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# SIMPLIFY MAGAZINE

· A QUARTERLY, DIGITAL PUBLICATION FOR FAMILIES ·

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# Letter from the Founder – Focus

As we approach the end of the year, it's a natural time for reflection. We think about what we've done and what's next. It's during these moments that we realize how important it is to keep our focus.

Focus is like a secret power—it helps us manage our time and achieve what we dream of. But in today's world, where everything buzzes for attention, holding on to that focus can feel harder than ever. That's why we've dedicated our December issue to understanding and mastering focus.

In this edition of Simplify Magazine, we're getting to the heart of what it means to stay focused. How does it affect what we do every day and the goals we're chasing? How can we keep our focus sharp in a world full of distractions? We've gathered tips, studies, and stories to help you learn how to keep your focus where it belongs.

You'll read advice from a range of experts—people who know how the brain works, professionals who teach others how to stay present, and those who have learned to stay on track in their own lives. They're here to share real-life advice and expertise on how to strengthen your focus.

My wish for you is that these articles may light the way to a sharper, more focused you—ready for a new year and whatever comes your way in it and beyond it.

With you on this journey,

Joshua Becker, founder of Simplify Magazine



# Learning to Focus on the Good

*Joshua Becker*



So many—if not all—of us struggle with feelings of discontent much of the time. Why is this restless attitude so prevalent?

There are at least two forces that stir up discontent within us.

On one hand, we live in economic system that is driven by our discontent. Businesses work hard to fuel within us a desire for more. We're constantly told to keep up with changing fashions, to upgrade our technology, to desire this new automobile. Nowadays, it seems like we're even encouraged to change the exterior of our appliances every few years.

If we want to stay current, we must upgrade. We are told that we're missing out on something "better" if we don't.

Influencers on every channel and social media outlet keep us guessing, and then informed, about what we're missing out on. From the palm of our hand, they hold us in theirs. As a result, it's easy to become discontent with our lives.

We wish we had more, better, or different. We chase new looks and appearances, diets and fitness trends. We try out the latest popular entertainments, consider the hot new travel destinations, or can't wait to eat at the newly opened restaurant.

And every time we find ourselves desiring something we don't currently have, we become focused on what we don't have and lose focus on the good we already do.

Of course, we cannot entirely blame our discontent on society around us. The external forces don't function in a vacuum. They connect with a voice of discontent already inside us. Discontent comes naturally to us.

*Hedonic adaptation* is the phrase that sociologists give to the human tendency to quickly return to a relatively stable level of happiness despite major positive or negative events or life changes. In other words, regardless of what we acquire or the life changes that occur, we slowly revert to the same level of happiness that we had before the change occurred.

We can see this powerfully displayed whenever we make a major purchase that we think will bring us lasting happiness. We convince ourselves that this new thing will increase our enjoyment of the world and, thereby, our overall happiness. And while the new item may be really fun at first, and even help us wake up the next morning with an extra skip in our step, before long it fades into the background of our life, and our overall happiness level returns to where it was before the major purchase.... And so we repeat the process.

If we believe a greater level of happiness can be discovered by simply acquiring something new or changing our circumstances, we will always be disappointed. Our internal voice will never be satisfied in this way.

Both inwardly and externally, discontent is continually being stirred up in our heart and mind and soul.

What happens as a result of this discontent is that we quickly lose sight of the good around us. In fact, that's the very definition of discontentment: a dissatisfaction with one's circumstances.

- In our bank accounts, we never have enough.
- With our possessions and property, we always desire more.
- When it comes to our bodies and appearance, we desire something different.
- During our vacations, we wish they were grander.
- Within our jobs, we dream of something better.
- In our marriages, we begin to focus on all the things we'd like to change.

Nothing is ever good enough, because discontent is constantly being stirred up inside us.

But look around. There are so many good things around you! Your life is full of beautiful blessings and wonderful things. You have so much to be thankful for.

And recognizing those good things in your life is the first step toward changing your attitude and discovering contentment in your life.

## **7 Ways to Refocus**

Maybe the most important factor in overcoming discontent is learning to focus on the good. But how? What intentional steps can we take to stay focused on the good?

Let me offer seven:

### *1. Declare aloud that life is good.*

The next time you are alone—at work, in the car, in the shower, or maybe right now—make this declaration out loud: “You know what? I’ve got it pretty good.” Don’t just think it, *say it*.

Every time I utter that sentence, I can’t stop with those words. I feel compelled to say more—continuing the thought rolls naturally off the tongue. I begin to immediately list something I have that is good.

It usually sounds something like this: “You know what? I’ve got it pretty good. I have a job that I enjoy. I have clothes on my back. I’ve got my health. I love my wife. I enjoy my kids...” And the list continues.

Give it a shot. The next time you are alone, see what immediately follows those words “You know what? I’ve got it pretty good.”

## *2. Practice gratitude daily.*

Gratitude is best understood as a discipline, not an emotional response to circumstances. When things are good, it is easy to be grateful. But when things are rough and we need gratitude the most, that is when it is hardest to find.

So practice it every day, regardless of your circumstances. In a way that makes sense to you.

You can practice gratitude with your morning coffee, on your daily commute, or during your prayer time, meditation time, or yoga session.

You can practice gratitude when you lay your head on the pillow or before you enjoy a meal with your family.

The important thing is to *do it*. The practice will immediately draw your focus to the good.

### *3. Remember what you liked in the first place.*

Life isn't perfect—it never has been and never will be. There is no perfect job, no perfect house, and no perfect marriage. Even the roses have thorns.

Over time, it seems, our natural tendency is to focus on the negatives rather than the positives. But we can reverse this tendency by intentionally rolling back the clock in our mind.

For example: What did you love about your job in the first place? What are the qualities that drew you to your spouse initially? Why were you excited about your house or apartment the first day you moved in?

When you remember what you loved about your circumstance in the first place, you are again focusing on the good.

### *4. Remember the positives.*

When I talk with people about their relationships, a question always seems to arise. “How do I get my spouse to be more \_\_\_\_\_ and less \_\_\_\_\_?”

There's a conversation to be had there, for sure. But I never begin the conversation by talking about how to change a spouse. Instead, I focus first on the positives.

Before you talk about changing your spouse into the person you want them to be, remind yourself of all the good they bring into your life. Maybe they don't clean up enough around the house, but are they the first to bring laughter into your home? Maybe they aren't as adventurous as you want, but do they bring a needed stability into your life? Maybe they aren't \_\_\_\_\_, but are they \_\_\_\_\_?

This same principle can be applied to so many circumstances in life. You could begin to think, *Maybe my car isn't fancy, but it's paid for. Maybe my house isn't the biggest on the block, but it is the easiest to clean. Maybe my job isn't perfect, but it's stable and I'm good at it.*

In almost every case, there are positives to be found if we look for them.

### *5. Wage war against if/then thinking.*

Work as hard as you can to live the best life you can live. Never settle for anything less than being the best you that you can possibly be. But don't fall for if/then thinking along the way.

