



Savoring Life.

The Best Of Stop & Breathe

By Jason Billows
Creator and writer of StopAndBreathe.com

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Introduction

My name is Jason Billows and I'm the creator and writer of Stop & Breathe, a blog that shares information and inspiration to help people create fulfilling lives.

Why am I writing a blog about creating a happy, healthy, balanced and fulfilling life? Well... because you asked. Okay, perhaps YOU didn't ask, but many people have asked me to share my story and thoughts on life.

Over the years I have experienced numerous ups and downs – so high and so low at times that even I'm surprised – and throughout it all I have maintained a very balanced perspective and positive outlook on life. I'm living the life of my dreams and I hope that some of what I have to share can help you find the same fulfillment in your life.

Am I qualified? Well, I suppose that depends on how you define "qualified". I am not a counselor, coach or therapist. Some of my successes in life have been considered extraordinary by a few, but modest by most. I'm just a regular guy. However, I have experienced and learned a lot that you may find valuable.

Are my experiences, opinions and life lessons any more valuable than yours? Absolutely not. I'm simply interested in sharing mine. And based on the response I've received at Stop & Breathe, a large number of you are interested in hearing what I have to say.

If you'd like to learn more about my accomplishments, please read my post titled "Why Me?" which can be found at the Stop & Breathe archives page.

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Why?

“Savoring Life. The Best Of Stop & Breathe”, is an 84 page collection of 17 articles that can be found on my blog. Why bother to create an e-book of existing articles? For your convenience. I simply gathered the information my readers have found the most helpful into one place, saving you the trouble of searching through the archives.

If you're a newcomer, this e-book is an excellent starting point to discover what Stop & Breathe has to offer. If you're a regular reader, I hope this collection will prove to be a useful refresher and a helpful reference tool.

Please Share

This e-book is a free resource and I encourage you to share it with anyone you feel may benefit from it.

While you can easily print a hardcopy of this e-book, I hope you'll embrace a minimalist and environmentally friendly mindset and read it on your computer, iPhone, iPad or similar device.

If you do choose to print a hardcopy of this e-book, please pass it along for someone else to read when you're done. Recycling may be good, but redistribution is even better.

Link Note

All light blue hyperlinks in this document are inactive, however active hyperlinks can be found on my blog at StopAndBreathe.com

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Section 1: Minimalism & Simplicity

“Be Content with what you have; rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you.” ~Lao Tzu

An Accidental Minimalist

February 12, 2011

“The secret of happiness, you see, is not found in seeking more, but in developing the capacity to enjoy less.” - Socrates

I used to have lots of stuff. All kinds of stuff. I’m pretty sure that [George Carlin’s famous comedy](#) routine about stuff was based on me. I had work stuff, personal stuff, sport stuff, household stuff, workshop stuff, school stuff – there was an endless amount of stuff. Of course I had to have somewhere to put all of my stuff, so I had a big house. And as George would say, “A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it.” I loved my stuff and I loved my big house... or so I thought.

Over time my stuff started to get heavy, and not just in physical terms. It weighed on my spirit, my conscience, my happiness. The stuff became clutter. It was in the way. Some of my stuff had gone unused for years. I started to feel irresponsible and wasteful. Did I really need all of this stuff?

I also started to question my choice of home. One day when cleaning, I realized I was standing in a bedroom that I hadn’t been in for over three months. The sole purpose for the room was to hold stuff I didn’t need. It was excessive.

I started to realize just how unhappy my stuff and my big home had made me. I had spent too much time, money and effort trying to keep up with the Jones’ and making choices based on what other people expected of me. It was time for a change. When my first wife and I divorced, I took the opportunity to make a long overdue move from my big house in the suburbs to an 800 square foot condo in downtown Ottawa.

It was a shock. My condo seemed small and had no room for my stuff, so

I started to unload the excess. I donated clothes and furniture to good will, gave sporting goods to friends, sold items online, and recycled those items for which I couldn't find a home.

It wasn't easy. I was attached to my stuff. I tried to convince myself that every item had a story, a use or reason to keep it. But the reality was that most of my stuff had gone unused for months or years. I stuck to my plan and continue to purge.

In time it not only became easier to let my stuff go, it became cathartic. I felt as if a weight was being lifted off my shoulders. My small condo suddenly seemed spacious and I felt good knowing that my stuff was now with people who needed it and would use it.

I realized that living in a smaller space was not restrictive, but liberating. I didn't have stuff weighing on me, my condo could be cleaned quickly and the cozy size made it feel like a lived in home, not a big storage space that I didn't really use. The time I saved cleaning my small condo was spent going for walks, visiting friends and being active. And by purchasing a smaller condo vs. a big home, I could afford to live downtown, close to restaurants, parks, libraries, work, the grocery store and the gym. I walked everywhere and got to know my community rather than simply viewing it through a car window.

I was happier. I was living my life dictated by my needs and not by what I could afford.

It was then that a friend commented, "You're quite the minimalist." A what? I had never heard the term, so I investigated and found a description of minimalism by [Leo Babauta](#), author of the popular blogs, [Zen Habits](#) and [mnmlst](#). Leo writes...

Minimalism is simply getting rid of things you do not use or need, leaving an uncluttered, simple environment and an uncluttered, simple life. It's living without an obsession with material things or an obsession with doing everything and doing too much. It's using simple tools, having a simple wardrobe, carrying little and living lightly.

So, am I a minimalist? Not on purpose. Perhaps I'm an accidental minimalist. I did make changes to my life that could be considered minimalist in nature, but I don't aspire to be labeled a minimalist. I have simply found more happiness in... simplicity.

A Practical Guide to a Minimalist Home

March 25, 2011

“One can furnish a room very luxuriously by taking out furniture rather than putting it in.” ~Francis Jourdain

Spring is here. The birds are singing, the days are longer and people are cleaning. Ah yes, everyone's least favorite chore, spring cleaning. But let's be honest, after we've cleaned and organized our homes, it feels great. What if you could feel that good (or better) about your home all year round? A minimalist approach can help.

I never thought of myself as a minimalist until recently. To be honest, I didn't know what the word meant until someone called me a minimalist and I looked it up. I suppose you could say I am [an accidental minimalist](#). I never sought the label. I was simply drawn to the benefits of living with less.

There are many common misconceptions about minimalism. Minimalism does not mean loss, deprivation or scarcity. That is a glass half empty view. On the contrary, minimalism provides us with space and simplicity so we can enjoy more freedom, more time, more beauty and more peace in our lives.

Have you ever looked around your home and wondered where all the clutter came from? Did that make you feel good or were you discouraged, frustrated and stressed? Maybe it was a reminder of that overdue credit card bill for stuff you probably didn't need.

Imagine a minimalist home. Not the stark, cold and empty buildings you

often see in architectural design magazines, but a real home. Your home. The counters and tabletops are clean and uncluttered. The walls aren't littered with random artwork purchased simply to fill space. Instead there are select pieces of art or photographs that conjure up wonderful emotions and memories. The shelves have only one or two important mementos with space to stand out and be appreciated. There is enough furniture to suit your family's needs, but no more. You have space to move. Your home still has character and personality, but without the clutter. Which house do you want to live in? If you chose the latter, I can help.

A practical guide to a minimalist home:

One step at a time

De-cluttering your home can be overwhelming at first. We become attached to our stuff and it's hard to let go. Take it one step at a time. Begin in a small room such as your bathroom or home office. Before long you'll embrace the cathartic process of de-cluttering and feel a sense of accomplishment, motivating you to continue the process in other rooms.

Assess the situation

Before you take action, stand in the middle of your room and look around. What do you see? How does it make you feel? Are there items that stand out and have special meaning to you? What things mean very little or maybe even make you feel stressed? Now imagine your minimalist home and consider which of the things belong?

Begin the purge

This is the most challenging part of the process, but also the most rewarding. Place into a box all of the things that were not part of the minimalist home you envisioned. If you're purging large items such as furniture, put it out of view and outside of the room.

Remember that you'll have an attachment to everything in your home. Every item will come with a memory or serve a purpose. But ask yourself if you really need an item. If it has gone unused for three months or more, chances are you can do without it. Maybe you don't need an item, but you want it. Ask yourself why and consider its true value? Be ruthless. When purging, it can be helpful to imagine a forest fire is burning towards your house. What if you only had a few hours to pack up your possessions? What would you take? If you're unsure about a particular item, purge it and put it in the box. We're not actually getting rid of anything just yet. That will come in a later step.

A place for everything

Now that we've purged the things we don't need or want, it's time to find a place for everything that remains. Use your newly uncluttered surfaces to display family photos and artwork with pride. Find a space for your laptop computer and cell phone. Everything should have a place appropriate to its purpose, whether that is to be functional or to add beauty to your home.

Don't simply place items where you find empty space and don't shove items into drawers and cupboards. If you can't find an appropriate place for something, reconsider whether or not you really need or want it.

Clean

Now that you've de-cluttered and created a room with space, beauty and functionality, it's time to clean. The joy of cleaning a minimalist home is that it takes less time. There's no frustration trying to move things around and clean under stuff. You can quickly dust, wipe, vacuum and mop the smooth uncluttered surfaces.

An excellent way to keep your home clean is to clean-as-you-go. When you finish dinner, do the dishes right away. Splashed some water around the kitchen sink? Grab a towel and wipe it down before moving on. Have a

few minutes before the big game begins on television? Go ahead and dust. Clean-as-you-go and cleaning will never become an overwhelming chore.

Create a waiting room

It's time to deal with all of your unwanted stuff. Find a place in your home that is out of sight. A corner of your basement or garage works well. Put your large items and your box of unwanted stuff into this space. This will be your waiting room. The place where your unwanted stuff will live until you can find it a new home.

Go through your box one item at a time and consider whether each item can be sold or donated. If so, take action within the coming week. Remember, this is a waiting room, not a place for your unneeded and unwanted items to live forever. If you don't think an item can be donated or sold, recycle it.

Remember those items you weren't sure you could part with? This will be their home for the next three months. If during that time you need or want the item, go ahead and get it. In that case it obviously has meaning or serves a purpose in your life. However, if it remains in the waiting room for three months, it's a good sign that you should sell or donate the item.

Stand guard

Now that you have a clean, uncluttered and beautiful minimalist home, keep it that way. Unnecessary stuff has a habit of finding its way into our homes. Before you purchase something in a store, consider whether you really need it. Say no to free samples and great deals on things that you really have no use for. Let family and friends know that you'd rather not receive unnecessary gifts. Encourage them to spend time with you instead, and if they insist, suggest useful a item such as a gift certificate to your favorite restaurant.

