There Really is No Time Like the Present
Living in the now can be one of the most powerful tools for living your best life once you start to practice it.

“May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven around the heart of wonder.”

- John O’Donohue-

We are human beings, not human ‘doings’, and yet most of us, especially in the West, are constantly chasing after what we believe to be ‘success’.

Yet success is not a fixed concept. It is in the eye of the beholder.

In the West, being a veterinarian, doctor or lawyer might be considered a sign of success, yet we know that there are many unhappy professionals.

The drive to constantly do something makes us distracted and keeps us so focused on the daily grind that we have little time for relaxation, de-stressing, or self-development.

Even worse, it makes us feel stuck as if we can’t change because we have no time, that the whole world we have created for ourselves will fall apart and more.

In this post, you’ll discover the power of living in the now in order to achieve personal transformation, and how you can be more present in your life in every sense of the word.

Let’s look at one of the main reasons we fail to live fully in the present and sacrifice our personal power, the mistake of living in the past.

**How to Let Go of the Past**

Many of us think we are living in the present, day after day, but the truth is that we are often more focused on the past and future than on the present.

We are plugged into a particular role in our family from the time we are born, such as the ‘good son’ or ‘little lady’ and our interests, even our clothing, are dictated by societal norms about what colour boys and girls should wear and how they ‘should’ behave. Boys get blue, girls get pink.

Yet it is all a question of perception. For example, you may think that black and white are straightforward, but the truth is that they carry different symbolic meanings depending on one’s culture. White used to be the colour of mourning in Europe in the Middle Ages, so the idea of a gorgeous white wedding dress would have horrified them.

As we are thrust into societal roles and live them day after day it can be hard to break away.
It’s easy to just do what you’ve already done, go along with what ‘they’ want for the sake of survival and deny parts of your inner self. You might long to be a writer and be very talented at it, but nothing would satisfy your parents except you becoming a doctor.

Old habits die hard, even when you long to make positive changes in your life. Sticking to your worst habits you know you should change is a lot easier than breaking them, such as quitting smoking or stopping overeating.

We also stay stuck in order to avoid conflict. No one wants to be alone in life, so we put up with certain situations in order to maintain the relationship. Why? Because change is scary. Stepping into your “unknown” is never easy.

The past soon becomes a pattern. And if something traumatic happens to us, it can often cause us to ‘freeze’ in that moment and have trouble moving on, or changing. A death in the family might be one example. A bad break-up with a spouse might be another, causing us to have trouble ever trusting or loving anyone ever again.

Just a simple argument can cause people to get stuck in the past. They might hold a grudge and not speak to each other for years, to the point where they can’t even recall what triggered the disagreement in the first place.

Living in the present allows you to create a new identity by releasing the pain and the self-limiting thoughts from the past, and taking things one day at a time.

Another reason we get stuck in our lives is that we get too wrapped up in the future and don’t pay enough attention to the present.

**How to Avoid Getting Wrapped Up in the Future**

Most of us are so busy chasing the future of our dreams that we overlook the joys of the present. Even worse, if we don’t get what we think we desperately want, our life might seem ‘ruined’.

There can be more than enough ‘outside’ stressors but we place a lot of stress on ourselves due to all our expectations, thoughts and desires.

We spend so much time chasing after the future we want, such as money for the down payment on that dream house, we fail to live in the now.

We do what we have to in order to keep our jobs so we can keep on earning in order to pay the mortgage, but there seems little time for anything other than work and other commitments.

Then we get frustrated and feel like a giant hamster running in a wheel all the time.
This constant doing instead of being, of living in the future, instead of living in the now, can cause anger and frustration to build. Very few of us are at our best when we are stressed and angry.

The important word here is choice. Do you find yourself just doing the same thing over and over because it is easier than trying something different? Or ignoring opportunities because they don’t fit in with what you picture your future to be like?

The truth is that your life unfolds moment by moment in the present. In the time it’s taken you to read that sentence, about 10 seconds have already passed into the past. By the time you finish, which might take about another 10 seconds, those future seconds will become the present, and then the past.

Understanding this can help you realise just how precious your time is, and how each present moment is the foundation to a happier future if you take time to live in the now. Let’s look at some of the ways to free yourself to live in the present.

**How to Live in the Present**

There are many ways you can train yourself to cut links with the past and stop chasing the future so you can live in the present. This will mean some focus and effort, but the results will be well worth it.

**Try meditation.** Meditation takes many forms and you’ll find plenty of ideas when you look. Start with something simple until you get the hang of it. Too many people tell me they are worried about not doing it ‘right’. There is no right or wrong. Relax and find a way that suits you. Give yourself the gift of that special time at least once a day.

**Practice mindfulness.** Once you have done this, try being more mindful of what is around you, the thoughts in your mind, the breeze in your hair. Try to push all other thoughts aside that don’t relate to the thing you are focusing on.

**Don’t follow your thoughts.** One of the most important lessons that meditation teaches you is how to distance yourself from your thoughts and simply observe them rather than get caught up in them. You may suddenly recall something that upset you last week or a scary experience from 20 years ago. What you do with these thoughts is up to you. Either observe them and think about what lesson you learned from the event at the time, or simply allow the idea to go back into the vast ocean of your thoughts just like a wave falling back into the sea.