If/then thinking goes like this: *If x happens, then I will be happy.*

This is dangerous thinking with no winners. It only spurs regret and discontent. There is no happiness to be found in it, because there is no finish line to the thought process.



If life can always be improved by changing or adding x, we will never be able to appreciate today for what it is. We've got to drop the if/then pattern of reasoning.

Again, this doesn't mean we become complacent and no longer strive to be the best version of ourselves. It just means we stop looking for happiness in changed circumstances and begin to appreciate all that we have today.

*6. Stop comparing yourself to others.*

When we compare ourselves to others, we often end up feeling worse.

People tend to share only the best bits of their lives, especially online, which can make us feel like we're not doing as well. But remember, what you see isn't the full picture. No two lives are the same, and everyone has their own challenges.

Focus on your own achievements and what you're good at. Celebrate your own victories, no matter how small. By keeping your eyes on your own journey, you'll appreciate your life more and find true contentment.

Life, after all, isn't about being better than anyone else but about being the best you can be. This approach helps keep your focus on the progress you're making in your own life.

### *7. Find purpose in your every day.*

Remember that every day is a chance to find meaning in the small things.

Purpose doesn't have to be about something big or far away. It can be found in how we help others, in the care we put into our tasks, and in the moments we enjoy.

Look for ways to make a difference in your daily routine. Whether it's doing effective work at the office, making someone smile, providing for your child, or simply organizing a space, these actions add value to your day.

Recognizing the purpose in everyday activities gives us a sense of accomplishment and joy.

### **The Good That's Already There**

The battle in our mind to focus on the good is ever-present, but there certainly appear to be times in life when that battle is tougher than others. If you are struggling to focus on the good in your life today, try out a few of those steps above.

You might be surprised to discover how good you actually have it.

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**Joshua Becker** is the #1 *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of *Things That Matter: Overcoming Distraction to Pursue a More Meaningful Life* and the founder of Simplify Magazine.

# Decluttering Your Mind:

How Confronting your Past can Clear your Head

*Jason VanRuler*



“I just feel like I can never get past all the things that have happened to me and all the mistakes I’ve made.”

For years, clients I worked with as a therapist in jails across the Midwest would say some version of this as they sat handcuffed to the table across from me, talking about what led to their incarceration. Their stories were always heartbreaking and yet also kind of expected, since I doubt ending up in jail is ever part of someone’s five-year plan.

Fast-forward a few years, and I’ve now traded jail cells for boardrooms, high-rises, and hotels, where I meet with entrepreneurs, founders, athletes, and celebrities, doing intensive workshops. The décor, smell, and language in these settings are a lot different, but the message is still strangely the same: “I can’t get past my past, and it’s affecting me today.”

Whether it’s a failed relationship, business gaffe, difficult childhood, abuse, or worse, we all have something in our lives that, when it surfaces, carries the weight of a thousand other things we don’t want to think about. It’s like a Scooby-Doo villain in our life who keeps showing up in different masks, but we always know exactly who it is. What’s more is that every time this happens, we find our mind more cluttered than ever with relics of an event that no longer serve us.

Our past shapes us in profound ways, whether we care to admit it or not. And no matter who we are or how we grew up, we all have things

from our past that have stuck with us and held us back. What are we going to do about it, so we can move on?

## **Stay Put and Face It**

The first step to clearing our mind is facing and acknowledging the role our past plays in our life, along with our need to prune the things that hold us back. William Morris said, “Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful,” and I believe the same is true of our mind.

Although we may be ruthlessly committed to facing forward in our present life, our past powers our future and the decisions we make today, whether consciously or subconsciously. For some, this revelation is like a springboard into a wonderful life, but for others of us, it’s like shackles chained to our ankles, which we drag with us forever. It’s exhausting and uncomfortable, and worse, it’s not sustainable.

What I’ve learned, from my own past hurts, and by helping clients work through past hurts with others, is this: we need to face our past brokenness and understand how it impacts us today so that we can change our relationship with the event and our narrative about it. Sure, things like rejection, betrayal, or believing lies about ourselves all impact us and our ability to trust people in the present. But should we allow these events to continue to affect our future relationships and our chance for happy and fulfilling friendships or marriages?

So often our temptation is to run away from our brokenness. Whether that means ending a relationship, relocating, or simply not returning a call. And yet, when we do this, nothing changes. There is no improvement; instead this just becomes another place that we don't go and that fills our mind with clutter.

It's challenging, but sometimes we need to stay put to deal with the brokenness. Maybe because we are tired of running or we are in too much pain, but it becomes obvious that it's time to do the work.

Your past, your mistakes, your problems aren't things you need to run from. Instead, consider what would happen if you confronted your brokenness head-on? So much additional brokenness—things like shame, regret, hiding, and embarrassment could be avoided and you could begin to change the cycle.

But you can't do it alone.

## **Ask for Help**

The second step to decluttering your mind is to ask for help with the problem you feel stuck with. This seems intuitive with almost any situation other than asking for help for inner brokenness, because it's tough to tell the truth to someone else and admit we need help in such a vulnerable way. But we've got to get to a point where we're ready to do it.

I remember a dark season in my own life, in my 20s, when I sat alone in my apartment and was sure my life was pretty much over and would never get any better.

And yet it did.

My first step was to own where I was, and my second was to ask for help. My life wasn't how I had planned, but I admitted how it actually was. Gradually I looked in the mirror, not with disgust but with the resolve of someone who was prepared to take on a project that required a lot of work. I didn't have awareness or a plan like I do today. I just wanted to feel better and to move on from the pain and exhaustion I felt.

Eventually, with the help of some friends and a therapist, I addressed the wounds from my past that had been pulling the strings all along. I acknowledged the pain that I had both endured and caused in my brokenness.

I started to hear the whisper of God's voice. Not often, but it was more than it had ever been. Things were far from perfect, but there was the slightest bit of change happening. There was hope.

And there's hope for you, too. But you have to be willing to change and be ready to ask for help, from others and from God.

So, how do you lay your hands on that help?



## Get Connected

The third step is establishing and maintaining healthy connection with others.

But connection can be scary. *What if the same thing just happens to me again? What if I'm rejected ... again? What if I simply end up back where I was, or worse?* That's the risk we run with vulnerability, but without that risk there's no chance of getting connected and taking that final step toward healing.

So reach out. You're not as broken as you think. The truth is, we're *all* a little broken. Whatever you've been through, it might *surprise* the person sitting across the table from you, but it probably won't *shock* them. Take the leap.

Text the friend you haven't talked to in a while.

Call your brother.

Join the community group or Bible study.

Talk to the person sitting next to you in class.

Reconnect with your spouse.

When we do the work to get connected and then talk—like, really talk—to each other, we'll find that we're not as alone as we may have believed for so long.