A minimalist home is not an empty space that lacks character. A minimalist home is an uncluttered space that gives you the freedom to live a simpler life with less stress and more time to create the memories that make a house a home.

A Practical Guide to a Car-Free (or Car-Lite) Lifestyle.

April 16, 2011

***The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet.
~Ralph Waldo Emerson***

Three years ago I began a new chapter in my life and embraced [a simpler approach to living](#). Part of that change included living car-free. I have reaped the benefits ever since.

After I moved from my big suburban home to my much more [practical downtown apartment](#), I began looking for other ways to simplify my life. The lease on my car was about to expire and I decided to experiment with a car-free life. I had lived with the use of a vehicle for most of my adulthood, so the thought of living car-free was scary, but I committed and gave it a try.

My plan was simple. Since I had moved downtown to where I worked and played, most of my needs were within walking distance. I would plan to walk everywhere. When walking wasn't convenient, I'd take my bike. If biking wasn't an option, I'd take public transit. If I absolutely needed a car, I'd borrow or rent. And if I needed a car regularly, I'd consider joining a car-sharing co-op. That gave me five alternatives to owning a car, and if it didn't work out I could still buy a car at any time. But I didn't. The benefits of car-free living have far outweighed any inconveniences.

What is true cost of owning a vehicle?

Financial cost.

In 2010, [TIME reported](#) that the average U.S. household spends over \$8600 annually on their automobiles. That includes the cost of financing, fuel, oil, maintenance, and repairs, but doesn't factor the cost of things such as insurance, parking and depreciation. That means that for many Americans, 20% or more of their take home income goes straight to car payments of one kind or another. Owning a car is expensive.

Environmental cost.

In addition to the financial cost, there is a much greater environmental cost. Remember the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico last year? Where do you think that oil was headed? Your car.

Jason Henderson, a Geography Professor at San Francisco State University warned us that, *"Today there is an ecological disaster in the Gulf of Mexico that stems from the insatiable demand for oil and for using that oil for driving. Almost half of the oil used in the US is used for personal driving, and upwards of 68 percent of the oil we use is for all transportation."*

The BP oil spill was an ecological disaster, but so too is the oil that goes into your vehicle week after week. Your car spews carbon emissions and puts smog into our air. Gas and oil is spilled on to the roadways and washes into our water systems. The energy and resources used to make and maintain your car pollutes the environment, and when your car is old and run down (usually because of planned obsolescence as explained by [The Story of Stuff](#)), we throw it into scrap yards and landfills, which further pollute the environment.

Health cost.

And have you ever considered the toll your car takes on your health? Car owners sit for long periods of time in positions that create back and hip problems rather than walking and getting exercise. They experience life

through the rolled-up windows of their vehicle and isolate themselves from the community around them. They **breathe** stale air from air conditioning in the summer and heating in the winter, rather than enjoying the fresh outdoors. And when it's rush hour, you can see the stress building in a driver's body as they impatiently wait to crawl forward in their vehicle. There's no doubt about it. Our car culture is slowly making us poor, destroying our environment and harming our health.

But isn't car-free or car-lite living difficult?

Not necessarily, but there are times that living car-free or car-lite can be challenging. That said, it can also be very rewarding and beneficial.

Some benefits of living car-free or car-lite include:

- Saving money
- Saving the environment
- Better health
- Less stress
- More time to enjoy the outdoors
- More connection with your community

Here is a practical guide to help you embrace a car-free (or car-lite) lifestyle:

1. Live closer to your work.

By doing so you'll shorten your commute, eliminate or reduce your need for a car, and have more time to spend with your family and friends. Yes, living closer to work may result in more costly housing, but don't forget that you'll save a considerable amount of money on car expenses every year.

2. Embrace public transit.

Notice I didn't say that you should simply take the bus. Most people don't

like to take the bus, and I get that. That's because they just sit and ride. But what if you had more time every day to read, [meditate](#), listen to your favorite music, or [achieve more with your limited time](#)? You can do all that if you spend your time on a bus or subway wisely. Still not ready to travel alongside strangers every day? Arrange a carpool and become an environmental champion for your office.

3. Play closer to home.

Planning a date night with your partner? Do you really need to travel across town to the new cinema or can you have just as good of a time closer to home? We often overlook the great opportunities in our local communities in favor of the biggest and brightest across town. Play closer to home and not only will you save money and the environment, you'll also discover more about the people and places in your community.

4. Get moving.

Walk, ride your bike or rollerblade. There are many ways you can get around without the need for a vehicle. You'll avoid the hassles of parking, you'll save money and you'll become healthier in the process.

5. Support others who are living car-free.

If you must drive, treat pedestrians and cyclists with respect. Give them room to safely use the roads and encourage their lifestyle. After all, their car-free choices benefit you.

6. Buy used.

If you must own a vehicle, consider purchasing used. By doing so you save the environmental impact of manufacturing a new vehicle while also saving money. Did you know that in the first year of ownership, a new car can lose up to 20 percent of its value, and by the fifth year, your car will depreciate by over 65 percent? [Read more...](#)

7. Borrow or rent.

Just because you choose to live car-free doesn't mean you can never use one. Borrow or rent a vehicle for those odd occasions when it's absolutely necessary. Friends and family are usually happy to help out from time to time and the money you spend on a small thank-you gift or renting will be substantially less than owning your own vehicle.

8. Share your vehicle.

Car co-ops are becoming more and more popular. They offer an excellent and convenient alternative to owning a vehicle. Join one of these co-ops and you'll have access to a number of vehicles for a fraction of the cost of owning. [Vrtucar](#) is an example of one such co-op in my hometown, but there are many others in cities around the world.

9. Avoid non-essential driving.

Do you really need to pick up that item now, or can it wait until you're going for groceries later in the week? Try to run multiple errands when you're out in your car and avoid non-essential driving.

10. Encourage government funding of public transit.

As long as driving remains more convenient than riding public transit, people will continue to favor their cars. Encourage your government to support public transit. Insist that they make it a priority.

Car-free or car-lite living is challenging at times, but the benefits far outweigh the inconvenience. Just remember that successfully living car-free or car-lite requires a change in your approach to living, not simply getting rid of your car. Begin by implementing some of the ideas presented in the guide above and you'll realize just how easy it is to live car-lite, or maybe even car-free.

My wife and I now live with a used car that she owned prior to us

meeting. We're no longer car-free, but even with a newborn son we prefer living car-lite and use our vehicle as little as possible.

How To Embrace Collaborative Consumption

June 28, 2011

“The corruption of the American soul is consumerism.” ~Ben Nicholson

My son and I recently discovered a toy library at our local community centre. What a great idea. It's a wonderful resource for children, and for parents such as myself who are raising their children with minimalist values. Of course libraries are not new, but this unique application of the concept is encouraging. It's a sign that society's values about ownership are changing and the concept of collaborative consumption is being embraced.

Collaborative consumption is an economic model based on sharing, swapping, bartering, trading, lending, gifting or renting access to products and not paying to own them outright. The concept has been championed by Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers, co-authors of [*What's Mine Is Yours: How Collaborative Consumption Is Changing The Way We Live*](#), as a new socio-economic revolution in the way we consume. TIME has named collaborative consumption as one of the [*10 Ideas That Will Change The World*](#).

Traditional applications of collaborative consumption include libraries, laundromats, gymnasiums, second-hand clothing stores and even neighborhood yard sales. But now, technology has allowed the concept to flourish on a scale that has never been possible before, creating an unbound marketplace to match millions of people who have with millions of people who want.

There are three primary systems by which collaborative consumption happens:

1. Redistribution networks

This is essentially the redistribution of used products. [eBay](#) was one of the pioneers to leverage technology and open an enormous redistribution marketplace for people to sell and trade products.

2. Product service systems

These systems allow consumers to share ownership and the associated expenses of products. Car-sharing co-op such as [Zipcar](#) are an excellent example.

3. Collaborative lifestyles

This is a system in which users exchange no-product assets such as time, space, resources and skills. For example, [Task Rabbit](#) has created a marketplace where individuals bid on the opportunity to do chores and odd jobs that others will pay to have done for them.

There is no doubt that collaborative consumption is disrupting outdated modes of business and reinventing both what we consume and how we consume it. But why should you embrace collaborative consumption?

1. Save money

Whether you choose to purchase a used item from someone on [Craigslist](#) or swap one item for another on [swap.com](#), you'll save money.

2. Be green

Collaborative consumption reduces the environmental impact of product

manufacturing and distribution. [The Story Of Stuff](#) does an excellent job of illustrating just how much impact our consumer habits have on our world and the way we live.

3. Make space

You don't want the drill, you want the hole that a drill can make, so why do you store one in your home when you rarely use it. Forego ownership and simply rent a drill when needed. Not only will you save money, you'll free up the storage space and enjoy the benefits of a more [minimalist home](#).

4. Support the source

Technology has helped collaborative consumption by connecting the creator with the end-user. Now, instead of paying \$100 for a painting and having half of the money go into the pockets of a middle-man, you can connect with an artist online and have 100% of the money support the creator.

How can you embrace collaborative consumption in your day-to-day life?

1. Sell, swap and gift

Take a look through your house. Chances are you're surrounded by things you haven't used in a very long time. Consider selling these items, swapping them for things you want, or giving them to someone in need.

2. Commute consciously

The average car costs over \$8,000 a year to own, yet sits idle for 23 hours a day. Why not share that cost, enjoy the [benefits of a car-lite lifestyle](#) and join a car share co-op. Or, have you considered peddling your way around town? Many cities now have public bike sharing programs where you can pick-up and drop-off bicycles at various points throughout the city for a small fee. [Bixi](#) operates bike sharing programs in Ottawa, Montreal

and Toronto, Canada.

3. Share

Some progressive neighborhoods have implemented peer-to-peer programs where everything from lawnmowers to barbeques are purchased and shared by neighbors. Why not start a peer-to-peer sharing program in your community?

4. Use electronic media

Chances are you own books, DVDs and CDs that you'll never use again? Redistribute them into the marketplace and the next time you're making a purchase, avoid the waste of buying a hardcopy. Instead, consider borrowing an e-book from the library, renting a movie online, or purchasing music online.

5. Exchange resources and skills

Find creative ways to work with others. For example, [Landshare](#) in the United Kingdom connects growers to people with land to share. Have some land in your backyard that isn't being used? Why not let a gardener use the land to grow and in return you can enjoy fresh vegetables throughout the year.

6. Invest in others

Organizations such as [Kiva](#) match investors with third world entrepreneurs. To date Kiva has arranged over \$224 million with a 98.79% repayment rate.