**Give up the myth of multitasking.** Multitasking is a dangerous myth that prevents people from practising mindfulness and working effectively and efficiently from moment to moment. The truth is that the brain can’t work on 2 things at once. All it can do is switch back and forth between the 2 or more tasks really rapidly.
However, this means that at the end of an hour, for example, you’ve got 30 minutes of work done on 2 tasks, and they are likely to be half-finished, compared with having worked on one thing at a time and completed it, then turned your full attention to the next chore on your list.

Multitasking is a time-eater, and a time-waster, that prevents you from living in the moment. One could even argue that it damages your chances of a better future because few of us do our best work when we are distracted.

**Don’t follow your fantasies.** When you’re at work, don’t spend your time thinking about what you are going to do with friends and family at the weekend. Get the work done. Then spend your free time on meditation and on things you like and which recharge your batteries. Treat yourself to a bubble bath before bed, or the latest novel by your favourite author. Take a walk in nature and observe everything, trees, flowers, the sounds of birds and so on.

**Stop thinking the grass is greener.** Many people fail to live in the now because they are constantly chasing after the future life they want and not making the most of the present life they have. It’s easy to envy others or try to keep up with the Joneses, but the more you have, the more cluttered your life can become. It gets focused on things rather than people, or your own self-development.

For example, it is nice to have a lovely lawn, but it requires work and ongoing expense. And after all your efforts, you might still look over at your neighbour’s lawn and decide that their grass is somehow greener. It may be, but in the end, it’s all just grass. Make the most of the life you have, and love the life you live. It’s unique to you because you are unique. I know you’ve heard that before but take a moment to think about it.

**Cultivate an attitude of gratitude.** If discontented thoughts start to creep in, think of 5 things you are grateful for in your life. I have found great benefit in keeping a daily journal where I write down the five things I am grateful for that day.

You can also focus on positive things in your life, such as your wonderful spouse or the joys of chocolate ice cream. Or, air to breathe, water to drink, clothes on your back.

**Just do it, and pay attention while you do it.** Don’t put off until tomorrow what you really want to do now. Sadly, everyone in the world dies with a to-do list. Carpe diem, as the Ancient Romans said. Seize the day. Grab the opportunity and make the most of it. Feel the fear and do it anyway.
Set your intention for the day and for each action. This may sound like goal setting or living in the future, but it is actually a way of focusing the mind to keep it going in the direction you wish. If your intention for the day is to get through it without strangling your boss, great. It’s a start. If your intention is to benefit all living beings by heading off to the nearest soup kitchen to help cook the daily meal, do all your work joyfully.

Stop judging. Humans tend to slap labels on things, good, bad, black, white, up, down. It is all a question of perspective. If you and your friends are each standing on a different floor in the house, for the person on the top floor, up would be the ceiling or sky, and down would be the next floor. For the person on the bottom floor, down would be the basement or the ground.

Accept that things are neither good nor bad, they just are. This is particularly important in relation to your thoughts.

Don’t judge, just observe. There’s no need to feel guilty about how much you detest your aunt. As long as you aren’t mean to her or say anything nasty, no harm is done. On the other hand, you could be grateful to her for presenting you with problems that enable you to learn and grow as a person.

Always begin where you are. The path of self-improvement can be a long and winding one. If you are lacking in self-confidence, you may feel like a complete mess that needs a great deal of work. You might even be told what’s ‘wrong’ with you by (not so) helpful and kind relatives and so-called friends. Choose one area of your life to focus on, being more present and mindful. If you struggle with overeating, for example, studies have shown that eating without the TV on ensures you focus more on the food you are eating, and eating slowly, chewing and really tasting every mouthful, will make each meal more satisfying and leave you less likely to overeat.

Your best is good enough. Most of us dread public speaking, but the truth is that the only way to get really good at it is to practice, to keep doing it over and over again until you improve. With each opportunity for failure comes a chance for success, and a teaching moment, that is, a time in the present when you can learn valuable lessons and use them as the foundation for doing better next time.

You don’t have to be perfect. You just have to try your best. If you procrastinate at work because you are a perfectionist or worry about getting judged, remember, it doesn’t have to be perfect, it just has to be completed by your deadline.

Stop watching the clock all the time. Of course, we have to stick to our timetables, but we should not be a slave to our schedule and not leave time for things that will rest and rejuvenate us, including things that we love, and savouring those things in the moment.
Go with the flow. Most people have trouble going with the flow, that is, living life moment by moment and seeing what will happen. Type-A personalities and real control freaks will actually try to do the opposite. Instead of going with the flow, they will try to re-direct the river. They might succeed up to a certain point, but the effort will be exhausting and the stress of trying to hold everything together so it doesn’t all just wash away can be overwhelming.

As the famous quote by American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr says, “...grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Divorce yourself from media. It is true that cellphones are very convenient, but studies have shown that they eat up a lot of time with talking and texting, checking emails and so on. Cut the calls and cable and try to have a technology-free weekend in which you get away from the computer, mobile, DVDs, video games and so on, and get back to basics.

Make regular time for loved ones. One of the greatest things you can ever give to a loved one is the gift of yourself through the quality time you spend with them.

There’s really no greater gift we can give a loved one that to be present for them, listening supportively and relaxing together, even if it just for a few moments each day.

As American cartoonist Bil Keane said, “Yesterday’s the past, tomorrow’s the future, but today is a gift. That’s why it’s called the present.”

Being present is a gift that will keep on giving, to your family, and above all, yourself, as you discover the power of living in the here and now.

“To live in the present moment is a miracle. The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green Earth in the present moment, to appreciate the peace and beauty that are available now.”

-Thich Nhat Hanh-