Going one step further, get connected with someone who can help you do the work. Friendships are amazing and healing in so many ways, but sometimes we need more than a friend to get coffee with twice a month; sometimes our past brokenness requires the help of a professional.

So make an appointment with a counselor.

Go see a therapist.

Meet with your pastor.

Find a mentor.

The resources are out there; it just might mean getting a little uncomfortable. But wouldn't you rather be uncomfortable knowing you're on the path to healing and connection versus stay comfortable in your brokenness and continue to struggle? I know what I would do. I know what I did.

**Why Not?**

What our world needs now more than ever is people who are willing to face and move beyond their past to pursue what God calls them to. Making this effort changes, not only your life, but also the legacy of your family, the trajectory of your relationships, and the world in general. It is hard work, but it will always be worth it.

You might ask yourself why change should start with you, but I'd ask, why not you?

The version of me sitting in that apartment 20 years ago never would have guessed that he'd end up here today. He was full of stories that he was either too unique or not unique enough, that people wouldn't care and that he couldn't do it alone. And he was partially right—he wasn't that special, and he wasn't fully independent. But it was never about having to be unique or doing it alone. Instead, it was about opening his hands and his heart and taking the next step.

What made the next step possible was clearing my mind of the things that held me back so that I could focus instead on what mattered moving forward. I say this because often, when we rid ourselves of the clutter of our mind, we find that what had been mixed into the clutter were truths about ourselves and where we could go that we really needed to remember. It's then that we realize that our healthiest and best self doesn't show up in the midst of clutter, but instead in the quiet and still expanse of our mind.

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[Jason VanRuler](#) is a licensed therapist and the author of *Get Past Your Past: How Facing Your Broken Places Leads to True Connection*. He has an engaged and rapidly growing online audience for his videos sharing practical tips for psychological care, self-help, and healthy relationships. He enjoys spending time with his wife and three children playing games and traveling.

# The Way of Simplicity:

How to Course-Correct from Lost to Focused

*Jessica Rose Williams*



It may be the closest thing to a universal worry—I'm talking about the worry that we're not making the most of our lives. We have fears around the hard truth that time is slipping through our fingers, and these fears tend to get worse year by year, because it feels as though time is speeding up as we get older. It makes us desperate to maximize the short time we're given.

Meanwhile, for so many of us, we're not living the life we want to live. We might have an idea of what we'd love to do, but we quickly talk ourselves out of it because *we don't have time, that's not for people like us*, or *we have to be realistic*. But still, the desire for more meaning gnaws at us.

Mary Oliver summed it up best with her existential question “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

I'm no stranger to the worries and fears, but with time and practice I've dedicated myself to facing them head-on. This is how I've discovered and held on to my focus. The secret has been simplicity.

## **Life from the Inside Out**

I never used to think about the decisions I was making, or why. It was as if I was living completely out of habit.

In my homeland of Britain I worked in a 9 to 5 job, even though it made me dreadfully unhappy, because I didn't think there was an

alternative. I spent more than I could afford on the things I thought would make me happy, because magazines or the Internet told me they would. They didn't, and the debt soon mounted up. I thought the answer was to earn more money, to say yes to more, to work harder, but it wasn't.

There was no unique direction in my life, no contemplation, reflection, or self-awareness. I was operating on autopilot, with my hard-wired beliefs from a traumatic childhood flying the plane. These beliefs told me I wasn't good enough; I wasn't talented; money was hard to make, easy to spend; and I had to keep myself safe from the outside world because it was a frightening place where people couldn't be trusted. I was one lost soul.

Then five years ago I moved out of suburbia to the countryside for a slower pace of life. The year after that, I decided to follow my creative dreams. Now I'm living in Paris, single and making a living as a self-employed creative. I write; I make videos; and I take photos. I know this is only the beginning.

I'm comfortable with living off the beaten path, confusing people when they ask me about my life, how I make a living, and what's a single girl in her 30s doing in Paris all alone? *How does she make money? How does she get by without speaking the language? Why hasn't she had children?* I'm not shook by this questioning, because I know it's nothing but projection of their own fears.

I know in my heart and soul that I'm doing what's right for me right now and that one way or another everything is going to be all right because I am living from the inside out. I'm not trying to change who I am; I'm trying to *be* who I am.

## Seizing Every Moment

According to Brené Brown, what so many of us crave—and fear we will never achieve—is true belonging. The problem is that the modern world dangles shiny new things in front of us on a daily basis. These distractions cause us to lose our focus. We regain it by stepping back, asking some big questions, and then daring to let go. That is the course I have chosen to take.

I can testify that when we're on the right path we feel aligned, we feel grounded, and we feel whole. The world opens up to us in ways we could never have imagined, and we begin to believe that our lives don't just matter; they're to be treasured and farmed.

I've come to believe the meaning of life is to experience it and that this is how we stretch time—to appreciate each moment, pay attention, and immerse ourselves in the simplest things each day. Things like feeling the ground beneath us, noticing the way our morning eggs smell while they scramble in the pan, taking in the sound of our children laughing.



When we walk through life asleep (which is so easy to do), we worry if we're doing it right, if we're missing it all. When we slow down and simplify our lives, we're able to breathe, to be in the moment. This is where we're able to see that life is already happening to us, whether we like it or not, and that the time is passing us by anyway, so we may as well make the most of every single moment as best we can each day.

It takes courage to embrace a simple life, but I've found it comes with worthy rewards, like space and the ability to see the wood for the trees. What you really want out of life becomes clear—no less scary, perhaps, but clear. The distractions melt away and you're able to figure out a path forward.

## **4 Skills of Simplicity**

Simplifying isn't an easy task. It's hard because simplicity requires us to choose and to let go. In a world where we're told to believe that more is more, that we can have and do it all, this goes against the status quo. Too much choice, however, leaves us feeling unwell, confused, and frozen. We often end up making no choice at all. That is no way out of our lostness.

We can escape our paralysis by making the choices that lead us along the way to a simpler life. And if there were just four skills to master on the path to simplifying and finding our focus in life, I'd say it was these:

### *1. Work out what your values are.*

The easiest way to do this is to ask yourself how you'd like to be remembered.

One of the best books I've ever read on the topic is *The 7 Questions to Find Your Purpose*, where Richard Jacobs advises us to choose the answers based, not on how we *think* we will be remembered, but on how we'd *like* to be. Now start showing up as that person. Start asking yourself if your decisions are aligned with these values on a daily basis. If the answer is no, it's time to make a change.

At first it feels confusing. The answers feel abstract and faint, but with practice we strengthen our intuition muscle and it becomes habit. This is living from the inside out.

### *2. Treat yourself as you would a child.*

When we grow out of childhood and become adults, our basic needs do not change as much as we might think. What does change is that in adulthood we become our own caretakers and it's our responsibility to provide for ourselves. But inside we're still a lot like the children we used to be, and children thrive in simplicity.