7. Work smarter

Self employed? Perhaps you should consider sharing office space with someone who will not only share costs, but who could also offer a complimentary business relationship. Wish you could work less overtime or work from home? Ask your employer if they are open to [job sharing](#) or

[virtual offices](#). Both have been proven to increase productivity and save money for employers.

8. Travel for less

Why pay to stay in a small hotel room while traveling when you can stay in a full-sized home? [Home Exchange](#) matches travelers who agree to stay in each other's homes while on vacation. [Vacation Rentals By Owner](#) eliminates the travel agent and puts you in touch with a homeowner looking to rent their property to vacationers.

Interested in learning more about collaborative consumption? Visit the [Collaborative Consumption](#) website and watch Rachel Botsman's presentation at [TEDx Australia](#).

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Section 2: Meditation & Mindfulness

“Meditation is the gateway, through which you arrive to the world of freedom.”

~Remez Sasson

Stop & Breathe

December 2, 2010

“If I had to limit my advice on healthier living to just one tip, it would be simply to learn how to breathe correctly.” ~Dr. Andrew Weil, M.D. (One of Time Magazine’s 100 most influential people in the world, 2005)

Each and every one of us breathes in and out approximately 17,000 times per day, yet the average person uses only 20% of their lung capacity.

Poor breathing has been linked to anxiety, stress disorders, depression, heart disease and even cancer. On the other hand, breathing properly has numerous benefits. Doctors, athletes, musicians, public speakers, actors and yogis are just some of the people who know how valuable breath can be.

Learning to breathe helped me lose 80lbs and become a healthier person. It helped me to mend strained relationships and build an incredibly strong marriage with my wife. And, believe it or not, proper breathing has also helped my career.

Let me show you how to harness the power of breath.

We don’t breathe properly.

Watch a baby and you’ll notice their belly rise and fall with every breath. They are using their diaphragm to breathe – the large muscle that separates the chest cavity from the abdomen.

As we age, this natural breathing process is interrupted by our vanity and

lifestyles. Society tells us that a big belly isn't attractive, so we suck in our gut and puff out our chest in an effort to look slim. We then spend hours on end sitting hunched over our desks, steering wheels and televisions. This poor posture restricts the movement of our diaphragm and prevents us from taking full breaths. Finally, we become slaves to our schedule, racing around to meet time demands while taking less and less time to exercise and relax.

All of these factors have conditioned us to become ineffective, shallow chest breathers.

Learn to breathe again.

Learning to breathe properly is easy and will reward you with immediate results. Simply follow these 7 easy steps...

1. Stand or sit comfortably with a straight spine.
2. Relax your shoulders and place your hands on your lap or at your side.
3. Exhale completely, drawing the diaphragm in and up.
4. Slowly inhale through your nose by contracting your diaphragm out and down. Your belly should rise, followed by your mid-chest and finally your upper-chest as air fills your lungs.
5. Pause.
6. Slowly exhale through your nose while drawing your diaphragm in and up.
7. Repeat this process three times, taking consecutively fuller breaths with each inhale.

Congratulations, you've just taken three deep breaths! Many people have not taken the time to breathe this deeply since childhood.

How do you feel? By breathing properly you've just lowered your heart

rate, relieved stress and delivered much needed oxygen to every organ in your body to name just a few of the benefits. And all in less than a minute!

The benefits of proper breathing.

The greatest benefits of proper breathing are to your health. Full, deep breaths are the fastest way to trigger the relaxation response and relieve anxiety. Proper breathing increases blood flow and delivers oxygen to every organ in your body, helping reduce factors for heart disease, cancer and depression. It helps you to sleep soundly, increases vitality and even improves sexual performance all while aiding the lymphatic system in the elimination of waste and toxins from every cell in your body. And as a bonus, deep breathing helps you lose weight by encouraging fat burning as a fuel source.

On my journey to improve my health, I lost 80lbs, completed multiple Ironman triathlons, overcame addictions and became an overall healthier and happier person. I have no doubt that proper breathing was a major contributing factor to those accomplishments.

Relationships can also be improved by proper breathing. Relationships are stressful at times, whether they be with your spouse, friends, family members or colleagues. Without realizing it we can become impatient, frustrated and quick to react during stressful situations. Full, deep breaths can help us to remain present and in the moment, encouraging us to respond rather than react. And when we do find ourselves reacting poorly, simply stopping and taking three deep breaths can quickly calm you and encourage clearer thinking.

My wife and I have an incredibly strong relationship, however we both lead busy and oftentimes stressful lives that test our marriage. Taking the

time to stop and breathe has helped us respond to many stressful situations in healthy, constructive ways that bring us closer together. Perhaps some of the most surprising benefits of proper breathing are to your career. Most of us spend hours a day seated at our desks, hunched over our computers and restricting our breathing. This results in low energy and ineffective work practices. Simply taking three deep breaths will immediately make you more alert, improve your focus and allow you to think more clearly.

Working as a producer of multi-million dollar special events, I am regularly faced with high stress and time sensitive challenges. By taking the time to stop and breathe I can relax, clear my head and regain focus, which improves my decision making skills and allows me to work quickly and effectively. As a result, clients know that I'm reliable and will do an exceptional job, and that ultimately translates into more repeat business.

More tips for harnessing the power of your breath.

1. Breathing properly with the technique outlined above is quite simple, however you need to practice. Set reminders to stop and breathe throughout the day and before long it will become habit. Try simple reminders such as every time you stop at a red light while driving, before you pick up the phone to make a call, or every time you open a door. I have even set reminders as foolproof as scheduling an hourly notice on my computer or posting notes on my fridge and bathroom mirror.
2. Whenever possible, breathe through your nose and not your mouth. As air travels through your nose it is filtered, warmed and moisturized in preparation for entry into the lungs, which contributes further to the benefits of taking full, deep breaths.
3. Experiment with breath counts. As you calm your breath and learn to breathe more effectively, you may try lengthening your inhales and

exhales for a count of 4, 5, 6 or more. You can also begin extending your exhales longer than your inhales, which has a very calming effect and induces bradycardia, or slowing of the heart.

4. There is a great deal of science and cultural history behind the manipulation of breath. You can discover more about the power of your breath by exploring meditation and attending pranayama workshops at your local yoga studio. **Read More:** [Meditation 101:A Beginner's Guide](#)
5. Exercise! Whether you are competing in an elite level sport or simply taking an after-dinner stroll, exercise in any form encourages proper breathing.

Meditation 101: A 10 Step Beginner's Guide

March 4, 2011

“Meditation helps you to grow your own intuitive faculty. It becomes very clear what is going to fulfill you, what is going to help you flower.” ~Osho

Life can get a little crazy at times. The hectic pace and demands we face on a daily basis often leave us feeling stressed, overworked, tired and even unhappy. Meditation is a simple, effective and convenient way to calm your busy mind, relax your body, become grounded and find inner peace amidst the chaos of day-to-day life.

I was first introduced to meditation at twelve years of age by my grade school drama teacher. At such a young age I didn't have much to stress about, but even then I was drawn to the benefits of meditation. I loved quieting my thoughts, feeling present and enjoying the deep sense of relaxation and peace that came from meditating. Throughout my life I have continued to explore various approaches to meditation and have discovered how profound the benefits can be.

Newcomers to meditation often feel intimidated. They imagine a monk sitting in lotus pose for hours on end atop a mountain. But the reality is that meditation is much easier and accessible than most people realize.

Here is a simple 10 step beginner's guide to meditation:

1. Sit tall

The most common and accessible position for meditation is sitting. Sit on the floor, in a chair or on a stool. If you are seated on the floor it is often

most comfortable to sit cross-legged on a cushion. Comfort is key. Now imagine a thread extending from the top of your head, pulling your back, neck and head straight up towards the ceiling in a straight line. Sit tall.

2. Relax your body

Close your eyes and scan your body, relaxing each body part one at a time. Begin with your toes, feet, ankles, shins and continue to move up your entire body. Don't forget to relax your shoulders, neck, eyes, face, jaw and tongue which are all common areas for us to hold tension.

3. Be still and silent

Now that you are sitting tall and relaxed, take a moment to be still. Just sit. Be aware of your surroundings, your body, the sounds around you. Don't react or attempt to change anything. Just be aware.

4. Breathe

Turn your attention to your breath. Breathe silently, yet deeply. Engage your diaphragm and fill your lungs, but do not force your breath. Notice how your breath feels in your nose, throat, chest and belly as it flows in and out. *Read more: [Stop & Breathe](#)*

5. Establish a mantra

A mantra is a sound, word or phrase that can be repeated throughout your meditation. Mantras can have spiritual, vibrational and transformative benefits, or they can simply provide a point of focus during meditation. They can be spoken aloud or silently to yourself. A simple and easy mantra for beginners is to silently say with each breath, *I am breathing in, I am breathing out.*

6. Calm your mind

As you focus on your breath or mantra, your mind will begin to calm and become present. This does not mean that thoughts will cease to arise.

As thoughts come to you, simply acknowledge them, set them aside, and return your attention to your breath or mantra. Don't dwell on your thoughts. Some days your mind will be busy and filled with inner chatter, other days it will remain calm and focused. Neither is good, nor bad.

9. When to end your practice There is no correct length of time to practice meditation, however when first beginning it is often easier to sit for shorter periods of time (5 to 10 minutes). As you become more comfortable with your practice, meditate longer. Set an alarm if you prefer to sit for a predetermined length of time. Another option is to decide on the number of breaths you will count before ending your practice. A [mala](#) is a helpful tool to use when counting breaths.

8. How to end your practice

When you are ready to end your practice, slowly bring your conscious attention back to your surroundings. Acknowledge your presence in the space around you. Gently wiggle your fingers and toes. Begin to move your hands, feet, arms and legs. Open your eyes. Move slowly and take your time getting up.

9. Practice often

Consistency is more important than quantity. Meditating for 5 minutes every day will reward you with far greater benefits than meditating for two hours, one day a week.

10. Practice everywhere

Most beginners find it easier to meditate in a quiet space at home, but as you become more comfortable, begin exploring new places to practice. Meditating outdoors in nature can be very peaceful, and taking the opportunity to meditate on the bus or in your office chair can be an excellent stress reliever.

Meditation is a simple, effective and convenient way to calm your busy mind, relax your body, become grounded and find inner peace amidst the chaos of day-to-day life. Begin meditating today and reap the rewards.

The Art of Mindful Eating

April 30, 2011

“He who distinguishes the true savor of his food can never be a glutton; he who does not cannot be otherwise.” ~Henry David Thoreau

What is your relationship with food? It may sound like an odd question, but consider it for a moment.

