



If there's one thing this year has taught us, it's that Robert Burns' infamous line about how even the best laid plans can go awry was spot-on. Safe to say that not many of us will have anticipated a global pandemic forcing us to delete every entry in our calendars and reassess all our goals. It's been a time of great anxiety for planners, worriers and self-recriminators – so, most of us then – as shown by over half the UK population who reported experiencing high anxiety at the start of lockdown.

But there have been positives, too: closer connections with friends and family, a respite from FOMO (fear of missing out) and a new appreciation of the small freedoms we used to take for granted, such as grabbing a coffee or picnicking in the park. Being forced to reassess our priorities has made it clear how *necessary* it is to appreciate the power of now.

Focusing on the present stops us from being held hostage by plans for the future or regrets about the past. It enables us to fully engage with the life we're living, rather than the life we want to live, or the life we think we *should* have lived before. In short, it gets us out of our heads.

## FUTURE-PROOF THE PRESENT

'Things will be better next year', 'Life will be easier if I lose 7lb', 'If I get that job, everything will be sorted'. It's easy to spend your life permanently looking ahead, but it's like the line from the John Lennon song: 'Life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans'. If you keep waiting for life to start, you're not actually living it. Or, if you're constantly caught up in 'what if' worries over the future, you're winding yourself up about stuff that hasn't happened yet and probably never will, while missing out on what's actually happening right now.

Mindfulness pioneer Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn summarises this waiting game: 'We might have a strong intuition on occasion that what is really missing in some profound way is us – our willingness or ability to show up fully in our life and live it as if it really mattered'.

So, why do we focus so much on the future? Research published in *The New York Times* in 2019 claimed, 'A more apt name for our species would be Homo prospectus, because we thrive by considering our prospects... Looking into the future is a central function of our large brain.' While there are many positives to this, it's not all rosy. This singular foresight 'is also the source of most depression and



anxiety, whether we're evaluating our own lives or worrying about the nation.'

It's in our nature to plan and to worry. However, *only* looking to the future when it comes to personal measures of success means you don't appreciate the journey or congratulate yourself when you meet your goals. Life inevitably passes you by as you keep moving the goalposts: 'I reached my goal but still feel meh, so I need a new one.'

It's not that you shouldn't make goals, they just shouldn't come at the expense of the present. What about the successes you're having *every day*? They matter, yet if you're only ever focused on the big win you won't register them. The fact you kept to your plan today is a big win! And the fact you didn't isn't a disaster (more on this later), so stop beating yourself up.



**'Life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans' – which means you're not actually living it**

Further reading: *This Book Will Make You Mindful* by Dr Jessamy Hibberd and Jo Usmar, £7.99 (Quercus)

## REFLECT, DON'T RUMINATE

You can't change the past, you can only learn from it. There's a big difference between rumination (dwelling on something you cannot change) and reflection (using what you now know to move on). Yet when we feel anxious or low, setbacks can lead to a chain of negative thoughts, such as 'I ate an entire packet of digestives because I was stressed. Typical! I always do things like that! I'm weak! I'll never hit my goal. Nothing ever goes right for me! I might as well give up!'

These kinds of thoughts are called NATs (negative automatic thoughts). They masquerade as facts, flashing into your head without you even noticing. They seem plausible and realistic and one NAT leads to another until soon, eating a couple of digestives equates to you being an awful human being. Plus, you're even more likely to recall negative memories that back up your unkind view of yourself. Great, huh?

The truth is NATs aren't facts, but opinions from your anxious mind. And opinions can and should be challenged, especially when they're false. So why do we think them? It's down to thought processing: how we manage all the thoughts in our head. When you shower you don't think about every tiny motion you make, you just get on with it while thinking about winning that hypothetical argument with your boss, right?

Our brain has to choose what's important to think about and what's not, otherwise steam would come out of our ears.

This works well, until the system defaults to negative processing, which it does when you're low or anxious. Negative autopilot shines a spotlight on all the information that supports how bad you feel, filtering out anything that doesn't fit in with that negative view. Your memory then jumps in, handily providing instances in the past of when things went wrong. This is your mind trying to keep you safe, by showing you 'threats' so you can protect yourself against them – great when the threat is an escaped tiger, not so great when it's a slice of lemon drizzle cake.

To counteract negative processing you need to become aware of when it's happening so you can stop the NAT runaway train.

## PRESENTING A BETTER WAY TO BE

Focusing on the now can help you pay attention to the good and bad in your life in more productive ways, and help you realise you can cope with whatever happens. The power of now is in learning to recognise your emotions and thoughts, knowing that they'll pass and that they don't define you. It's about having choices: 'do I want to listen to my mind or don't I?' So if you do choose to go off-plan you can at least enjoy it. And tomorrow you can make a different choice.

## Making now count

## STRATEGIES TO BRING YOURSELF TO THE PRESENT

### Ask yourself, 'What's my mind doing right now?'

Are you worrying? Are you dwelling? Are you freaking out? By simply noticing what your mind is doing you're slowing things down and giving yourself a choice: continue down this path, mulling all the possible consequences, or consciously change where your thoughts are headed. No need to judge yourself or get angry, just appreciate that you're becoming more aware.

### Use your breath as an anchor

Breathing in and out is constant, automatic, simple, and, most importantly, takes

place in the present – you're breathing right now. So, focusing on it helps to ground you in the here and now.

Set a timer for two minutes and count your breaths (an inhale and exhale are 'one' breath), counting to 10 before starting again. Or say to yourself, 'Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in', 'Breathing out, I know I am breathing out'. Don't worry if your mind wanders. Being present is about noticing that it has wandered and bringing it back to the task in hand.

### Snap out of autopilot

Practise being in the now when you're in the shower by

engaging all your senses. What can you feel (hot water on your skin), see (steam on the window), hear (the water hitting the ground), smell (the scent of your shampoo), taste (the water on your lips)?

### Challenge your NATs

Learning to identify NATs will allow you to see how ridiculous they really are. Next time a negative thought posing as a fact flashes into your head, catch it and analyse it. 'I never get any likes on my Instagram posts because people don't care'. Do you really *never* get any likes? Are you generalising? Do you really believe people don't care? Do they show they

care in other ways? Do you like every post you see? Analysing your NATs will show you that these thoughts are exaggerated to fit your worst fears.

### Name your thoughts – and let them go

As a practice, try naming your thoughts as they enter your head. Are they boredom thoughts, worry thoughts, annoyed thoughts, embarrassed thoughts? This will make you feel more in control. A good mindfulness tool is to imagine each thought typed onto the side of a balloon bobbing past you in the sky. Are you going to grab the string and engage with it or let it go? 🎈