No longer are you allowed to just take life as it comes, no longer can you change with the wind and feel your way through each moment. No longer are you allowed to sleep without thinking what the next day will bring, nor make a decision without thinking

how it might impact life as an adult. Things get more serious. No longer will just “turning up and being there” be enough.

This “little chat”, arranged in your “best interests” by the school, is where your mental freedom starts its imprisonment. Suddenly, instead of being praised for keeping an open mind to all of life’s possibilities, you are made to feel insecure for not having a life plan.

At this point, you are being asked to develop tunnel vision, along with practical, sensible and achievable goals, and work towards them every day, knowing that when you reach one level you must go to the next without too much deviation, as that could result in failure. You must accept that at every step of the way you will be hounded by the question “What next?” And you must always have an answer.

This is no exaggeration. I vividly remember sitting in that room and being asked for my plan. He was shocked that I had no idea what I wanted to be, and that my suggestions were way outside of the boxes he was required to fill in on his form. I came out feeling very insecure, as if I’d done something wrong and missed an opportunity, as if everyone knew what they wanted to be except me.

When I was a young boy, I honestly thought I could be anything. I’d watch a Rocky film and practice shadow boxing in my room for a week. I’d watch an episode of Colombo and want to be a detective for the following month, but not just any detective though; it had to be an aloof, cigar-smoking one.

I was good at sport too, and at times flirted with wanting to be a runner or a footballer, and probably could have succeeded in some professional sporting endeavour had I not been that boy that was too easily led by the next intriguing hobby, and the next intriguing girl who smiled at me in the playground.

Perhaps – in defence of the career office – this was what he was trying to shield me from. He wanted me to pick something I was good at and go for it, with a clear, structured plan of action. He was an adult. He knew of life's potential disappointments that lay ahead, and part of his job was to protect me from them.

I was very happy being that way though, and in many ways I've not changed much. I enjoyed a wide range of things. I also enjoyed imagining doing new things too. I have always felt the thrill in life's possibility, and that's what always lured me to the next challenge. As long as it felt fun and soul rewarding at the time, I was game. I was 14, and fully content in socialising, exercising and being interested in everything that seemed interesting.

Most people struggle to put a label on me because I'm always doing so many different things. I've had a ton of hobbies and am always discovering a new interest to explore. I can't bear the thought of just doing things for the sake of doing them, either out of expectation or complicity. I guess in this way I failed the system. But it took me many years to realise that the boy being questioned by the career officer, the boy who wanted to be a bunch of cool things but no one thing in particular, was who I am, and that it was fine to be him. 'Life Entrepreneur' would be an appropriate label, perhaps.

I have at times in my life tried to force myself down a more “sensible and secure” pathway, but the outcome was always the same: I ended up feeling cornered, uninspired and somewhat depressed. I am strong willed, independent and want to do things my way, which means continuing to use my mind to discover, learn and experience life as much as I can, without being restricted by fear and external expectations.

It took me many years to trust my intuition and follow my passion and my creative mind. And when I did so, nine times out of ten I ended up in what felt like the right place. So that’s the career path I’m sticking to.

Once I became adept at shaking off fear and attachment to material gain, and fully understood that success in life cannot be measured by prestige or remuneration, I allowed myself to be me – a guy that likes to do lots of different stuff; a jack of all trades and master of none, one might say.

There really isn’t one thing in particular I want to do, and who knows what I’ll be doing next year. One thing I do know is that I want to remain open to new pathways that enthuse me and put a smile on my face.

Just for the record, this isn’t an anti-commitment post, far from it. If you know what career you want at 14, or even 40, then great. Follow what makes you feel alive. But if you don’t know, or want to do something out of the ordinary, or want to suddenly change course at the drop of a hat, then that’s fine too.

Don't let anyone try forcing your hand. Go at your own pace, with your intuition radar switched on, your mind fully open and your awareness in the now.

I Don't Want to Die & Realise I Haven't Lived

As cliché as it may sound, when we are old and grey, most of us will look back and think, "I'd do anything to get that time back".

If we know this to be true, then why are so many of us waiting life out in jobs we hate, wishing the clock would strike 5pm and Friday would hurry up?

Why are so many of us living in the future, thinking that life is going to happen one day soon when X, Y and Z are achieved?

One day when I...

Next year I will...

When we get the..., we can...

The problem with striving to achieve X, Y and Z is that you quickly create a new A, B and C. The perpetual cycle of desire for better never ends.