Unfortunately, many people have negative associations with food that result in unhealthy food choices, guilt, overeating, poor body image and low self-esteem. Others may not have such negative associations, but they do very little to nurture a positive relationship with their food. They eat mindlessly, making it difficult to truly savor and enjoy the food they eat. Mindful eating can help strengthen your relationship with food.

Mindfulness is the attentive awareness of the present moment. By focusing your attention on the here and now, you can more easily disengage from habitual, unsatisfying and negative behaviors. Mindful eating uses mindfulness practices in the preparation and consumption of food, allowing you to enjoy the positive and nurturing opportunities that food provides.

What are the benefits of mindful eating?

- Greater enjoyment of the food you eat
- Reduced overeating
- Healthier food choices
- Greater control over your diet
- Easier weight loss

- A feeling of satisfaction during and after eating
- Improved digestion
- Increased body awareness

The 8 essential steps to mindful eating:

1. Make time to eat

In our fast paced society we are often rushed and eat on the go. That prevents us from appreciating our food. Making time to focus on what and how we eat is the most important step to mindful eating. Set aside time to enjoy your meal.

2. Find an appropriate place to eat

It's important to eat in a place that allows you to focus on your food. Avoid eating in your car, in front of the television or anywhere else that will distract you from your meal. A dinner table is the perfect, dedicated place to practice mindful eating. As you become more comfortable with mindful eating you can practice it elsewhere, such as at a picnic, in a restaurant, or even at a food court table.

3. Acknowledge your food

Before eating, take the time to acknowledge your food. This will mean something different to every person. Perhaps you will choose to say grace, thank Mother Nature, or simply offer a silent word of gratitude to the farmer who cultivated your food. This acknowledgement is not simply an opportunity to give thanks. It also allows you to disengage from what you were doing and turn your focus to the food and experience before you.

4. One bite at a time

As you eat, savor one bite at a time. Take a bite of your meal and place your cutlery down so you can focus on the act of eating. Don't rush your

meal. Chew. Every morsel of food has something to offer, so take time and experience it to the fullest.

5. Use all of your senses

Eating is a very sensual experience. Enjoy it. As you eat, notice the color, texture, taste, smell and even the sound of every bite. Eating something as simple as an apple can become a truly wonderful experience when you admire the bright color, hear the crunch and taste the tart and sweet flavors mixing in your mouth. If you take the opportunity to truly savor the natural flavors of food, you'll realize that there is no need to smother your meals in sauces and cheese.

6. Listen to your body

Notice how your body reacts to the food you eat, not just while you're eating, but afterwards. Your body craves nourishing food and will tell you when food is or isn't good for you. The sight, smell or taste may not always alert you to foods that are unhealthy, but your body never lies. Consider how you feel after eating a salad or piece of fresh fruit. Now compare that to the way you feel after eating a Big Mac and fries. Use those experiences to guide your food choices. I believe that listening to your body is the most important step in gaining control over your diet and achieving [healthy weight loss](#).

7. Practice hara hachi bunme

Hara hachi bunme is an old Japanese saying that instructs people to stop eating when 80 percent full. It takes time for your stomach to tell your brain that it's full. It's no surprise then that people who devour their meals quickly are habitual overeaters. This Japanese saying is a reminder that you should not simply eat what is available or on your plate, but that you should remain mindful of what you're eating and listen to your body.

8. Show appreciation for your food

Before finishing your meal, take a moment to appreciate the food you've just eaten. Recall your dining experience and notice how you feel. If you've practiced mindful eating, chances are you feel satisfied and nourished, not bloated or sick.

More tips for mindful eating:

1. One meal at a time

Poor eating habits are difficult to change, so don't bite off more than you can chew. At first, choose one meal a day and commit to mindful eating. As you become more comfortable with the practice, start to practice mindful eating throughout your entire day.

2. Practice mindful food preparation

Extend your mindfulness practice to food preparation. Be present and aware when preparing your meals, whether you're creating a culinary masterpiece or simply pouring a box of cereal. Feel the knife in your hand, listen to the sound of food as it simmers on the stove and notice the color of your ingredients. This mindful approach will make you more familiar with your food and aware where it comes from. Your choice of what to eat, healthy or otherwise, begins at preparation, not when you begin eating.

Check out these tips for [healthy home cooking](#).

3. Dine with family and friends

Mindful eating doesn't mean dining alone. Enjoy your meals with family and friends. You can still practice mindful eating, and as an added bonus, dining together will strengthen your relationships.

Good or bad, acknowledged or ignored, we all have a relationship with the food we eat. Use this guide to get started and enjoy your food like never before, by practicing the art of mindful eating.

Want to learn more about mindful eating? [The Centre for Mindful Eating](#) is a forum for professionals across all disciplines interested in developing, deepening and understanding the value and importance of mindful eating.

The Power of Silence

February 19, 2011

“Silence is a source of great strength.” ~Lao Tzu

After three weeks of coughing fits and battling pneumonia, my throat was raw. My voice sounded like Seabiscuit and it was painful to talk. I needed a break. At 5 pm on Friday evening, I made a decision – *I will not speak for the entire weekend.*

I quickly realized that this may have been a rash decision and would prove quite challenging. My wife and I were scheduled to attend a three day yoga workshop and concert with [Wade Morissette](#), not to mention that I would have to take care of numerous errands over the weekend. Would I really be able to do it? How will I sign in to the workshop? What will I do if someone asks me a question? I was becoming stressed at the thought of getting by without words.

To my surprise, not speaking wasn't as difficult as I had anticipated. Rather than feeling restricted, I felt liberated, and I discovered just how powerful silence can be.

Here are 5 lessons silence taught me:

We communicate with our entire body.

Without speech I needed new ways to communicate. My first thought was to grab a pen and paper, but writing notes proved to be frustrating. I started mouthing words without making any sound. It worked, but it felt awkward. As the weekend progressed I began to realize the power of non-verbal communication. I was amazed by how much we can say with a glance or a smile. I watched others communicate and also discovered that

many people say one thing with their words, but communicate something completely different with their expressions and gestures. Our posture, our eyes, the way we move, they all tell a story. That realization encouraged me to become more conscious of the messages I send and how I send them. By being aware of how we communicate non-verbally, we can communicate more effectively.

Silence can quiet your mind.

Just because I stopped speaking didn't mean I stopped talking. My mind still raced. There was a constant dialogue in my thoughts, but it wasn't until I silenced my outer voice that I was able to hear my inner voice. My mind worried about to-do lists, speculated about the weather and even critiqued people's clothes. The randomness of my inner dialogue was very distracting. I have regularly turned to meditation as a way to help me find peace in my life, and I now realize that my weekend vow of silence was a form of meditation in itself. As the spiritual teacher [Osho](#) said, "Meditation doesn't lead you to silence; meditation only creates the situation in which the silence happens." Similarly, I believe that not speaking doesn't quiet your voice; not speaking only creates the situation in which you can hear your voice. Once I was aware of my inner dialogue, I was able to calm it. The voice continued, but it changed. My inner voice became more focused on valuable dialogue rather than wasteful dialogue. I found space in my thoughts. Silence had helped quiet my mind.

Hearing is easy, but listening take effort.

As people spoke to me throughout the weekend I constantly wanted to respond. I knew I couldn't speak, so why did I have this urge? Habit. When someone speaks to us, we respond. Sometimes it's expected, sometimes it's polite. Regardless, when spoken to, it's habit for us to respond. And in preparation for our response, we think. We think about what we'll say, how we'll say it and when we'll have the chance to speak. Unfortunately, all of that thinking often means we're not listening. Hearing

is something that happens without any effort, but listening is an intentional activity. Have you ever found yourself in the middle of an argument, anxiously waiting for an opportunity to say your piece, only to realize that you haven't been listening to what the other person said? Even during my weekend of silence, my mind habitually prepared to speak and often prevented me from truly listening to others. Hearing is easy, but listening takes effort.

Silence helps us appreciate our surroundings.

On Friday evening after our workshop, I stepped outside to wait for my wife. Wade was sitting nearby, but knew I wasn't able to speak so we simply exchanged a smile. As I stood there, I was amazed at how beautifully the silence and the sounds of nature blended together, complimenting one another. I was standing on an urban street, yet the sound of the cold winter wind, the crunching snow under my feet and the bark of a dog in the distance all blended with the silence of the night, highlighted by a clear sky and bright moon. It was a simple, yet beautiful moment. Had I been speaking that weekend, Wade and I would have immediately started talking. Instead, I was given the opportunity to experience a very special moment. Throughout the weekend I became more conscious of my surroundings, whether they were quiet moments in nature or listening to the exciting buzz of the city. Silence is the canvas upon which music is painted. Without silence between notes, music would simply be noise. Similarly, noticing the silence in our surroundings allows us to hear the beauty of the sounds around us, and helps us to better appreciate our surroundings.

We all crave silence.

Once people knew I wasn't speaking, they immediately dropped the volume of their voices. They would speak to me in whispers, and many would begin using expressions and gestures to communicate rather than words. I was intrigued by this. During one conversation, someone

commented that they had loved the “forced silence” they experienced when they had laryngitis. A few others agreed. They had craved the silence and when given the opportunity, embraced it. Our lives today are filled with noise from traffic, television, computers, ipods, cell phones and more. This noise pollutes not only our ears, but our thoughts. Taking a break from these noisy distractions can help us quiet our mind and relieve stress.

Perhaps a weekend vacation from speaking isn't possible in your life, but there are still ways you can learn and benefit from silence.

Here are 4 simple ways you can embrace silence:

Mediate.

Meditation not only silences your outer voice, it helps to quiet and focus your mind. **Read More:** [Meditation 101: A 10 Step Beginner's Guide](#)

Don't talk.

Set aside a period of the day or week in which you don't talk. Perhaps you're an early riser or you walk to and from work. Take that time when you are alone to enjoy the silence around you.

Unplug.

Do you really need that television or radio playing in the background? No. And while you're at it, turn off your phone for a while and enjoy some quiet freedom from those constant rings and alerts.

Enjoy nature.

Sit on your balcony, stroll through a park or go for a hike in the woods. Many urban sounds can cause us stress, but the silence and sounds in nature can be incredibly soothing.

By the way, on Monday morning when I spoke for the first time in 57 hours, my voice wasn't hoarse. I was able to speak normally again. Although, for much of the day I still chose to remain silent.

How To Live In The Moment

July 8, 2011

“Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment.” ~Buddha

Do you ever feel as if life is speeding by so quickly that you don't have the time to experience it? Maybe you're swamped with work deadlines. Maybe you're focused on family responsibilities. Or, maybe you've just forgotten how to live in the moment.

