



CURING THE TEMPORARY DIS-EASE OF “TOO BUSY”

Strategies for Everyday Sanity | Flip Brown

How often do you hear or read these phrases? “Sorry, I didn’t get back to you. I’ve been so busy” or “Things are just crazy busy at work.”

This word, “busy,” has become almost meaningless on one hand, and a catchall excuse for not being truly present and engaged on the other. So how do we break out of this pattern?

Ask yourself: is your work life one of relative ease? Do you start each day with a core sense of calm, move through your tasks, meetings, and conversations from a place of feeling centered, and end with reasonable balance? I didn’t think so!

Here’s a typical scenario. Your day starts with Ms. or Mr. Monkey Mind making a very early appearance. As you buzz through your morning routine, you’re mentally making a to-do list of the three to five truly important things that you must accomplish today. Fast forward to the end of the day, and as you commute back home your mind is going “Rats! Not only did I not get all of those urgent tasks accomplished, I got two or three more added to the list.”

You try and get some respite in the evening, but there are notes to review, e-mails that intrude, and deadlines that don't respect five o'clock. On top of this there are the obligations to family and friends, a never-ending list of chores, and oh yeah, stuff called exercise and self-care (always last on the list). Meanwhile, your partner/spouse/family is either feeling disconnected from you, or they're spinning in their own whirlpools of busyness.

Some would say this is modern life. It's just the way it is. Might as well learn to deal with it because the pace is out of your control. Besides, you want to continue to receive a paycheck, right?

I completely and sweetly disagree. There are ways to work from a sense of grounded being, of using the awareness of the moment to truly be in the moment, and to be fully engaged without being "swept along" more often than not. I'll share some tools and techniques I've found along the way, but first let's look at some possible root causes of living as a "human doing" instead of a human being.

To start, we might as well go deep early. The fundamental question here is "who are you?" No, I'm not talking about worker, manager, owner, professional, executive, etc. Nor am I referring to father/mother, daughter/son, or any other pre-determined identity. Same with age, gender, ethnicity, or any other "box." I'm talking about your fundamental sense of self. Is it—at the very core—whole, complete and, most importantly, good?

For many of us the answer is “it depends.” It depends on how we see ourselves, how we’re seen by others, and how much we can get done. Therein lies the trap of the overly busy person. If we are judging ourselves on the basis of conditional acceptance, we will always be trying to do “the right thing” in order to feel okay. I’m not arguing for doing the wrong thing, but from time to time we must examine our deep beliefs, and question the reality that only by figuring out what to do next are we going to experience self-worth and contentment. We already are okay—this just becomes buried under layers of responsibility, commitments, and obligations.

In other words, your core relationship with and to yourself is where the key opportunity lies here. Knowing that you have a basic fundamental goodness—not out of ego, accomplishment, or external identity—that nothing can touch is essential. On the other hand, if you are still working through significant amounts of anxiety and self-doubt about what you can get done, then you will be at the unnecessary mercy of external circumstances.

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Many folks go through a certain number of years before they realize that who they are is much deeper than what they do, that their acknowledged competencies are just tools and not their identity, and that we are all here to be of service to others rather than work for the approval of others.

So the first step in living in relative balance is to end the contract with “Superwoman” or “Superman.” Your super powers are actually quite different than completing (or attempting) a million accomplishments every day. Being responsible is good—being hyper-responsible isn’t.

Therefore, walk up to the mirror, take a deep breath, and say (in your own words) something like:

“I have a basic human goodness that no set of circumstances can diminish.

I am not my work—I am someone who works well.

I can’t possibly get everything done, but I can get what really matters accomplished.

I can’t possibly please everyone, but I can engage with dedication and empathy.

I have power to make changes (unless and until I believe I don’t).

I choose to enjoy the time spent at work to the best of my ability.

I will hold on to what’s truly meaningful, and let the rest go.”

So where's the box of magic wands, you're asking? How do we deal with ridiculous workloads, unreasonable deadlines, and the loveable crazy people all around us?

I thought you might ask. Here are some specific tips, tools, and techniques:

- **Be realistic.** Can you truly do more than the best that you can do? If you apply yourself well without setting yourself up to do the impossible, then your best is really all you can do.
- **Now is all we have.** Give up the myth of “someday” as in “someday I’ll get organized,” “someday I’ll find the time to exercise,” “someday I’ll be able to go to my kid’s soccer game once a month.” The more we regret the past and fret about the future, the less energy is available for right here, right now.
- **Watch how you talk to yourself.** Do you have a critical internal dialogue operating almost all the time in the background? Do you judge yourself more harshly than anyone else would or should? Having high standards for ourselves is not a bad thing—beating ourselves up for it because we set impossible expectations for ourselves in the first place is.