A simple life is one where we tend to our most basic needs as a priority and surrender to the desire for a simple, repetitive routine. We can do anything (within reason), but we cannot do everything—

we have to choose. It soon becomes clear how little time we have once we've prioritized the basics like sleeping when we're tired, feeding ourselves well, and getting the exercise we need to maintain a healthy body and mind.

Get used to asking yourself what you need right now and practice loving yourself enough to provide it.

### *3. Learn to live alongside fear.*

My life terrifies me right now—on a daily basis—but it has also never felt so exciting or fulfilling. I think fear and the life we want are closely linked.

Sometimes I wonder what on earth I'm doing. I gave up so much, everything I thought would make me happy. But I couldn't breathe in that life. Now I'm single, self-employed, and living in a foreign country. I've no idea where I found the courage, but I'm going to hang on to it for dear life and keep going.

It's okay to be different and to follow a different path to those around you. It's okay to not want all the things we're told we should want. We already have all the answers, in our hearts.

### *4. Dare to say no.*

If it's not a hell yes, then it's a no. But no can be hard.

Even the *thought* of saying no can stir up the fear of missing out, rocking the boat, causing upset, or burning bridges. We worry about what others might think, that we might be outcast or ridiculed for opting out of what's expected or requested.

If we live our lives this way—always worrying about what other people think and not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings—we'll never do any of the things we actually enjoy. It doesn't help that we're trained to say yes, be polite, and go with the flow.

When we're children, if we are invited to a birthday party, we attend. Nobody teaches us to think about whether we want to attend or not. We aren't taught to put our own needs and wants first and carefully prioritize what we say yes and no to. I think this has a huge part to play in people living overly busy lives today, where we constantly rush around, trying to cram everything in.

The answer to this problem is that two-letter word *no*. It's the only way out of the trap. And if you're worried saying no will make you less likeable, let me tell you that I've found the opposite is true—people will respect you more.

## **Rewards of the Simple Life**

Through these four simplicity skills come clarity, space, and focus—but most of all fulfilment. Committing to these skills took me from

living the life I thought I should be living to living the life I want to be living.

I wish the same for you.

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[Jessica Rose Williams](#) is a British writer and blogger who writes on simple living, minimalism, interiors, self-care, capsule wardrobes, creativity, books, and slow travel. Her work has been featured in *Cosmopolitan*, *Forbes*, Refinery29, and other channels. Her first book is *Enough*. She lives in Paris.

# Focusing Through the Fog:

Learning to Thrive Under Physical and Mental Constraints by  
Focusing on what is Most Important

*Monique Duray*



I have always been a busy person, both physically and mentally. If my body wasn't moving, my mind certainly was.

This abruptly changed when I came down with COVID-19.

After the initial week of sickness and an additional week battling a secondary pneumonia infection, I did not bounce back quickly. In addition to my poor-performing lungs, I suffered from chronic fatigue, brain fog, and other seemingly random symptoms. Like nearly 7% of other American adults, I had developed long COVID.

After over 20 years of practicing yoga and working as a classroom teacher, family educator, and mental health social worker, I had some good tools. But despite all my coping mechanisms, I struggled. As my illness lingered, I started to wonder if I was going to ever get back to normal.

I was a single mom with three kids. I had pets. I had a job. How was I going to manage?

## **The Underwear Dilemma**

For months, I rarely changed out of my pajamas or left the couch. When I did, it was out of physical necessity: either to visit the kitchen or go to the bathroom.

On one particularly rough day, I heaved myself off the couch and into the bathroom. As I sat on the toilet and finished with my business, I attempted to gather the gumption to pull up my underwear and walk back to the couch. I sat there for a while, unable to move, when I was struck by the harsh realization that I had enough energy to do one or the other, but *I could not do both*.

If I pulled up my underwear, I would need to lie down on the floor and rest for a while before I had the strength to walk to the couch. I have napped next to a toilet more often than I'd like to admit, but it was due to nausea, not exhaustion. And the tile floor in the bathroom was cold, so I really wanted to get back to the couch.

But the desire to put on my underwear was strong too. It didn't seem right not to. What if someone saw me?

In his book *The Four Agreements*, Toltec philosopher Don Miguel Ruiz explained domestication, or how we learn to behave in ways that are socially acceptable. He writes, "We have learned to live our lives trying to satisfy other people's demands. We have learned to live by other people's point of view because of the fear of not being accepted and not being good enough for someone else."

Perhaps there are times in life when it is important to include underwear, but in the bathroom that day, I realized this wasn't one of them. I stood, stepped out of the underwear, and returned to the couch.



## Not Both

This was the first of many decisions on how to manage my new physical and mental limitations, and I found myself often returning to the same thought pattern: *I could do this, or I could do that, but I cannot do both.*

I could manage the upkeep of my two-thousand-square-foot house, or I could spend two hours in the car to take my kids to their dad's house. I did not have the physical energy to do both.

I could move forward with my plans to open a family medication center, or I could write the book I'd been tinkering with for months. I did not have the cognitive bandwidth to do both.

I could spend time with my friends and large extended family, or I could give a few key relationships the attention they deserved. My social battery didn't have the power to do both.

Accepting the necessity of these choices wasn't easy, but it allowed me to reevaluate what I wanted my life to look like.

Over the next year, I found myself getting rid of half my possessions to move into a smaller home close to my kids' dad, abandoning my business plans, and letting go of relationships. I walked away from things in my life that were no longer serving me so that I could focus

my energy on my core values and allocate any remaining energy to regaining my physical, cognitive, and emotional stamina.

A key tool I used during this process was meditation.

## What Do I Want?

In addition to my usual practice of clearing my mind by not engaging with the thoughts that entered it, I also began to meditate on the specific question *What do I actually want?* Not what do other people expect of me, but what is actually important to me? I examined whether I was doing something because it was of real value to me or because domestication had made me think it was necessary.

In his book *The Path of the Yoga Sutras*, Nicolai Bachman says, “Life becomes easier and simpler as our attention is disentangled from the outer world. As we unravel the layers of our conditioning, we experience more and more of the soft, warm, unassuming glow that is our true essence.”

Through meditation and the study of yogic philosophy, I stripped away other people’s expectations, revealing what truly mattered to me. These revelations caused me to start doing things a little differently than most people.

I teach for an online school, so I work from home. I have limited my children’s activities, and I rarely do things for them that they are

physically and cognitively capable of doing themselves with some coaching.

I have automated as much of my life as possible to avoid decision fatigue. I follow the same basic schedule every day, have a rotation of simple meals, and keep all my bills on auto-pay. I rely on just a few go-to outfits for when I leave the house. On the rare occasions when we get take-out, our order is always the same.

I've also learned I need to rest, and the more intentional I am about it, the more smoothly the rest of my life goes. And so I have integrated rest into my daily life.

My slow, quiet morning routine is a good example of this. If I am gentle with my body and my mind when I wake up, allowing myself to gather speed rather than immediately tackling my to-do list, my energy levels stay high enough to accomplish the things I need to do.