Lately I've had the opportunity to observe a master of living in the moment – my three-month old son, Caelan. When he wants to eat, he let's me know. He doesn't wait until it's convenient. When he's tired, he sleeps. He isn't worried about being rude to the guests that are visiting. When he's happy he smiles and when he's upset he cries, unconcerned about what others will think. He truly lives in the moment.

Unlike babies, most adults live with responsibilities and distractions that cause our minds to leap from one thought to the next. When that happens, we're robbed of the opportunity to experience and appreciate the present moment. But we can take inspiration from babies and find ways to be more present in our lives.

Here are 8 ways to help you live in the moment:

1. Tune in to your senses

Tuning in to your senses is one of the best ways to connect with the present and truly live in the moment. Unfortunately, we all too often dull

our senses. Sometimes we do it intentionally, such as when we block out the sounds around us with music headphones. Other times we simply ignore our senses. Have you ever devoured a meal only to realize you didn't take the time to taste your food? If you acknowledge and fully experience your senses you'll become much more present in your life. Practicing [the art of mindful eating](#) is an excellent way to show yourself just how powerful of an influence your senses have on experiencing the moment.

2. Single-task, don't multi-task

If your attention is divided between multiple tasks it is impossible to live in the moment. Instead, choose to single-task and focus fully on experiencing the task at hand. Zen monks practice this in every aspect of their life. If they are sweeping, they focus completely on sweeping. If they are cutting vegetables, they cut vegetables and nothing else. Focus on one task at a time and live in the moment.

3. Find your flow

Athletes describe being in "The Zone" as their thoughts and actions flowing seamlessly and with ease. Artists describe a similar experience in which their creative process takes over and a paintbrush directs itself across a canvas or words effortlessly flow on to the page. These are excellent examples of living in the moment. Have you ever experienced this kind of flow in your life? Perhaps when you cook, when you dance or even when you become immersed in work you're passionate about?

Spend time doing these activities and when you experience that flow know that you are truly living in the moment.

4. Step back

Most of us are furthest from living in the moment when in stressful situations. Stress forces us out of the present and we begin to think ahead to the future or to rehash the past in our minds. Have you ever

argued with your partner and later realized that you didn't listen to what they were saying because you were focused on what you wanted to say next? The next time you find yourself in a stressful situation, step back. View the situation as an external witness and watch the events unfold. This will help you to remain present and better able to respond rather than react.

5. Breathe

The list of responsibilities and distractions we face in life is endless. They can become overwhelming at times and will easily pull us out of the moment. The next time you find yourself overwhelmed by thoughts racing through your head, breathe. By doing so you'll become refocused and return to the moment. Here are some tips on [how to harness the power of your breath](#).

6. Meditate

Taking the time to breathe properly can help you refocus and return to the present moment when your thoughts become overwhelming. However, meditation can help you calm your mind and de-clutter those distracting thoughts that cause you to lose focus in the first place. Read [Meditation 101](#) for a simple beginner's guide to meditation.

7. Face your self-conscious fears

It's impossible to live in the moment if you're worried what others may think of you. It is intimidating to put ourselves in the spotlight when we're self-conscious, but it's necessary if we're going to live in the moment. Start out small. For example, if you're scared to speak in public, ask to lead your next staff meeting. Having dinner with friends? Rehearse a short toast. Look for opportunities to face your fear one small step at a time. Once you've gained more confidence, you'll be less concerned with the opinions of others and be better able to experience the moment.

8. Ignore the future and let the past be

If we're focused on the future or the past, we're not in the moment. But, being focused on the future or past isn't always as obvious as reminiscing about old times or planning your schedule for next week. For example, I'm always amazed to see people who view their entire vacation through a camera lens. They're so concerned with capturing a moment in time so that in the future they can look back on a past moment. Unfortunately, their preoccupation with capturing the moment on film often means they've missed experiencing the moment itself. Let the past be, ignore what is still to come, and simply experience the now.

It is impossible to always live in the moment, especially given the hectic world we live in. However, by using some of the tips above we can spend more time connected to the present and less time distracted by what has happened or what's still to come.

Savoring Life.

The Best Of Stop & Breathe

Section 3: Health & Fitness

“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

~World Health Organization, 1948

My Simple Six-Step Strategy For Healthy Weight Loss

April 2, 2011

Like many people, I have struggled to maintain a healthy body weight throughout much of my life. For years I was on a weight loss roller coaster, experimenting with one diet after another. Then, four years ago, I discovered a strategy that helped me loose over 80lbs and maintain a healthy body weight with relative ease.

My strategy is a result of trial and error, using tips and tools taken from a variety of diets that I have tried over the years. It is influenced considerably by a [paleolithic diet](#) approach to eating and has similarities to [Tim Ferris' popular Slow Carb Diet](#).

This strategy is more than a way to shed excess body fat. It also helps rebuild your body with the nutrients it needs to become stronger and healthier. It's the same strategy I followed to prepare for two Ironman triathlons.

It's a simple approach and it works.

My simple six-step strategy for healthy weight loss:

Step 1: Listen, don't measure

I believe that listening to your body is the most important factor for healthy weight loss. That's why I don't recommend measuring. 8oz of protein per meal may be too much for one person but too little for another. Cookie cutter approaches may work for some people, but they don't work for most

of us because we all have different needs.

Listen to your body. If you're hungry, eat. If you're not hungry, don't eat. Our bodies require varying amounts of food at varying times of the day depending on our activity levels.

When you do eat, don't gorge. Use a small plate or bowl and eat small portions. If you're still hungry after you've eaten, have seconds. An old Japanese saying—*Hara hachi bunme*—instructs people to stop eating when you are 80 percent full. This is an excellent reminder to listen to your body and avoid overeating.

Step 2: Eliminate gluten

Gluten is a protein found in wheat, rye oats and barley. Despite being one of the most common foods in a modern western diet, it is also one of the worst for our health. Gluten creates inflammation in our bodies, unbalances our hormone levels, contributes to unhealthy body weight and can result in significant health issues. While people with Celiac disease are most sensitive to gluten, it affects everyone's health in a negative way.

An explanation of how gluten affects your health would require more space than I have in this post, but I encourage you to read further. [Robb Wolf's](#) book, [The Paleo Solution](#), provides the most comprehensive and scientifically backed explanation on the subject that I have found. You can also find an excellent excerpt from Robb's book [here](#) at Tim Ferris' blog.

Yes, I know that gluten is found in bread, cakes, cookies and a long list of other items that taste great, but it's also destroying your health slowly. Don't believe me? Try it out. For the next 30 days eliminate gluten from your diet, then refer to step 1 of this post and listen to your body. When I first eliminated gluten from my diet it took only three days before I saw significant changes in my energy levels, complexion and quality of sleep,

to name but a few of the benefits.

I should note that dairy and other grains such as corn and rice have similar, but less problematic effects than gluten. Listen to your body and decide if they should be a part of your healthy diet.

Step 3: Eat protein at every meal

Protein is essential to life. Without it, we will die. Carbohydrates on the other hand are not essential to life. I make this point to underscore the importance of protein in your diet.

Whether it comes from animal or plant sources, it is important to have protein with every meal or snack. Not only is protein an essential building block for our bodies, it discourages overeating and helps us to feel satiated for longer periods of time.

When choosing animal proteins I encourage you to consider grass fed and organic sources. Not only are they healthier for you, they are also a more humane and environmentally friendly alternative.

Step 4: Eat vegetables at every meal

Vegetables provide an incredible number of vitamins and minerals to help build a healthy body. Choose a variety of bright and colorful veggies to eat at your meals throughout the week. It's virtually impossible to gain unhealthy weight by eating too many veggies, so load them on to your plate.

One word of caution... Potatoes can be packed with goodness, but they also rank very high on the [glycemic index](#) and contain a high number of calories. Because of this combination, you should eat potatoes in moderation.

Step 5: Eat fruit in moderation

Fruits contain a number of vitamins and minerals that benefit our health, but similar to potatoes they are also high GI foods and can be high in calories. Try to eat fruits early in the day and in moderation.

Step 6: Don't drink your calories

Soda, energy drinks and fruit juice all contain a high number of calories with little to no nutritional benefit. Avoid them if you want to maximize weight loss.

Of course it should come as no surprise that the best thing you can drink is water. If you want more flavorful beverages, try unsweetened tea or coffee. Vegetable juice can also be a good option, but remember that while it may be convenient, it is still not as nutritious as eating whole vegetables.

That's it, my simple six-step strategy to healthy weight loss. You'll notice that I haven't recommended any exercise as part of this strategy. I highly recommend that you make exercise a regular part of your life, but it isn't necessary for weight loss. As I said in my recent post on [strategies to get your exercise program back on track](#), it's best to focus on one life change at a time. If exercise is currently part of your life, keep it up. If not, focus first on this strategy for healthy weight loss and then add exercise into your life at a later date.

An opportunity

This past winter I gained 20lbs. I could give you a long list of excuses why, but the truth is that I made poor food choices and stopped following my plan. Instead of becoming discouraged by this setback, I have chosen to view it as an opportunity to regain a healthier approach to eating. Over the next 30 days I will journal about my weight loss here at Stop & Breathe. I will follow my strategy outlined below and will hold myself accountable to those of you who are interested in following along in the

comments section.

This is also an opportunity for you. If you're unhappy with your weight, I challenge you to join me for the next 30 days and regain control of your diet. Skeptical about whether or not this can work for you? Just try it. It's only 30 days. What do you have to lose... other than weight?

What's that? You say it's not a good time? It's never a good time. I have used that excuse over and over again. I have told myself that I'll start eating well tomorrow, or that I'll eat poorly just this one last time because I'm celebrating a special occasion. Well, tomorrow came and went and there was always something to celebrate.

My wife is due to give birth to our first child tomorrow. I can't think of a more inconvenient time in my life to start a challenge of this kind, but I am. If you want to make a change, now's the time.

20 Tips And Tricks To Fast Track Healthy Weight Loss

April 13, 2011

I recently posted [My Simple Six-Step Strategy For Healthy Weight Loss](#). That strategy helped me loose 80lbs and build a strong healthy body to complete multiple [Ironman](#) races. While this strategy formed the foundation for my weight loss success, there were many other tips and tricks I used to achieve my goals.

Here are 20 tips and tricks to help fast track your healthy weight loss:

1. Listen to your body. This was the first step in my six-step strategy, but it's so important I think it's worth mentioning again. [Read more...](#)

2. Track your weight loss. Weigh yourself and take stomach measurements daily. Knowing that you'll be tracking your progress on a daily basis helps to keep you on track. But don't forget that daily changes are not as important as long-term results. Small fluctuations up or down can be caused by a number of variables. Look for trends over multiple days or weeks and adjust your weight loss strategy as needed.

