

Simple Yet Astounding Ways to Calm Down

By Norman Fischer

If you're so crazed that you have to pencil in time for a deep breath, here's how to become more relaxed—and efficient—in less than a minute. All together now: Ahhhhh... You keep a to-do list, but you can't get through it by the end of the day, and you're frustrated because you feel like you haven't been able to get enough done. You find that things take longer than you thought they would. And when people ask how you are, "Fine" has been replaced by "Too busy."

Welcome to the "too busy" club.

In this technology-driven world, we can do more, so we do—and we love it. We feel effective and powerful as we check items off our lists and use our cell phones, BlackBerrys, and computers, sometimes all at once. We're multitasking, doing as much as we can in the least amount of time. We're active, creative, and engaged! In demand! Being too busy makes us feel as though we're making an impact.

On the other hand, feeling too busy drives us crazy. Falling ever further behind as the to-do list relentlessly grows (each item generating many more items almost as fast as we can think of them) is nerve-racking and stressful. We begin to feel like prisoners of the list, prisoners of our lives and our desires, prisoners of time. There just aren't enough hours in the day. It's as if we're doing battle with time—and losing.

But the point is not how many things we have done or will do in a given amount of time; the point is how we do what we do. If we're rushed and frantic, we're too busy. If we move through our tasks with equanimity, patient and composed, we're not.

In the Zen Buddhist tradition that I've been practicing for many years, there's a story that illustrates this point: A monk is sweeping the temple grounds. Another monk comes by and says, "Too busy!" The first monk replies, "You should know there is one who is not too busy."

Our sweeping monk may have been moving quickly, and so he looked "too busy" to his brother monk. But inside—in his mind—he wasn't busy. In the midst of his vigorous activity, he was in touch with "the one who is not busy."

Most of us judge how busy we are by how much we have to do. When there are too many things to do, we think we're busy, and when there isn't much to do, it feels like we're not busy at all. But in fact, we can feel busy when there isn't that much to do, and we can feel relaxed even when there's a lot going on. The states of "busy" and "not busy" aren't defined by how many things there are to do. Contrary to popular opinion, there is no such thing as multitasking; the brain can tend to only one thing at a time. Being too busy or not being busy is an interpretation of our activity. Busy-ness is a state of mind, not a fact. No matter how much or how little we're doing, we're always just doing what we're doing, simply living this one moment of our lives.

That moment may seem long or short. Time is an internal, not external, reality. Have you noticed that half an hour in the dentist's chair lasts longer than half an hour at a fun dinner party with friends? And five minutes waiting on hold on the phone passes more slowly than five minutes watching a movie. Time is how we live it, not what's measured by the clock (after all, the watch was invented fairly recently, in the 16th century). To be sure, our world operates on clock time, which is convenient and necessary; how else would we make it to that dentist's appointment or dinner party? But the clock is supposed to be working for us, not the other way around. If we feel too busy, we've mistaken a feeling for an objective reality and are held captive to that reality. It needn't be that way.

Okay, you say, good theory: We think we're busy, but we're not—we're just doing one thing after another. But the habit of being convinced we're too busy is hard to shake. What can we do about this persistent mania of feeling task- and time-driven?

Understanding something differently is only a beginning. To change the way we live, we have to practice what we've come to understand until it becomes a natural part of us, a habit of thought, feeling, and body. There are many simple techniques that can help us with this. Take three conscious breaths (try it now, as you're reading). This will change your mind. Whatever you're feeling will become less compulsive, less driven. There's a measure of detachment and equanimity even after the first breath. You become more present to your surroundings, to the basic awareness of being alive. Try it the next time you're feeling overwhelmed; it doesn't take much time, and it will help you remember "the one who is not busy," the part of you that's always right there, even when it looks or feels like you're too busy.

Walking meditation—intentionally bringing awareness to your body as you move—can lift you out of a busy-ness-induced, semiconscious funk. If you can become conscious of the way you're moving and the sensation of each movement, you'll feel refreshed instead of rushed. I know what you're thinking: "I'm too busy to go for a walk." But this is something you can do on your way to and from the bathroom. (And if you're really feeling busy, you're probably overdue for a trip there anyway.)

Sometimes just a phrase can help: "Not busy." Remembering our two monks, you can say this softly to yourself when you feel overwhelmed. I do this when I feel crazed; with the repetition of the words, I immediately recognize that it is my feelings and my thoughts that make me feel pressured, not the tasks I have to do. They will get done—or not, and the world and I will survive. Even if I do have a crucial deadline, I'll have a much better chance of making it if I feel "not busy" and can proceed with a calm mind. Feeling frantic doesn't make me more efficient. Quite the contrary, it makes mistakes and glitches more likely.

It goes without saying that if you've bitten off more than you can chew in a day, or in a lifetime, you'd better step back and change your circumstances, if at all possible. Let go of a few activities: Peace of mind is more important, and healthier, than those few extra accomplishments. But if you can't or don't want to change your circumstances, you need to find the most serene and beautiful way to live the life you have. In the end, if you persistently and unpleasantly feel too busy, remember this: It's not a fact; it's a choice. There is one who is not busy. That one is you.