I schedule my most demanding tasks for early in the day to make sure I have the energy to get them done. If I am feeling drained in any way, I can push myself just a little because I know I have an easy afternoon ahead of me.

One of the most important things I have learned from long COVID is to say no without regret or shame. If I push my physical, cognitive, and social limits, there is less energy left for the others. It's like a pie graph—when one piece of the pie gets bigger, the others shrink. If

taking on something new means that another pie piece will get too small, I simply say no to the request.

Before COVID, I might have felt bad about this. If I didn't feel like I was letting someone else down, I would feel a little disappointed in myself. I'd wonder, *Why can't I do more?*

But the truth is, I did too much and there were consequences of stretching myself too thin. Like a lot of people, I was often tired and felt unsatisfied. It's just that now, when I make that mistake, the repercussions are more obvious and immediate.

As my body, mind, and spirit have healed, I have remained selective about where I put my energy and what I bring into my life. I continually ask myself, *Does this bring enough value to my life to be worth the effort?*

Today I can do most of the things that I could do before COVID, but there is significant planning and recovery time involved. So even though I am capable of doing more than I was a couple of years ago, that doesn't always mean it's a good idea.

## **An Opportunity for Improvement**

We are still learning about long COVID and how it affects people's physical and mental health. According to an August 2023 "Morbidity and Mortality Report" by the Center for Disease Control,

approximately 1 in 10 adults with previous COVID-19 were experiencing long COVID. Furthermore, the “limited ability to carry out day-to-day activities because of long COVID symptoms can have a significant impact on quality of life, functional status, and ability to work or provide care to others.”[[1](#)]

Despite this impact, people may feel societal pressure to go back to normal, especially if they weren’t hospitalized or on a ventilator. Even for people who didn’t get sick, life may not look the same now as it did before the pandemic, but maybe that’s okay in certain respects.

I never would have guessed that enduring a long health problem would improve my life, but that is exactly what happened. By narrowing my focus to what mattered most, I was able to spend my limited energy where it counted, allowing me to thrive in a way I never would have expected.

But the truth is, you don’t need to experience an illness-induced existential crisis on the toilet to make changes in your life. You don’t even need to study yogic philosophy or meditate. What I do encourage you to do is give yourself some time to reflect on what matters most to you and decide where you want to direct your focus.

When you find yourself in a position to make a decision, ask yourself if you are being influenced by domestication or by your own values. And most of all, you can ask yourself, *Does this bring enough value to my life to be worth the effort?*

...

[Monique Duray](#) is a certified yoga instructor with a master's degree in family education, based in northern Minnesota. She can be found by visiting her website, but not on social media, because she can do one or the other, but she cannot do both.

# Stop Skimming Your Life

*Courtney Carver*



Are you struggling to simplify your life? Does it feel impossible to do the thing you most want to do or to create the kind of work and life you crave? Maybe, instead of making progress, it feels like you are skimming your life, just treading water to stay afloat.

I get it. You've got a lot on your plate. You have a bunch of tasks, to-do's, appointments, interests, and issues. You may also be dealing with fatigue, confusion, uncertainty, and other distractions.

Maybe we can do it all, but we can't do it all at once. And frankly, maybe we don't want to do it all.

You won't discover the secret to becoming more engaged and focused with the latest productivity hack. The secret is ... less.

Everything can't matter at the same time. It can't all have your attention.

Seth Godin said that only 10 words of the 1,000 we write will get attention. I've already written more than 150. Are you still reading?

If you notice that you've been skimming email, books, blog articles, social media, or other things in your life, consider what you are allowing in—into your life, into your brain, and into your heart. You may discover you are skimming your entire life because there is too much going on (inside and out) to do it any other way.



If you let less in, could you give more of yourself to what's most important? Could you trade some of the time you are skimming your life for a deep dive? How might that change things for you?

## **Try These**

If you want to simplify your life, reduce stress, and actually make a difference, instead of skimming your life, implement these ideas:

### *1. Consider your health.*

I probably don't have to tell you that when you feel good, things seem easier. When you don't feel well, you may as well be trying to do your life underwater. It's harder, more frustrating, and wears you down.

Health includes mental and physical wellness. There's no difference.

For more focus, concentrate on feeling better. This usually starts by prioritizing rest. Whether you are struggling with burnout, overwhelm, or chronic illness, resting can help.

### *2. Declutter your space.*

While decluttering often feels like the most overwhelming step on a simplicity journey, it quite literally removes obstacles and clears the path for you to simplify further. Even the little things add up. These

are the things that usually matter the least, but they still get your energy and attention.

Remove the things that remove you from your life.

### *3. Change your work.*

The most stressful thing about your life right now may be your work. It may be easier to ignore it because it feels impossible to change it. But take it from someone who did that for years: once a change in work becomes your primary objective, it's possible.

It may take time, but as soon as you begin to imagine a new path, you can see your current work as a means to an end, helping you to make a change.

### *4. Stop checking email.*

Sometimes it seems like all we do is manage our inboxes. I recommend removing email from your phone if possible. Also, instead of checking email all day long, open your inbox no more than one to three times a day, click “select all,” and then, at a glance, unselect anything you want to keep. Delete the rest. This will save you so much time and energy.

If you are starting with hundreds or thousands of emails, you can try the gradual approach and spend a few minutes each day on the older

emails. Or you can declare email bankruptcy and ... “Select all. Delete.”

### *5. Clean your closet.*

It sounds like a simple recommendation, but I know it’s not.

Until I cleaned out my closet and downsized my wardrobe, I had no idea the stress that was caused from my shopping for clothes, collecting wardrobe items, storing and saving clothes, and thinking about what was in my closet. The decisions around what to wear seemed endless and overwhelming.

If you feel the same way, try minimalist fashion challenge Project 333 for three months.[\[2\]](#)

### *6. Simplify the way you spend your time.*

Whenever I think I don’t have time for (insert the thing I most want to do here), I remember Elizabeth Gilbert’s words, “You have to stop doing things you want to do so you can do the thing you most want to do.” This means I have to let go of things, even good things.

There are too many amazing, wonderful, interesting, compelling things—the good stuff. So we have to say no to some (I mean a lot) of the good stuff too.

It's why I'm so good at saying no to the "meh" stuff. I want to have room for as much of the good stuff as possible.

### *7. Get back to where you started.*

One time I lost my keys. My husband asked, "Where is the last place you had them?"

Recognize that kind of scenario? It can teach us something.

If you've lost your focus and ability to stay engaged in what matters to you, ask yourself, "Where is last place you had it?" When did it slip away? You can find your focus by noticing where you lost it.

### *8. Ask "Demand or deserve?"*

When you have too much to do or too many ideas to choose from, it's hard to determine what comes first. You will find focus when you can discriminate between what *demand*s your attention and what *deserves* your attention.

When something distracts you or pulls you away, ask yourself, "Demand or deserve?" and then act accordingly.