3. Take a picture. Throw on a bathing suit, set up your camera and take a picture. You may not be happy with what you see, but that's the point. Use the picture as motivation. Keep it on hand and look at it when you're tempted to make poor food choices. At the end of your weight loss challenge, take another picture wearing the same bathing suit and compare your photos.

4. Make yourself accountable. Tell everyone you know about your weight loss goals and strategies. If you're accountable to others you're less likely to deviate from your plan. Uncomfortable sharing your goals with the people in your life? Share them with online friends and participate in the comments on this blog.

5. Get a buddy. Even more helpful than telling others about your goals is to have someone join you. Encourage a friend or family member to make similar lifestyle changes and do it together.

6. Eat slowly. Don't rush your meals. Eat slowly and you'll be better able to listen to your body and know when it's time to stop. An old Japanese saying—*Hara hachi bunme*—instructs people to stop eating when you are 80 percent full. This is an excellent reminder to listen to your body and avoid overeating.

7. Savor your food. Don't just eat, taste your food. Most foods are packed with flavor, but we often smother them in high calorie sauces, breading or cheese. Forego these unhealthy toppings and appreciate the great natural flavors of your food.

8. Cook with fresh herbs and spices. Trying to savor your food, but finding some of it too bland? Fresh herbs and spices will add an extra punch of flavor?

9. Avoid white foods. This is one of the best tips I have found for losing weight. Most white foods (bread, rice, potatoes, sugar, dairy) are packed with calories and have very little nutritional value. Replace them with lots of colorful vegetables, fruits and proteins.

10. Avoid deep fried foods. Deep fried foods come with high calorie counts, unhealthy fats and are usually layered in breading. They're a sure

way to sabotage your weight loss goals.

11. Prepare your meals at home. Restaurant foods can be packed with all kinds of hidden ingredients that work against your goals. Prepare your meals at home and you'll know what goes into your food. Not only is it healthier, it will also give you the opportunity to enjoy meals with family and friends. Check out these [Healthy Home Cooking Strategies](#).

12. Keep your fridge and cupboards well stocked. Before beginning any weight loss challenge, empty all of the unhealthy and tempting foods from your fridge and cupboards and replace them with healthy food options. If unhealthy foods aren't convenient, you'll be less likely to eat them.

13. Keep healthy desserts on hand. If you have a sweet tooth like me, it can be difficult to cut out all sweets. Instead of sneaking sugary desserts, keep some healthier treats on hand. One of my favorite sweet treats is frozen grapes. They're like little candies that melt in your mouth.

14. Cheat once a week... maybe. Having a cheat meal once a week is a strategy that works for some people. It can motivate you to stay on track and it gives you a reward to look forward to every week. But cheat meals can also trigger binges. You'll need to decide if cheat meals will work for you.

15. Stock up. When you have the opportunity to cook a healthy meal, make double and freeze the extra portion. The next time you're in a rush, reheat the meal and skip the fast food drive-thru.

16. Use supplements in moderation. Nothing beats the nutritional benefits of whole foods, but sometimes our schedules make it difficult to prepare balanced meals. Supplements can help. A multivitamin is always

a good idea. Rushed in the morning? A protein shake and piece of fruit makes a quick and convenient breakfast. No time to make salad? Try a greens supplement.

17. Eat within an hour of waking. Starting your day with a healthy breakfast that includes protein will help you stay satiated and on track throughout the rest of the day.

18. Don't eat within two hours of bedtime. Try to avoid going to bed with a belly full of food. Since you're not active when you sleep, much of your food will be stored as fat. Going to bed with an empty stomach also gives your digestive system the break it was intended to have and as an added bonus, you'll experience a [more restful sleep](#). This is part of the principle behind [intermittent fasting](#), which is another helpful weight loss strategy.

19. Eat fat. Fat is necessary in a healthy diet. It is an excellent energy source and plays an essential role in the body. Avoid trans fats, but all other fats should be encouraged in moderation. And yes, even saturated fats can be good for you. [Robb Wolf](#) explains in his [FAQ](#).

20. Plan a restaurant strategy. It's fine to dine out from time to time, but you'll have a much better experience if you plan ahead. Don't wait until you're sitting at the table, staring at a menu that tempts you with all kinds of weight loss landmines. Instead, check out the restaurant menu online in advance and decide what you'll eat. Most restaurants will have healthy options, and if they don't, ask. Restaurants are usually quite happy to make substitutions.

Your Most Restful Sleep Ever In Six Simple Steps

March 15, 2011

“The amount of sleep required by the average person is five minutes more.” -Wilson Mizener

I was never a great sleeper. I always had trouble falling to sleep, my nights were restless and if something disturbed me in the early morning there was no chance of drifting back to dreamland. As a result, I often felt tired throughout the day. That's rarely the case anymore. With six simple steps I have found the secret to getting my most restful sleep ever.

Sleep is one of the most important factors for good health, yet it is also one of the first things we neglect when life gets busy or stressful. Some people even consider surviving on little sleep to be a sign of superiority. We've all met that guy who brags about only needing four hours of sleep. Then there are those who think you should just suck it up, have some coffee and get through the day because being tired is just a fact of life.

The scary truth is that inadequate sleep can result in serious health risks. As [Robb Wolf](#) explains in his book *The Paleo Solution*, just one night of missed sleep can make you as insulin resistant as a type 2 diabetic. Cumulative sleep deprivation can result in unhealthy weight gain, illness, premature aging, low sex drive, lack of focus, low testosterone levels for men, increased PMS for women and many more undesirable consequences. And don't fool yourself into thinking that sleep deprivation is rare. Just a half hour of missed sleep every night can quickly become a health hazard.

So how do you know if you're sleep deprived?

1. Do you need a coffee to get going in the morning?
2. Do you regularly hit the snooze button?
3. Do you feel tired throughout the day?
4. Do you wake up feeling more exhausted than when you went to bed?
5. Do you have problems falling to sleep or staying asleep?
6. Do you get sick regularly?
7. Do you have extra weight around your midsection despite exercise and a healthy diet?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, you're probably not getting enough sleep and your health is suffering because of it. The good news is that by making some simple changes, you can quickly recover from your sleep deficit.

Here are six simple steps to having your most restful sleep ever:

1. Turn out the lights

A dark room is essential to good quality sleep, but that means more than simply turning off your bedside lamp. Clock radios, televisions, computers and phones all have glowing lights that negatively affect your sleep. Get rid of these light sources or cover them up. You would be surprised at how disruptive a small amount of light can be to your sleep.

If you live in a city or if you plan to sleep past sunrise, you should also black out your window. When my wife and I began living together she insisted that I install a black out blind on our bedroom window, and I'm glad she did. Completely blocking out any light source in our bedroom was the single most beneficial step in helping me to sleep well.

2. Turn down the volume

Even if a noise doesn't completely wake you, it can prevent you from achieving a deep and restful sleep. Get rid of ticking clocks, turn off alerts on your phone (even vibrate mode) and never sleep with the television on. Some people will argue that a white noise machine helps them sleep in a noisy space, but it cannot compare to the benefits of sleeping in a silent environment.

3. Shut the fridge

A late night snack is a sure way to disrupt your sleep. If you eat before bed your body will be working hard to digest food and you will not experience good quality sleep. Ideally you should try to eat no less than three hours before bed. If you are hungry and must eat before hitting the sack, keep your late night munchies small and healthy.

Coffee or other caffeinated beverages should definitely be avoided in the evening hours. If you'd like a warm drink before bed, non-caffeinated tea can help you relax and may benefit your sleep.

In general, a healthy diet can play a key role in getting quality sleep. Read [this](#) for tips on healthy home cooking.

4. Wind down

It's important to wind down before hitting the sack, both physically and mentally. Imagine doing an intense workout and then climbing directly in to bed. Chances are you'd be so energized that it would be difficult to fall to sleep. The same applies for our minds. You can't expect your mind to immediately shut off and go to sleep without having the opportunity to wind down.

Ideally you should stop watching television, working on your computer, or doing any mentally taxing tasks an hour before bed. If you want to read, choose fiction and don't read on a backlit display such as a computer. E-

ink readers or traditional paper books are best.

Even better, put aside the book and take the time to sit and talk with your partner, relax or simply enjoy some [silence](#). Interested in [meditation](#)? It can be one of the best ways to wind down before bed while simultaneously relieving stress, calming your mind and relaxing your body.

5. Schedule it

Most of us have heard of circadian rhythms – the built in schedules on which our bodies are meant to operate. Ideally our bodies would like us to sleep from sunset to sunrise, but that is rarely the case in our modern lives. Instead we work and play well beyond nightfall and often force ourselves to wake with alarms regardless of how rested we feel. While we can adjust our circadian rhythms to a certain extent, there is no doubt that we function best when we are on a regular schedule. Regardless of what time you plan to go to bed and to wake, try to keep it consistent. Your body will thank you.

6. Get active

Our bodies evolved to hunt, gather food and work for our survival. The concept of sitting in front of a computer or a television all day long is something very new to us as a species. As a result, many people are not active enough throughout the day to encourage deep sleep in the evening. Become active and you'll see a marked improvement in your quality of sleep. And remember that being active doesn't necessarily mean pumping iron at the gym. All activity is beneficial, whether that means playing with your kids, going for a walk or even taking the stairs instead of the elevator.

So how much sleep do you need?

It varies. Most people require 8 to 9.5 hours of sleep a night, but only your body knows for sure. The best way to determine how much sleep you need is to experiment. Go to bed earlier and earlier every night. Once

you find yourself walking up feeling rested without the need for an alarm, you're probably getting enough sleep.

While the above steps are ideal for achieving adequate sleep, life doesn't always cooperate. Raising young children and doing shift work are just two challenges that wreck havoc with our sleep schedules and there are many more. However, being faced with challenges like these doesn't mean you should ignore all of the recommendations above. Use as many as you possibly can. For example, even if you can only hit the sack for a few hours at a time, doing so in a completely dark and sound free room will help you get the most beneficial sleep possible during that time.

If you would like a more detailed explanation of how poor sleeping habits can profoundly affect your hormone levels and health, I encourage you to read [Robb Wolfe's](#) book *The Paleo Solution* or visit his [website](#).

Strategies To Get Your Exercise Program Back On Track

March 19, 2011

Fall seven times, stand up eight. - Japanese proverb

Family responsibilities, work, illness and a lack of motivation can all derail our best efforts to exercise. When that happens we often get discouraged and the thought of returning to an active lifestyle can seem daunting. But there are strategies we can employ to help us get back on track more easily.