We are encouraged to lust after the next best thing, to keep aiming higher and higher, to be better, to have more, to never be content with just enough for now. We end up chasing fulfilment that doesn't exist.

But what exactly are we aiming for? Where are we going? And when we get there, what then?

Stuck on autopilot, we forget what it feels like to stop looking ahead. We forget the truth that life is happening now, that it isn't

something that will reveal itself one day and make us whole and happy.

Rarely are we truly mentally present to enjoy the feelings we have, the actions we are taking and the people we are interacting with. We suppress feelings rather than explore and understand them, we engage in a task while thinking of what else needs doing, we go to sleep already living in thoughts of what tomorrow might bring, we work with our minds fixated on what rewards our efforts will bring and, when we do find mental spaciousness, we quickly seek to fill it with a new condition to meet and expectation to fulfil.

To paraphrase the late Alan Watts, *I am not saying let's drink for today because tomorrow we die, that we shouldn't make any plans. What I am saying is that making plans for the future is only of use to those who are capable of living completely in the present.*

Why?

Because those unable to live in the present will never fully live those plans anyway.

One day tomorrow will not come. We will all die. Each day is a step closer to our ultimate demise.

Our time is limited. So slow down, take a look around and breathe it, feel it, touch it, smell it, love it and live it in your own unique way. For the last thing you want to do is die and realise you haven't truly lived.

The Funny Thing About Fear

Fear is the mind killer, the eradicator of potential and the eraser of personal progress. And if there's one thing that will stop you embracing life, it's fear.

Fear wants you to stay in your house and lock your door, to avoid smiling at a stranger because they could be dangerous, to avoid changing job because you won't know anyone, to not trust anyone because you've had a previous bad experience.

We are born free of fear, but it quickly becomes a learned behaviour that benefits self-preservation; we need to be fearful of things that have the potential to endanger our lives.

But as we age, fear must be managed. It has the power to control us to an unhealthy level of restriction, and as such is often used as a weapon by those in positions of authority. Fear is a devious weapon because it is capable of controlling people without them realising it, keeping them locked in a certain place, mindset and ideology.

Fear can stop us asking questions of ourselves. It can stop us putting one foot in front of the other and trying new things. Essentially, fear can stop us living.

The Funny Thing About Fear

Think of some of the big achievements in your life to date. I bet my bottom dollar that those experiences were accompanied by a host of fears linked to failure: What if I fall over, what if I mess up my

lines, what if people laugh at me, what if they think I'm totally unsuitable, what if I come last, what if I disappoint everyone.

The funny thing about fear is that the majority of associated worries never amount to anything more than worry. Even though past experiences tell us the fear is unfounded and built upon little more than exaggerated thought processes, we still let fear control our lives.

When Fear Becomes a Virus

The thing about fear is it spreads like a virus, not just through your life but also through the lives of those around you, causing those close to us to become fearful and anxious too.

The fear virus makes you avoid new challenges, preventing you taking steps to fulfil your happiness and potential. It stops you following your intuition, manifesting itself in your psyche and infecting every aspect of your life.

So, next time you feel fear holding you back from tackling a challenge you really want to face head on, ask yourself, what's the worst that can happen?

For a moment, let's just say your fears did come true:

You were laughed at. You did trip up. You weren't good enough for the role. You found her attractive but she wasn't into you.

You did fail the test. You messed up the lines at the casting.

SO WHAT!

The true win is never in the result anyway – it's in the action, the doing, the taking part, the putting yourself forward and doing it because it feels right for you. Your mum (or grandmother) was right; it is the taking part that really counts. Living is about putting yourself in for the race you want to run, even when winning isn't guaranteed, and even when the odds are stacked firmly against you. The win is overcoming the fear.

Don't Let Fear Second Guess Your Life

You can't predict the future, but you can guarantee that the preconceptions you harbour through fear will be entirely wrong once you step up to the play. I mean, how often do things turn out the way you thought they would?

Think about how many times you have been wrong: How many times you thought you wouldn't enjoy the party, wouldn't like your new work colleague, wouldn't cope with another baby, wouldn't have enough money to get by. Fear is just a bunch of preconceptions regarding possible negative outcomes that are less likely to occur if you face the challenge head on, with an open mind (fulness) that allows you to flourish without restriction.

Fear multiplies when you back out. It begins to control you, beats you down, zaps your confidence and puts life on hold. Fear only takes on a reality if you let it stop you taking action. Kick it to the curb and be the best you can.