### *9. Be content.*

When you don't like what you do, what you have, or who you spend time with, focus becomes increasingly challenging. A change may be

in order, but a hard stop might not be an option. In the meantime, be grateful. Make a tiny list every day of things that make you smile and warm your heart. Even when things are bad, there is always something that deserves your gratitude.

Prioritize simple pleasures. Do something you love. Add something lovely to your life while you try to figure things out. Try a photography class, bake cookies, read a book, or go for a bike ride. Make your own prescription for happiness in the midst of discontent.

### *10. Get present.*

When we are overwhelmed, fear and worry hang out and distract us from focusing on one thing. While we are trying to accomplish one little thing, we worry about all of the things left undone and fear that we will never accomplish anything. This is a result of future-thinking and can be remedied by being in the moment.

If that whole Zen idea seems foreign to you, set a timer for 20 minutes and commit to the task at hand. If 20 minutes is too long, try 10. When the timer rings, you can get back to fear and worry. They'll wait. Practice increasing your time for being in the moment a little each day.

For more focus in your life, choose one of the recommendations above and make that one thing your priority. Feed that change every single day with tiny steps. Choose consistency over intensity. Don't

worry about how long it takes. Dismiss your self-doubt as well as negative feedback from the people around you. Dismiss it and dive deeper.

## Head for the Deep End

I don't know about you, but I don't want to skim through my life, manage a zillion surface-level relationships, or try to work the way everyone else is working. Instead, I want to unsubscribe from the "new normal" and the status quo. I want simpler, slower, softer. I want long stretches of time to write, to daydream, to connect and disconnect.

I'm aware of how privilege, different life stages, and time and energy availability factor in to how accessible focusing on the most important thing is. You can't always abandon your day-to-day responsibilities to clean out your closet, write a book, or fulfill a lifelong dream. You can, however, become more discerning about the important things, cut out the things that aren't serving you, and give as much of your extra attention to one thing that matters.

Skimming doesn't serve you. It distracts you.

Choose deeper over wider, and immerse yourself in what matters to you.

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# Technostress and the Paradox of Our Digital Devices

*Gloria Mark*





We face a paradox when we use our digital devices.

On the one hand, personal technologies extend our human capabilities. With our fingertips we can crunch out large-scale data analyses, we can broadcast a message to thousands of people, and we can connect with a team globally. We can accomplish more than people ever dreamed of doing before the digital age.

But on the other hand, we're paying a price. Being on our devices nearly around the clock is resulting directly and indirectly in what is called *technostress*—stress that's linked to our use of tech.

A recent “Stress in America” poll conducted by the American Psychological Association revealed that stress is at an all-time high.<sup>[3]</sup> Of course stress can stem from many sources and not just from our use of tech. But stress that is rooted in our use of personal devices is very real. The disruptive innovations we use on a daily basis—the Internet and our personal computers and smartphones—are taxing our minds in ways never before seen in history.

Think about the information we are handling. News cycles are nearly continuous. Most of us return to our favorite social media again and again. Slack channels keep pushing out messages that we are expected to respond to. There is of course our organizational work for which we're tethered to our devices to finish. And there are video meetings, which for many have not abated much since the pandemic.

Stress is a danger to personal health, is linked to inflammation and chronic health conditions, and creates a financial cost to society. Stress can also hinder our ability to be present in our work and personal lives—it stifles our creative energy to be engaged and motivated.

Instead of assuming that use of our devices is always a good, we should realize there's a paradox here. The upside is paired with a downside. If we're attuned to the reality of technostress, we can begin to mitigate it and become happier and healthier people.

### **3 Leading Sources of Technostress**

Before we get to solutions, let's break down some of the major ways in which use of our devices is linked to technostress, so we know what we're dealing with.

#### *1. Email and social media.*

The amount of electronic communications we deal with on a daily basis is mind-boggling. In research I participated in, we found that people check email on average 77 times a day.[\[4\]](#) For those in our sample who were Facebook users, they checked it 21 times a day.[\[5\]](#) Meanwhile, around 500 million X posts and 350 billion emails are sent globally.[\[6\]](#)[\[7\]](#)

Is all this electronic communication causing stress? You bet it is. To give just one piece of evidence, in a study where we cut off email in an organization for one workweek, we found that, without email, stress went down.[\[8\]](#) The truth is, often we don't even know the extent to which email and the like are stressing us out until we do without them.

There are reasons why email, in particular, causes stress. It has become a symbol of work, and most of us are part of a work culture that has deep-seated expectations and pressures to stay connected and respond to messages. The inbox has also expanded the scope of information work by creating additional tasks above and beyond our normal work, such as for physicians and nurses, who must deal with inbox messages in addition to seeing patients. Further, the text medium of email, like with Slack and texting, lacks social cues and can often lead to misinterpretations of the writer's intent, which in turn can lead to conflicts and stress.

## *2. The need to filter information.*

The amount of digital information available is so massive that we're faced with the necessity of trying to discern what is valuable and credible. After all, the digital information that we process is not just produced by published authors or academics, or filtered by gatekeepers like news networks, newspapers, or libraries, but much of it is created and sent by other Internet users. Some users may pass

on false information without knowing it; others deliberately spread disinformation.

Filtering information can be a nightmare, and trying to sift through the morass of information to understand what is truthful adds to stress.

### *3. Interruptions.*

Most people experience a lot of interruptions to their work because of technology, and these cause stress. As mentioned above, the typical information worker on the job checks email and social media a lot—and this is just during the workday. It does not even consider interruptions due to news, e-commerce sites, texts, apps, Slack, and so much more. Further, people are about as likely to self-interrupt as to be interrupted by some external source.

These interruptions cause stress.<sup>[9]</sup> Why? Because every time you switch your attention you have to reorient to the new task at hand, whether it is email, social media, news, or your overdue report. This imposes extra time and effort, called a *switch cost*, and manifests as stress.

A byproduct of being interrupted so often and being distracted so much is that our attention spans have shortened. I have been empirically measuring our attention since 2003, and I have found that our attention spans have been shrinking as computing has

permeated our lives. In 2003 the average attention span on a screen was two and a half minutes. From 2016 to 2019, it was measured by computer logging techniques to average 47 seconds. We also found in our research that there's a correlation between shorter attention spans and higher stress.[\[10\]](#)

We want to be as productive as possible, and we are enabled to do this with tools that allow us to work and access information and people 24/7. It's not uncommon for people to tell me how they cannot detach from work in the evenings, and they check their phones throughout the night. When we're using our personal technologies around the clock, it's no wonder we experience technostress.

### 3 Proven Solutions to Technostress

We have limited attentional resources, and as with physical resources, we need to conserve them. And so we need to develop new skills to harness our attention when we use our devices as well as to pull back when we have reached the limits of our attentional capacity and are starting to get exhausted.

Here are a few key ways in which we can use tech without getting stressed and experiencing burnout.