This past winter I became ill with pneumonia. The illness lasted well over a month and interrupted my training for a series of upcoming triathlon races, including [Ironman USA](#) (2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike, 26.2 mile run). As I return to training regularly, my workouts seem difficult and my motivation is often lacking. It isn't easy. But, by using some simple strategies that have proven successful in the past, I'm confident that I'll stay on track and have a strong season of racing.

Here are some helpful strategies to get your exercise program back on track:

Commit

Even if you return to the same exercise program as before, you'll need to re-commit. Be clear about why you want to exercise and get excited about your return to a healthier lifestyle. Decide how long you will commit and make it a priority. Thirty days is an excellent length of time. It is short

enough to not seem overwhelming, yet long enough to establish new habits and make exercise a regular part your life.

Set goals

Having goals will help you find purpose in your workouts. Focus on the one or two goals (not too many) that are most important to you and make them challenging, yet achievable. Remember that your goals don't have to be performance based, such as lifting a certain amount of weight or running a race in a specific time. Often the best goal is to simply commit to never missing a workout.

Be accountable

Make others aware of your commitment to exercise and you'll have a better chance at staying on track. Tell your family, friends and colleagues and ask for their support. Even better, find a training partner. If you make plans to train with a partner you'll be much less likely skip workouts. Beware of online support systems. Online groups and forums can be a great place to share your goals and find motivation, but the anonymity of cyberspace could result in you being less accountable.

Schedule your workouts

Make your workouts a priority and schedule them into your week. Let others know that your time to exercise should not be interrupted. Early morning workouts are usually best because they are completed before other distractions and responsibilities hijack your day. Having trouble fitting workouts into your schedule? Consider how [smooth transitions](#) can help.

Take baby steps

Start out slowly and don't overdo it. Keep your goals achievable and your schedule manageable, or you'll become discouraged. If you don't feel like exercising, just take baby steps. For example, if you were scheduled to

do a 5 mile run, start by simply getting out the door and walking around the block. Once you've begun, chances are you'll be motivated to continue.

Reward yourself

Staying committed to an exercise program can be challenging at times, so be sure to reward your achievements. Rewards that encourage you to stay committed to exercise and healthy living are best. Maybe there's a new workout top you've been eyeing or a healthy restaurant you want to try. Reward yourself.

What about my diet?

You'll notice that I have not included any diet strategies. While a healthy diet and exercise certainly go hand in hand, it can be overwhelming to regain control over both simultaneously. I recommend you focus on one at a time. Begin by reestablishing a regular exercise routine and you'll probably find yourself naturally eating a healthier diet. Once exercise is a regular part of your life, then consider focusing on healthy diet changes. In the meantime, if you'd like some easy and healthy home cooking tips, read these [healthy home cooking strategies](#).

Good luck, and remember that these strategies are not only good for getting back on track, but also for maintaining an exercise program.

Savoring Life.

The Best Of Stop & Breathe

Section 4: Perspectives On Life

“The best way to prepare for life is to begin to live.” ~Elbert Hubbard

Happy People Have Shitty Lives Too (+ 9 Tips For Greater Happiness)

May 21, 2011

“If you want to be happy, be.” – Leo Tolstoy

Do you know someone who's happy? Not just someone who smiles when you greet them. I'm talking about someone who's genuinely happy, someone who savors life. I'm one of those people.

Guess what? Happy people have shitty lives too. Bad things happen to us. People piss us off. We get into accidents. Our partners are unreasonable at times. We get sick. Bosses demand too much from us. We fail and get frustrated. We deal with the same kind of crap that unhappy people deal with every day.

Sometimes happy people even have it worse than unhappy people. There was a time in my life when I went through a heartbreaking divorce, had spinal surgery, was unable to work, had no home of my own and was overcoming a prescription drug addiction all at the same time. And guess what? I was still happy.

It's a myth that happy people have easier lives than others. The truth is that happiness is a choice. Yes, your ability to be happy is influenced by genetics, how you were raised and your current life circumstances, but the most important factor for determining your happiness is quite simply your decision to be happy.

If you want to be happy, make the choice and take action.

Here are 9 tips for greater happiness:

1. Be grateful. Your focus dictates your reality. If you regularly focus on what you don't have, you'll feel deprived and unfulfilled. Instead, remind yourself regularly of the things you have to be grateful for such as your health, your home, your job or your family and friends. Yes, you may be faced with challenges in life, but try to look for the silver lining. There is something positive to be experienced or learned from every situation. Be grateful for what you have and remember that while it may be simple to you, it would mean the world to someone else. As Katie Tallo from Momentum Gathering says, [Do The Math, Count Your Blessings](#).

2. Enjoy the little things in life. Don't delay your happiness by waiting for those big moments worthy of celebration. Find happiness in the little things. Smile at the laughter of children in a playground. Appreciate the kindness of a stranger who holds the door for you. Admire the beauty of a tree gracefully blowing in the wind. There is so much potential for happiness all around you. Enjoy the little things in life. They add up.

3. Surround yourself with happy people. People feed off one another's emotions. Spend time with someone who's miserable and it won't take long for you to start feeling down. But surround yourself with happy people and you'll be reminded of the joys in life. Happiness is contagious.

4. Be present. Too many people plan for their happiness and ignore the present. They'll be happier when the weekend comes, when the weather improves, when they go on vacation or when they retire. Why put off happiness? Focus on the here and now and enjoy this present moment for everything it has to offer.

5. Connect. I don't believe we can be truly happy if we're alone. One of the greatest joys in life is connecting with others. Make time with family and friends a priority, but don't simply spend time together, connect. Share your feelings, play together and support one another. Leo Babauta from Zen Habits has some great [tips for connecting](#). New in town and don't have family or friends nearby? Volunteer, join a club or enroll in a course. Take action.

6. Take care of yourself. It's hard to be happy when you're tired, lacking energy and feeling unhealthy. Your physical and emotional wellbeing is directly related to how you treat your body. Be sure to get [adequate sleep](#). [Exercise](#) regularly. Make [healthy eating](#) a priority. [Meditate](#).

6. Simplify. We're constantly bombarded with marketing messages telling us we need bigger, better and more if we want to be happy. The truth is that material excess is often the cause of stress and undermines our happiness. Consider a simpler, more [minimalist approach to life](#). Focus less on material possessions and more on the people and experiences that enrich your life.

7. Stop and breathe. Stress can easily rob us of happiness. Sometimes it comes at us with guns blazing, other times it sneaks in and sets up camp without us realizing it. Regularly take time to [stop and breathe](#). It will help you to relax, maintain perspective and stay focused on the positive.

8. Embrace change. Change can be unnerving for many people. It represents the unknown and pushes us out of our comfort zone. But change is inevitable and happens every day. Instead of living in fear of change, embrace it. Learn to appreciate the excitement and opportunities that change brings. Change will happen whether you want it or not, so go with the flow.

9. Fake it 'till you make it. Sometimes even the most positive people find it difficult to be happy. That's okay. Life can be hard. When you find yourself faced with one of those challenging times, fake happiness. If you change your physiology, your psychology will follow. Smile, stand tall, laugh and dance. You'll be surprised at how effectively actions can influence your state of mind. This is not the same as being in denial. It's simply a tool to help you change your psychology and encourage genuine happiness.

Happiness is a choice. Like any [habit](#), the more you practice the more natural it will become. Take action and welcome more happiness into your life today.

How To Live With A Sense Of Wonder

May 28, 2011

“He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.” ~Albert Einstein

Have you lost your sense of wonder? As adults, it can prove challenging to marvel at our day-to-day lives. The awe and amazement we once felt for the world around us has been replaced with busy schedules, deadlines, work and other responsibilities. But it is possible to renew your sense of wonder and see the magnificence of the world around us.

9 ways to help you live with a sense of wonder:

1. Experience nature. Whether you are observing wildlife, watching trees blow in the wind, feeling the cool flowing water of a river on your feet, or laying on the soft grass as you stare up at the stars, there is probably no better way to experience a sense of wonder than by spending time in nature.

2. Spend time with children. [My son](#) just turned 7 weeks old and he’s already taught me that you can experience wonder in even the most ordinary of circumstances. I sit in amazement when his eyes grow wide watching something as simple as the way a curtain blows gently in the wind. Children naturally approach life with a sense of wonder. To them, everything is new and exciting. Spend time with children and be reminded that as familiar as your world may seem, there is always something to wonder at.

3. Notice the little things. You don't have to wait for major life events to rediscover your sense of wonder. As any child would agree, the beautiful colors on the back of a beetle crawling across your lawn can be just as awe inspiring as Niagara Falls. A sunset, a flower blowing in a gentle breeze, a beautiful building, or even the way a strand of hair falls across a loved ones face are all worthy of our attention. There is wonder all around you, but you must make the effort to notice it.

4. Eat. One of the greatest pleasures in life is food. Practice [mindful eating](#) and savor your food. When you take the time to truly experience the food you eat it's hard not to wonder at the tastes, smells, colors and textures it has to offer.

5. Meditate. Stress, distractions and the fast pace of life can clutter our minds and contribute to a lost sense of wonder. [Learn to meditate](#) and calm your busy mind. By doing so you'll be better able to see through the chaos of day-to-day life and wonder at the world around you.

6. Explore the world. If you've traveled to a new part of the world you've probably been amazed at the culture, colors, art and people? Travel is a great way to rediscover your sense of wonder, but you don't have to go to far off and exotic places. You can travel to new places within your city. Follow in the footsteps of tourists and rediscover your hometown from their perspective, take a walk in a park you've never explored, or visit the ethnic areas of your city such as Chinatown or Little Italy. The world just outside your door is much larger and more wonderful than you can possibly imagine.

7. Become a life long student. When we take time to learn, we discover just how amazing our world and the people in it can be. But being a lifelong student doesn't mean taking forty years to complete your university degree. Learn through books, online research, attending

lectures, taking community classes or talking with the people in your life.

8. Discover your body. As a new father I'm in awe at how my wife and I were able to create such a perfect little human being. But we don't have to wait for the birth of a child to experience the wonder of the human body. Play sports, practice yoga, [exercise](#) or simply walk. Being active gives you the opportunity to discover your body and appreciate what a truly incredible machine it is.

9. Create. Write, paint, act, dance, make music, or learn a craft. Artists and artisans know that pursuing their art is one of the best ways to cultivate a sense of wonder in your life. Art encourages you to push the envelope and explore beyond what you already know. Don't consider yourself an artist? [The Artists Way](#) is an online creativity workshop that provides an easy to follow process for discovering the artist within you.