How I Eliminate the Stress of Having ‘So Much to Do’ (in Just a Few Words)

We all know that feeling. In fact, for many of us it is a constant theme looping uncontrollably through our lives.

I’ve got so many things to do!

You keep telling yourself this. You tell everyone else, especially those who want to add to your never-ending to-do list.

This state of mind stops you being able to relax. For the moment you take leave of that mental task list, it nags at you, telling you that “There’s so much to do and you’re wasting time!”

It’s uncomfortable and agitating. It causes you to become irritated, restless and on edge.

No matter how adept you are at calming your mind, be it through meditation or other form of mental relaxation, we all occasionally get drawn into the “so much to do” stress zone. Having a demanding work schedule and young family, I am certainly no exception.

So, in one simple swipe of mindfulness, here is how I cope with the stress of my Monkey Mind constantly reminding me of all these things I need to do. I say to myself, out loud:

If I stress about these things, they will take longer to do and I won’t enjoy doing them.

If I try to rush through these things, I won’t do them to the best of my ability.

If I worry about these things, I will be so caught up in the anxiety of getting them done that I will miss out on the reward of doing them.

Whether I get these things done or not, there will always be other things ready to take their place and cause me further stress.

Remember that the best *doing* is always dependent on our ability to be present, because the most productive *doing* comes out of being. If that sounds a little vague, this is just another way of describing “being in the zone”.

Don't force your way through life frantically trying to tick things off your to-do list. This is a fruitless, tiring, stressful way to live; because the more you desperately try to tick off, the more you'll despair at its defiant growth.

Release the stress. Brush it off your shoulders.

Just do what needs doing, as and when you can do it. Don't rush through a task on the basis that you must finish as quickly as possible because other stuff needs doing. This approach is likely to make a task take longer, and make it far less enjoyable. Take your to-do list in your stride and take pride and enjoyment in even the simplest of tasks. There is no reward to be found in stressing and rushing around, but there is a sanctuary of peace to be found in going steadily and mindfully with a pure awareness of your actions.

12 Ways to Feel Happy and Inspired Right Now

We all need a touch of inspiration to reignite the fire in our soul, be it to stimulate creative ideas for a project we are working on or simply to break the monotony of life's autopilot and lose ourselves in the moment of possibility for a while.

It is easy to get caught up in the day-to-day hustle that steals our time and robs us of feeling connected to personal inspirations that give us a zest for life.

I personally felt this disconnection last week. I'd been wandering through a routine for a solid while and felt detached from the things I enjoy that make me feel inspired - simple things like listening to music, going for evening walks and socialising with friends.

So I took affirmative action and wrote down a list of things I like doing on my whiteboard, as a way of reminding myself to incorporate these things back into my life on a regular basis.

This got me thinking about other inspirational actions that we can all do to put a spring in our step and help us make peace with our seemingly nonsensical existence.

Here are twelve actions I came up with:

1. Get out into the world and connect with other humans

Work, family commitments and the general daily grind often prevent us from being the sociable beings we were designed to be. Instead of making time for this essential human pleasure, we

substitute the real thing for virtual friendship on Facebook, or a TV series that engages the mind with interesting characters.

This really isn't enough though. You are human. You need social interaction, and plenty of it. You thrive on talking, laughing, debating, helping, listening, smiling and generally being part of a group (tribe). So make time for nights out, days out, a coffee and a chat, a walk with a friend. Don't be too busy to socialise. It is absolutely essential to your wellbeing.

Note: Being sociable at work doesn't fill this void, so make sure you meet friends for chats and fun in the real world.

2. Make a cup of your favourite tea (metaphorically)

I'm throwing this into the list because I have a passion for teas of the world that I tend to forget about. At times I go weeks without getting out my collection of teas and one of my teapots to indulge in the making of a soothing green or lotus flower tea.

The fact that this is about tea is metaphoric in a way because it could be anything you like really, just something simple and rewarding that you enjoy doing and takes you away from the day's monotony and into a warm, spacious place for a while.

3. Book a trip to somewhere you've never been

It doesn't have to be to the Rocky Mountains, though I'd love to go, but just somewhere that makes your face light up when you think about a visit. It could be anywhere: a new museum in town, a

famous railway station you once read about, a national park, whatever, just book it and treat yourself to its wonders.

4. Change your perspective on something

There is always more than one way to look at a situation, and we do ourselves a disservice when we close our minds to possibility. So break for five minutes today and consider a situation that troubles you and mentally explore its dynamics.