*1. Separate from your devices.*

The Japanese term *yohaku no bi*, as exemplified in the Ryoanji garden in Kyoto, refers to the beautiful and dynamic empty space around the objects in a painting or in garden design. This empty, or negative, space is a good metaphor to use for setting aside respites in your day that surround hard work—stepping back and letting the mind replenish.

Instead of using your devices for long stretches, allow yourself time for some empty space. Spend some time going outside in nature, contemplating, meditating, or doing a simple hobby to relax the mind.

## *2. Engage in meta-awareness.*

As I'm using it here, the term *meta-awareness* refers to gaining an understanding of our automatic actions.

So many things we do with our devices are unconscious responses—we check email or social media or swipe our phones open. We need to learn to pause first and probe *why* we are doing such behaviors. When we reflect on our actions, we can become more intentional.

When you have an urge to check social media, ask yourself first why you have that urge. For me, it's usually because I'm bored. When I become aware of this, I then form a plan, such as to work 30 more minutes and take a break. Based on what meta-awareness tells you

about your own use of digital devices, make conscious choices about when and when not to use your digital devices.

### *3. Practice forethought.*

Practicing forethought is imagining how our current actions affect our future selves. For example, next time you feel like checking social media, form a concrete visualization of yourself at the end of the day. How do you want to feel at 7 pm? I bet you want to feel rewarded and relaxed, and certainly you don't want to still be working on that deadline. That image of your fulfilled self can stop you from going down the rabbit hole of social media.

Attention is goal-directed. Keeping our goals in mind is the best shield to guard against distractions, and staying on track can lessen stress. When we don't have strong goals, our actions become unconstrained and we might start checking email and social media and switching our attention like crazy.

Don't just remind yourself of your goals at the beginning of the day. Goals are dynamic and they can slip easily. Write down your goals, in order to help keep your goals in mind throughout the day.

## **A New Relationship to Our Devices**

Technological development continues to occur at rapid-fire speed. Every year there are new inventions enabling us to produce and

consume more information. Yet technological developments have leapfrogged over our human capabilities. We can produce information like we never have before in history, yet the human mind remains a bottleneck for processing that information. Rather than continuing to push ourselves to our limits in utilizing technology's capabilities, let's give ourselves permission to pull back.

Faced with the paradox of technology, what we need is new thinking on how we can use our tech in an intelligent way, to pause from it when it becomes overwhelming, and above all to maintain our well-being. When we experience positive well-being, we can be more motivated, engaged, and creative, and ultimately more productive.

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# Cognitive Solitude:

The benefits of disconnecting from technology and making space  
for reflection

*Maggie Jackson*



Midway through his first spacewalk, astronaut John Herrington felt stunningly alone. It was two days before Thanksgiving in 2002 and he was running an equipment check on the far side of the International Space Station.

“I’m at the end of my tether, at the edge of the space station. I can’t see my spacewalking partner; he’s off doing something else,” said Herrington. “I’m it.”

Clinging to a craft orbiting the planet at 17,500 mph from 240 miles up, Herrington at that moment was the furthest point of humanity in the universe. He had been testing a bolt assembly on a segment called the P1 Truss when he made himself turn and look not at earth but beyond it.

“There’s nothing between me and whatever else is out there,” he recalls thinking.

A sense of shocking solitude often strikes astronauts on spacewalks, prompting acute awareness, curiosity, exhilaration, and sometimes trepidation. It’s a time when the new perspectives gained by being in space are revealed most intensely, they say.

Herrington told me that he had made a point “to stop and take it all in” on the advice of a mentor, an astronaut who flew seven Shuttle flights. Veteran astronauts often say this to new spacewalkers; some commanders even order them to do so: just for a minute or two, set

aside NASA's breakneck, right-stuff, mission-above-all work pace and grab time for yourself to stare out into the inky vastness, heed the infinite silence, and reflect upon it all.

Now we tether ourselves to technologies that are far more than provisional lifelines. Americans check their phones an average of 144 times a day. Teens spend 7.5 hours on average a day on screens, not including school or homework time. And all the while, our devices splinter our hours and minds, preying on our attention by offering slot-machine-like bursts of notifications, invites, and likes.

The simultaneity of doing and being that long-ago inventors conjured in the age of the telephone and desktop now gives way to a noisy multiplicity and to an unprecedented possibility: we can banish solitude from our days.

Being alone, especially with our thoughts, has never been easy for a creature whose survival depends upon connectivity. But treating such times as useless or optional is a costly mistake. Solitude is the cradle of reflection.

## **Addictive Connection**

Some years ago, I spent several days interviewing students at a large East Coast university who were undergoing a 24-hour digital detox. Most of the university students failed their assignment, sometimes within hours, often without regret. Many I met coolly told me that

technology was unavoidably central to life. What struck me most, however, was how unnerved they were by disconnecting even briefly. Waking up, walking across campus, listening to a lecture, or going to sleep untethered left them feeling vulnerable and exposed.

“I had nothing to do, no one to talk to,” said one student of a half-hour media-free drive. “I had no connection to anything.”

Still, some students caught glimpses of galaxies beyond the glare and din of their own.

Mike, a senior, told me that a morning alone, while “creepy” at first, allowed him to clarify his “jumbly thinking” on whether to move in with his girlfriend. “It let me organize and weigh the positives and negatives of the situation.”

In a class discussion, a young man named Brian observed that during the assignment he could “hear what was going on in my head. When you’re playing games or music, you don’t hear that.” The professor listened, amazed.

Later I made my way to a corner of the campus where construction on a Garden of Reflection had just begun. “In a time when most people run their lives with an overcrowded calendar and the world seems a bit more fragile, finding time—let alone a place—to reflect is difficult,” read a flyer I found there. T. S. Eliot’s plaintive line from

*Four Quartets* came to mind: “We had the experience but missed the meaning.”

In this era of flux and fury, we are often *not* taking it all in, at least not deeply. There is much that we still do not know about technology’s impact on human thinking, but a scientific consensus is emerging. “When we turn to these devices, we generally learn and remember less from our experiences,” cognitive scientist Jason Chein and colleagues concluded in a research review on the topic.[\[11\]](#)

Those who routinely juggle media—watching the game while working and texting, for example—are less able to filter out distractions and discern what’s relevant in their environment than people who typically do one or two things at a time. “Heavy multitaskers” also have trouble remembering things, even briefly.

Likely fueling these failures are constant lapses in attention, many scientists now believe. In other words, it’s not that multitaskers focus well on some things but not on others. They largely aren’t keeping a close eye on *any* ball. And chillingly, these avid multitaskers, who are least able to juggle well, are most confident in their ability to do so.

Yet beyond split-focus, hyper-connected living is not a void but a fragile space protected and cultivated by solitude where higher thought is born. Imagine shutting off your phone, closing the door, and taking a walk. You are essentially curating the environment to create the conditions for wading into thought. This is the kind of

physical aloneness that we typically equate with solitude. But that is just a beginning.