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- **No need to ask if you're okay.** Watch out for hidden validation needs. Yes, it would indeed be lovely if all our co-workers, especially the “powers that be,” would appreciate us, compensate us richly, and basically take care of us. This, and four dollars will get you a fancy cup of coffee. If we're bringing needs that slip into neediness, we not only set ourselves up for frustration but we're not that much fun to be around.
- **Language matters.** Watch how your words set you up. Are you apologizing for no good reason (a cultural pattern too many women have without being aware of it)? Can you eliminate phrases like “crazy busy,” “swamped,” “maxed out” and the like? It is what it is, so try to go about engaging to the best of your ability.
- **Being full of complaints is painful.** Venting is letting off steam—once it's over there's nothing left. Complaining, on the other hand (where it's the fault of someone else and we have no options) leaves a nasty residue that saps our available energies.
- **You can't really plan your day.** Expect the unexpected. Many of us look at an eight-hour day ahead of us and mentally figure out in advance everything we can get done in this time block. This is delusional thinking. One phone call, email, or managerial drive-by and your plans go in the dumpster. Leave space for what may happen instead of what you believe will happen.

- **It often takes longer than we think.** Pad your time estimates. Think you can do those last two or three things in the morning before you head out to work and be on time? Think again. If being late is a challenge, add fifteen minutes to your best guess, and if it's not needed you'll have a few minutes to take a breath on the other end.
- **Boundaries serve a valuable purpose.** Practice setting and keeping limits. Since you can't do everything and please everyone, we can guarantee that the others aren't going to figure this out for you. Yeah, someone might get crabby if you say "I'd love to, but my time is fully committed right now" but you have the right and responsibility to make judicious choices or not take everything on.
- **Try "mono-tasking."** Create firm focus times. You make appointments with others and keep them, don't you? Can you apply that same discipline and respect to yourself? See if you can negotiate with your teammates that you will be spending one pre-designated hour per day not looking at e-mails, answering the phone, or taking questions so that you can move something that's important forward in a quality way. Betcha they'll want to do it, too.

- **Take real breaks.** Get up, get out, and (preferably) get outside. Our parents and grandparents used to work in places where everyone got a rotating ten- to fifteen-minute “coffee break” in the morning, and dang if they didn’t do it again in the afternoon! They had this old-fashioned belief that this would have a positive effect on productivity and safety. In our 24/7 culture we plow through until our eyes are bleary and our backs are stiff. A fifteen-minute walk in the park may allow just enough feelings of renewal that you’ll more than make up for the time away.
- **Unplug to recharge.** Limit the technology tyrant. Want to freak yourself out? Get one of those apps that tell you how many times a day you checked your smartphone. Batch your “viewing and doing” so that you aren’t a slave to a perpetual time sponge. Take a digital detox (it’s called “natural life”) when you can, and for multiple days at least once a year.

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- **Vacation? What's that?** As Americans we're about the worst in the world in truly taking time away from work. Many other countries have viable economies where even the lowest paid workers get four to six weeks off a year, plus holidays. We think two consecutive weeks is virtually impossible. Go to a relaxing place—even if it's local—and be with the ones you care about. Your workplace can survive without you, so don't be checking those emails and voice mails, otherwise you've just moved your office to a nicer view.
- **Try “slow” for a change.** Try some experiments to change the pace. Take the stairs. Notice the yellow light and slow down instead of speeding up. See when you are wolfing down your lunch as opposed to eating with awareness and appreciation.
- **Less is more.** Work with your team and family to periodically cut away what's truly too much. Orchardists will tell you that the best fruit comes from the best pruning practices. What can you trim? How can you figure out more of what not to do?
- **Get a good set of conflict resolution skills.** By practicing [“The Art of Supportive Confrontation”](#) you can have better outcomes when natural, normal conflicts arise. By finding the middle path between avoidance and aggressiveness we experience less stress and better business outcomes.

- **Invest in your available supports.** Friends, peers, mentors, and coaches all have valuable roles to play, however we will only get benefits out of their positive energies if we make ourselves available to and for them. Sometimes the best way to get unstuck is to ask for another's hand.
- **Make it a practice.** Pick some new strategies and commit to them. Fitness doesn't improve because we think about going to the gym. See if you can chart some progress toward changing your feelings of being unhappy, overwhelmed, or frustrated.
- **Find your own Zen.** Understand what healthy detachment means. Nurses don't scream when the blood spurts. Electrical workers don't shake when they're hooking up high-voltage lines. When we see our work as imbued with positive emotions from being "in service" we can let the drama and trauma around us unfold without it pulling us off center. It takes practice, much as meditation or yoga does, but the rewards are substantial and sustainable.
- **Give back to gain perspective.** Stretch your energy and finances to meet the needs of those less fortunate. By being of service to others (who would indeed be grateful for a percentage of what you have) we see our stresses and stressors as having less size, weight, and power.

- **Tap into soul and spirit.** Where, when, and how do you tap into the deeper mysteries of being alive right now on this incredible planet? In what ways do you allow yourself to get out of your temporary pity party and celebrate the connection to the universal themes of light, life, and love?
- **Change is possible.** Is what you're doing the best match for your awesome potential at this time? If not, can you think about how you might investigate a new short or long-term direction to increase your meaning, fulfillment, and satisfaction?

In terms of having a better experience day-by-day, minute-by-minute, we must ease out of the “too busy” mindset into one that increases awareness, sees options, practices new patterns, and over time allows us to live well.

By having a toolbox of skills to enhance our resiliency, not only will we have a better experience, we will be a source of positive energy to those around us. Then, perhaps more of us will be able to sing along with the song lyrics that advise us to **“ride with the tide and go with the flow.”** It sure beats feeling like we're drowning most of the time. 🌊