I often break from writing for a moment and look out of the window at the swaying trees and vast sky. Fixated on nothing in particular, I allow the situation to process through my mind of its own accord, allowing for an alternative viewpoint to emerge on whatever I'm thinking about. This is a particularly good exercise when you are seeking creative solutions.

5. Create an inspiring work space

Tidy room, tidy mind, so the saying goes, but tidy might not be as inspiring for you as it is for me. So take a look around at the space you are working in and see how it makes you feel. Is the clutter making you feel penned in? Is the blandness of an overly organised, minimal desk making you feel glum?

Think about the things you enjoy looking at and love to be surrounded by and design a new and inspiring space. Perhaps bring in a plant or some pictures of your family to your office. If you work from home, or if you have the authority to change your office around at work, move your desk nearer the window so you

can look outside whenever you like. Think about how you could create a more pleasant, inspiring place to sit and work.

6. Walk Among Mother Nature

At the core we are animals. We are sentient beings with an interdependent, interconnected relationship with the natural world. That is why it feels so good to be out in the fresh air, to see animals in the wild, to stand at the shore of the sea. So what are you waiting for? Get out of those four walls; go and spend some time with Mother Nature!

7. Sing in the shower

Who doesn't love to sing, even if you have a terrible voice like me? Sure, a shower is always refreshing, but is transformed into a liberating, almost primal experience when you bellow out one of your favourite songs at the top of your voice as the water cascades down over your body. Stay in the shower for an extra 5 minutes today and enjoy a spot of singing.

8. Draw something (even if you are the world's worst artist)

Even if you can't draw for toffee, grab a pencil and pad and try. It's fun, and even more so when shared as a group activity with your kids or partner. Choose an object in the room and draw it as you see it. There need be no reason to do this other than to simply drop down a couple of gears and exercise a bit of mental creativity. You might actually surprise yourself when someone says, "Hey, that's pretty good!" Unfortunately, I usually just get laughed at, but I always enjoy trying.

9. Read any book for a minimum of 20 minutes

It is so easy to forget how enjoyable reading is, not least because these days most of the reading we do isn't really reading, rather more like snippet-digestion of text messages, emails and social media posts. So fiction or non-fiction, whatever type of book you enjoy; make a date with a good book for a minimum of 20 minutes quiet reading time. Combine with #2 for a blissful experience.

10. Listen to forgotten music

I absolutely love music. From folk to drum and bass, I have broad taste and different moods inspire me to listen to different genres. Last week, however, it struck me that I haven't been listening to much music lately.

I am conscious of this though: I'll be tapping away on my laptop thinking, *I'll put some music on in a minute*, or a specific song will pop into my mind from 'way back when' and inspire me to put it on. But then I'll get distracted and forget. This is madness because listening to music can make even the most laborious task enjoyable, not to mention it takes just a few seconds to turn on. So when you think about an artist or album you love, or when an old song pops into your mind and triggers some happy memories, don't let the moment pass you by. Dig out the track, turn up your speakers and dance, whistle along, or just nod your head.

11. Do something spontaneous and fun

The definition of this will of course differ greatly between people, but all the same it's an essential act of self-liberation. Spontaneous and fun in this context means something outside of the normality of your daily routine - something you wouldn't normally do that will spice up your life a bit.

It could mean that you suddenly feel the urge to run, and instead of ignoring this urge and carrying on with what you're doing, you immediately put your trainers on and go outside and sprint for a minute or two. Or it could mean that you call up a friend and go clubbing on a week night, then go into work the next day feeling tired as hell but with a whopping smile on your face. Just break the monotony and live a little. You deserve it.

12. Play with your dog, cat, or kid(s)

I saved my favourite until last. Nothing makes me happier than playing games with my daughter. Her smile lights up my soul and, in that moment of seeing her happiness, life is absolutely complete for me.

If you haven't got a child, or a niece or a nephew to spend time with, perhaps you have a dog or a cat. Or perhaps there's someone you love being around but don't get to spend as much time with as you'd like. So instead of spending time wishing you had more time, and thinking about how much you enjoy being with that pet or person, make time! Do it today. Take a day off work if you have to. You deserve it, they deserve it, and you will both benefit immensely from the connection.

Pluck a few things out of this list today and inspire yourself to be happier. Break the monotony by doing something fun and creative.

Copyright Notice

All rights reserved. Alfred James & Pocketmindfulness.com © 2016. No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.