## Courting Solitude

Picture the kind of mindset that comes from fully giving ourselves over to a thorny problem or a wondrous glimpse of the heavens. The state that I call *cognitive solitude* springs from an amalgam of focus, persistence, and readiness, or what the philosopher John Dewey termed *wholeheartedness*. The result is a kind of mental decluttering that sets the stage for the play of deepening thought.

“Perhaps cognitive solitude is a condition that allows us to find whatever might be in our minds,” then work or play with these nascent beginnings, philosopher Nathan Ballantyne, author of *Knowing Our Limits*, told me.

People can work well in a noisy café, not just because they have chosen a quiet back table or a setting where they are anonymous, but because they are willing to be alone with their thoughts. A surgeon suddenly experiencing a bit of trouble in the operating room often stills her hands and hushes her team in order to settle her mind completely on the problem before her.

Even pausing and doing “nothing” offers a kind of cognitive solitude, a time for the mind to focus on inner work below the surface of our conscious awareness. When we rest, sleep, or simply pause, our

minds digest, synthesize, and encode experience, strengthening new memories and finding new insight.

In one representative study, people who rested for ten minutes after learning to navigate a virtual town later had a far better sense of its full layout than those who played a video game after the initial task.[\[12\]](#) Only by courting cognitive solitude can we continually wrest meaning from the blooming, buzzing confusion of our days.

## The Opportunity

Soon after the heady days of the 60s-era Apollo program, crewed space missions came under fire. Robots could do the job, many proposed. Astronauts were glorified repairmen and flag-planters, critics said. But the astronauts themselves vocally argued that the world needed a deeply felt and reasoned human perspective on the universe *and* that they needed focused time in space to craft such reflections.

“They realize they are in a unique situation, and want to take advantage of it,” says Frank White, author of *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution*. “They see the entire cosmos in a way that’s new and different.” It is a view that many within NASA have come to respect.

John Herrington’s scheduled return to earth was delayed by low clouds that kept the Space Shuttle in orbit for three days. As a result,

he received an unexpected vacation in space. Each day, when his mission work was completed, he would make his way alone up to the shuttle's flight deck, turn out the lights, float, watch the earth and stars, and wonder about a cosmos that humans have only begun to probe.

In the fleeting times when there is nothing between us and the universe of our thoughts, will we turn away?

...

[Maggie Jackson](#), an award-winning journalist and social critic, is the author of *Uncertain: The Wisdom and Wonder of Being Unsure* and other books. Her essays, commentary, and books have been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New Philosopher*, on National Public Radio, and in media worldwide.



# Do You Have Enough Time to Work?

*Laura Vanderkam*



On a recent Friday, I spent some time constructing the family's schedule for the next week. With two working parents and five active kids, there are a lot of moving parts in our family.

I finished the run-of-show for our weekly circus, then stepped back to analyze my work. I saw that there was plenty of time for kid driving and lessons and contractor visits and the various appointments associated with seven people's life maintenance. One thing there was not enough time for? Mom's focused work. And with several deadlines staring me down, something was going to have to change.

Perhaps you have encountered the same problem.

Some people work set hours in set places, and for these people, doing anything other than work during work hours requires officially taking time off. But many of us work more flexibly these days. Hours are more malleable or self-directed. As more professionals work from home, there's more opportunity to move work around on dimensions of time and place.

That's great—flexibility often makes combining work and life possible. But when work *can* move around it often become more fragmented.

For those of us who can do things like school pick-ups, doctor's appointments, or meeting a contractor during traditional working

hours, we face a choice. We can allow the time to get chopped up, but we can also decide that our professional goals matter too.

We can all try to be more efficient, but there's a limit to how efficient anyone can be. We need to make sure we have enough focused time to work.

## **LV's Schedule**

In my case, after constructing the family schedule, I began doing a few things. The first was plotting out "LV's work hours" and seeing how many total hours were available to work. Given that many afternoons required a hard stop to help with activity driving, this exercise showed me that I needed to become better about starting my workday on time.

Like many people, I'm more focused and energetic in the morning. I'd been haphazardly "helping" with the household morning routine, even after our fully competent nanny arrived for work at 8:00 a.m., and I was mostly just getting in the way. If I started work at 8:15, rather than 8:45, that was 30 highly productive minutes that might be the equivalent of an hour later.

I also needed to set some guidelines with the kids. Rather than deal with random texts from the older children asking to be picked up at school if they didn't feel like riding the bus, I scheduled in a day or two each week that they could for sure get a ride from me, my

husband, or our nanny—and let them know that, except in emergencies, I would be working longer on the other days.

Finally, I needed to batch the little things. Any given week brings permission slips, school forms, the need to send health records somewhere, random one-off bills, birthday party invitations, activity registrations, someone's urgent need for socks, and so forth. Rather than deal with these matters when they appeared, or when I thought of them, I could shove them all to a low-energy time on one or two days of the week. This would preserve the rest of my working hours for more focused matters.

## **Your Work-Saving Strategies**

Now let me show you how you can implement the same strategies I used to pry open space for work in my weekly schedule.

### *1. See where the time is going now.*

Sometimes people feel behind, despite seeming to work all the time. Tracking time for a week reveals that the time is so fragmented, and so few of the “best” hours are available, that even adding chunks of work on nights and weekends doesn't get you to 40 hours.

We can all be more efficient, but if a job truly does require full-time hours, working fewer is going to lead to feeling harried. Best to get a

good sense of what your weekly landscape, and your family's schedule, truly look like.

## *2. Make strategic choices.*

It seems like a little thing to schedule a dentist appointment at 10:30 a.m. The slot is available—maybe even tomorrow!—and hey, you work from home. Except that renders pretty much the entire morning unavailable for deep work, and over time these unavailable mornings add up.

It might be better to take a 3:30 p.m. slot, when you're already tired and not going to be capable of working on your most important matters.

## *3. Set boundaries with family members.*

This last step is challenging, as one of the biggest upsides of flexible work is getting to spend more time with family. I find it helpful here to think in terms of 168 hours (a week), rather than 24 hours (a day).

Things don't have to look the same every day. Maybe a kid can stay for after-school programs two days a week, thus giving you two longer workdays, and you can end work at the end of the school day three other days—and then work a weekend shift when the child is doing something else, to keep your hours up.

Older kids might also understand the concept of trade-offs. Theoretically you can drive them to school. But what looks like a 15-minute trip to them adds up to more like 35 minutes for you when you figure in time in the carline and time coming back home—and that time has to come from somewhere. Maybe a kid can take the bus Monday to Thursday, and you drive on Friday when your schedule is more relaxed. Maybe you can even leave early and stop for donuts!

### Keeping the “Work” in Work/Life Balance

Time stretches to accommodate what we choose to put into it, and people with flexible schedules can fit in a lot. But in the pursuit of work/life balance, there is nothing balanced about feeling like you’re constantly being pulled between different things. By making sure you have enough focused time to work, you can get your work done and feel able to enjoy the rest of life, rather than constantly trying to make up the time.

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