How To Be Spontaneous

May 4, 2011

“All growth is a leap in the dark, a spontaneous, unpremeditated act without benefit of experience.” ~Henry Miller

I'm a planner. My calendar is always up to date, my day scheduled and my to do lists ready to be checked off. I like order, so you may be surprised to learn that I'm also quite spontaneous. One of the greatest adventures of my life began when I accepted a six-month contract to work aboard a cruise ship as a juggler/comedian. It was a spontaneous decision that I made within an hour of receiving the offer, despite having to leave home and begin work on another continent just three days later.

Singles regularly report that one of the top traits they look for in a mate is spontaneity. Spontaneous people are regarded as exciting, adventurous and fun. For some people it comes naturally, but spontaneity is also something you can learn.

What are the benefits of being spontaneous?

- 1. New experiences.** Being spontaneous exposes you to a whole new world of experiences that you would not have otherwise enjoyed.
- 2. Better relationships.** Spontaneity can breathe new life into relationships that have become predictable.
- 3. Be noticed.** Spontaneous people are considered exciting, adventurous, and fun. They get noticed for doing the unexpected.
- 4. It's interesting.** A predictable life is a boring life. Spontaneity

welcomes the unknown and makes life more interesting.

5. Overcome shyness. Spontaneous people are rarely shy. Learning to become more spontaneous can also help you overcome shyness.

6. Growth. Being spontaneous opens doors that would otherwise be closed, offering opportunities for growth.

7. Encourages flexibility. Sometimes spontaneous actions result in a disappointing outcome. That's okay. Life can throw challenges your way sometimes. Being spontaneous helps you prepare for those challenging times by teaching you to be flexible and go with the flow.

8. It's fun! Most spontaneous acts are fun. I don't know anyone who dreams of spontaneously scrubbing the toilet.

How can you learn to be more spontaneous?

1. Yes and... Being spontaneous means seizing new opportunities when they present themselves. *Yes and...* is a concept used in improv games that can help you be more spontaneous. *Yes and...* means accepting a suggestion that someone puts forward in a scene and adding to it to keep the scene moving forward. Practice *Yes and...* in your life by accepting people's suggestions. The next time a friend asks you out for a coffee date, don't hesitate. Forget about checking your calendar and planning. Accept their offer and suggest that you meet right away.

2. No and... This is contrary to the first step above, but it's necessary for some people. Are you the kind of person who can never say no to someone? Consider whether or not that prevents you from being spontaneous. If you're constantly meeting the needs of others you may not have the time to be spontaneous.

3. Schedule time to be spontaneous. This may sound like the opposite of being spontaneous, but think of it. If your schedule is filled with commitments, even if they're things you want to do, you won't have the time to be spontaneous. Leave some flexibility in your schedule and you'll have more opportunities to be spontaneous.

4. Start small. Learning to be spontaneous can take time. Being spontaneous doesn't necessarily mean taking a last minute trip around the world. It can be as simple as going to the coffee shop across the street instead of your regular java joint. Look for little ways to be spontaneous. Take a new route home. Surprise a friend with an unexpected call. Try a new restaurant.

5. Embrace the unknown. Many people don't like [surprises](#). They prefer order and predictability. But being spontaneous often means experiencing the unknown. If you follow step 4 and start out small, you'll soon learn that the unknown often holds more positive experiences than negative. Embrace the unknown.

6. Be curious. Always wondered what that restaurant is like? Curious where that road leads? Interested in knowing what that woman's tattoo represents? Give in to your curiosities and take action. Your curiosity is an excellent guide to being spontaneous.

7. Expect the best. Negative expectations stifle spontaneity. If you worry about what people will think or how things can go wrong, you won't take action. The next time you want to be spontaneous, expect the best and go for it.

Being spontaneous is a wonderful way to welcome excitement, adventure

and fun into your life. Don't hesitate. Take action now. Pick up the phone and call a long lost friend. Make a reservation for dinner and surprise your partner. Stop a colleague in the hall and tell them how much you appreciate their work. There are opportunities to be spontaneous all around you. Seize them.

What am I doing to be spontaneous? My wife and I have just decided that tomorrow we'll pack up the car and embark on a road trip to the East Coast of Canada. We're not sure how long we'll be gone – maybe a week, maybe two. I suppose it'll depend on how spontaneous we are during our trip.

5 Signs That You Are Sacrificing Too Much For Your Career, And 5 Strategies To Regain Balance

February 4, 2011

“Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance and order and rhythm and harmony.” -Thomas Merton

“You’re not as important as you think you are.” My colleague was kidding, but the words stung, probably because they were true.

I was recently struck by a flu virus which inconveniently turned into pneumonia. I was bedridden for two weeks and was in no shape to work, even from home. I stressed over my return to the office. How much work would I return to? What problems were created by my absence? Were any of my relationships with clients permanently damaged? Would my CEO be upset at me for taking so much time off?

I finally returned to work to find a mountain of emails tagged “urgent” and my voicemail system filled with messages panicking over looming deadlines. It felt as if my job was falling apart at the seams. Many of my worst fears had been realized... or so I thought.

As I began responding to those urgent messages the problems seemed less severe than expected. Many people who had been stressed about

my absence were now more concentrated on welcoming me back to work, and those items that couldn't wait for my return had been skillfully handled by my colleagues. I focused on getting back on track and before long everything was under control. Granted there was a small amount of damage control that needed to be done, but much less than anticipated.

The experience was a reminder that while I'm an important asset to my organization, I'm only one piece of the puzzle and work will go on in my absence. This prompted me to consider my relationship to work and the sacrifices I make for my career.

Sacrificing certain areas of your life for your career is necessary to an extent, but sacrificing too much can lead to an unbalanced and unfulfilling life. Ignoring one important aspect of your life to focus on another doesn't work. Imagine neglecting your family for a year while you focus entirely on your career. It would do irreparable damage to your relationship with your spouse and children. The example may be extreme, but there is no doubt that neglecting an important area of your life, even in small ways, can have far reaching negative effects.

Your health, family, friends, passions and career are all connected. If one area is neglected it will negatively affect others. On the other hand, if you find a balance between all areas of life that are important to you, they will support one another and flourish. For example, good health can help you be more productive at work and pursuing your passions can make you a happier individual and role model for your family. Balance is essential to a fulfilling life.

Here are 5 signs that you may be sacrificing too much for your career, and 5 strategies to regain balance:

Sign #1: You regularly miss family meals and activities

It's common to experience busy times at work that require more hours than usual, but this should not be a regular occurrence. Working late and missing family dinners or activities are sure signs that you're working too much. At the end of your life will you look back and wish you had worked more, or spent more time with the ones you love?

Solution #1: Schedule time for family and friends

Simply scheduling time with your family and friends can help you stay committed to this important area of your life. Put these commitments into your schedule first to ensure they take priority over work. And keep in mind that it doesn't have to be complicated. Set aside time to have breakfast as a family before you leave for work, or plan to cook dinner together as a family. Single? Join a sports club, take art classes or find other ways to connect with friends. Humans are social animals and need to spend time enjoying the company of others in order to be truly healthy and happy.

Sign #2: Your health is deteriorating

Do you find yourself grabbing fast food lunches and making poor food choices throughout the day because you're too busy or tired to cook? Do you lack the energy or the time to work out? Is your health deteriorating? Your work life balance may be the culprit.

Solution #2: Get moving

So often I have heard people complain that they don't have the time or energy to exercise, yet it has been proven that the healthier you are the more energy you'll have and more productive you'll be. Stop making excuses and commit to exercising and eating well. It takes less time to make a healthy lunch the night before work than it does to line up in a fast food restaurant. No time to make a trip to the gym? Get creative. Try working out at lunch, go for a walk with your spouse in the evening, take the stairs instead of the elevator, and plan active family time instead of

sitting in front of the television. Make a healthier lifestyle a priority and it will benefit all areas of your life. [Check out this post for easy and healthy home cooking tips.](#)

Sign #3: You don't have the energy to pursue your passions

We would all like our careers to be our passion, but the reality is that for most people we work primarily to support our lifestyle or family. Doing work that we're not passionate about can be very draining and can leave us with little energy to pursue other passions outside of the workplace.

Solution #3: Get passionate

Perhaps it's time to revisit your career choice and find something you're more passionate about. In the meantime, don't put your passions on hold. Look for new ways to become passionate about your job. Are you helping people? Contributing to the community? Providing an essential service? Chances are that your job is extremely important to someone and you can take pride in it. Aside from your job, commit to pursuing personal passions in your [free time](#). Always wanted to write a book? Set aside 30 minutes a day to write and before long you'll have some momentum towards achieving that goal. Passionate about sports? Volunteer to report on high school sports for a community newspaper. People who find passion in their career or hobbies are happier, more energized people who are more likely to achieve their goals in all areas of life.

Sign #4: You dream about your career

Are you always thinking about your job? Do you daydream about work? Maybe you literally dream about your career as you sleep. If you are constantly preoccupied with your job, chances are you're sacrificing other important areas of your life.

Solution #4: Wind down

Our minds are constantly working to solve problems and find solutions to the challenges we are presented with. Even on a subconscious level our minds continue to process items we have worked on throughout the day. It's important to help our minds let go of work related problems and refocus on other important areas of our life. Make a conscious effort to quiet your mind. Perhaps you can pursue an interesting hobby, sport or activity, but I have had the greatest success with simply taking the time to wind down every day. One hour before bed turn off all of your electronic devices, read some fiction, spend time talking with your family, take a bath, meditate or enjoy a relaxing cup of tea – anything that will allow you to slow down and physically relax. Your physiology can greatly influence your psychology, and so by physically relaxing your mind will also be calmed, allowing you to refocus, sleep better and forget about the stresses of your workday.

Sign #5: You're addicted to crack

They don't call it a Crackberry for nothing. Blackberries, iphones, or any kind of smart phones can be incredibly valuable tools in the workplace, however their portability and accessibility also make them ruthless intruders into other areas of our lives. Do you find yourself checking work emails outside of the workplace? Does it interfere with your family time? Taking 30 seconds to read an email may not seem like a problem, but add those emails up and consider the time you spend responding to or thinking about those messages and you realize just how intrusive they can be.

Solution #5: Unplug

Use your phone options to help manage your time and attention. Turn off alerts when you're outside of the office and commit to only checking work messages when absolutely necessary. Better yet, turn off your phone all together and enjoy completely uninterrupted time with your family or friends. Spending the night alone? There is still value in unplugging from

your phone. We have a tendency to want to fill our time and keep ourselves busy, but that's not always healthy. Even if for just an hour every night, unplug and enjoy some time offline.

Our careers tend to be the one area of our lives that demand more than others which can result in an unbalanced, unfulfilling life. Watch for the signs that you may be sacrificing too much for your career and find solutions to regain balance.