

## What People Are Saying About *Stress Free in 30 Seconds*

Melanie Smithson has written a very readable, entertaining and useful guide for stress reduction. If you're ready for easy, read this book.

— Hale Dwoskin, author, *New York Times* best seller,  
*The Sedona Method*

You are holding in your hands a plethora of invitations and roadmaps back to yourself. Melanie invites us to be playful with our own self-exploration and healing and gives a strong and friendly nudge out of the land of “stuck.” A warm-hearted and honest look at the (sometimes painful) truth: We all have blocks. It's in how we play with them that determines our ultimate creation of this life.

— Jessica Morningstar Wolf, SOMA Movement Facilitator  
& Artist

The Fun Starts Here! I love how Melanie approaches the challenges of life with both compassion and humor. Her blend of body, play and releasing practices makes it easy for the reader to let go of stress, even while reading. Buy the book, follow the suggestions and leave stress behind!

— Janet Bray Attwood, *New York Times* best-selling author,  
*The Passion Test*

Funny, warm, and powerfully accessible, this book is a pleasure to read. Who knew that increasing my happiness and well-being could be so enjoyable? Melanie isn't interested in a “do this, don't do that” book. She takes us on an excursion into the values and attitudes that underlie well-being, in a straightforward and playful way. So, when all the fun, edgy,

challenging, and clearly articulated exercises do show up, we are wholeheartedly on board, ready to go for it. Melanie writes the way she lives, and she lives this work in a way that inspires us to do the same—minimizing fuss and maximizing an engaged, productive, healthy, and happy life. What a gift! Enjoy this book!

— Christine Caldwell, PhD, LPC, BC-DMT, NCC, ACS,  
Dean of Graduate Education, Professor, Somatic  
Counseling Psychology, Naropa University, author,  
*Getting Our Bodies Back*

If you want to learn how to release stress, this book is for you! Melanie incorporates her years as a therapist and mind-body coach and powerfully shares examples and insights that are effective in creating a life full of great relationships, happiness and peace. Take comfort in her stories and open your mind to a new way of thinking and living.

— Dina Proctor, best-selling author, *Madly Chasing Peace*

*Stress Free in 30 Seconds* is an insightful fun ride to happiness. Melanie Smithson's advice is powerful and engaging, and it will help steer you towards internal peace through simplicity and fun. This was such a light easy read, and her guidance was delivered through personal stories and encounters. I love Melanie's style and ease around a subject that is so prevalent in our world. Congratulations Melanie on this remarkable endeavor.

— Kim Wermuth, Executive Marketing Consultant

*Stress Free in 30 Seconds* sounds too good to be true, but it isn't. After reading only a few pages of Melanie Smithson's book, I found myself relaxing. I was delighted to know that I am not alone in trying to cope and find a sense of peace in this stress-filled society of ours. And I was surprised to find

that there are “universal” ways in which we all become stressed. The author shares examples from her own life and consulting practice to prove the points she makes. All the good things in life come to us when we are relaxed, and humor is the great elixir to unwind the tentacles of stress. Tickling your funny bone is just what the doctor ordered—“Dr.” Smithson, that is. Have fun with this book. It’s a lifesaver, filled with great strategies to fill your life with more joy and greater meaning!

— Sally Huss, creator of Happy Musings, a King Features syndicated panel for newspaper; author of *The Importance of Living Happy*, and over thirty children’s books, including *How the Cow Jumped Over the Moon And A Boat Full of Animals*

This book will be on the top of my recommended list for all my clients. I have seen firsthand the impact of stress on the body, and Melanie offers great tips and tools that will minimize the long-term effects of stress on your health and well-being. As an added bonus, the book is fun to read and you just might find yourself playing more.

— Dr. Emilia Ripoll, MD, author of *Menopause* and *Andropause*, Board Certified in Urology and Holistic Medicine

At long last! In this fast paced age we live in, many of us are aware of the effects of stress on our minds and bodies. We understand the need to let go and support our personal growth, but often don’t know where or how to begin. This wonderful heartfelt guide offers that and more. I highly recommend this to anyone ready to step into the joy and ease that Melanie so clearly demonstrates is possible for everyone.

— Vanessa Morgan, LAc, Dipl Ac., Dipl Hom,  
Certified Sedona Method Coach

In this playful and important book, Melanie offers many strategies to alleviate stress and deal with the limiting beliefs and habits which restrict passion. Discover how easy it can be to take control of your experience of life. Warm and humorous, this book gives you the tools you need to live life stress free. And yes, it can happen in just 30 seconds.

— Patty Aubery, #1 *New York Times* best-selling author,  
*Chicken Soup for the Soul* series and President,  
Jack Canfield companies



Stress Free  
*in*  
30 Seconds





Stress Free  
*in*  
30 Seconds

A Slightly Irreverent Approach  
to Navigating Life's Challenges

MELANIE SMITHSON

Komodina Press  
Denver, Co

**Stress Free in 30 Seconds: A Slightly Irreverent Approach  
to Navigating Life's Challenges**

by Melanie Smithson

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# Foreword

**H**aving spent most of my adult life helping people heal from childhood wounds and discover an easier way of being in the world, I am thrilled that Melanie Smithson has written about the many ways people inadvertently block happiness and how to allow for joy.

Melanie has written a guide, a manual actually, on dealing with stress, thoughts, feelings, and emotions. A plethora of tips and techniques will be found here, along with the theory to back them up. She uses scenarios from her own life, growth, and clinical practice. The book is practical, including “play breaks” to solidify her points and add the experiential to the learning. The reader will return to it again and again to glean points for action.

Melanie is a seasoned, well trained, and effective therapist and workshop leader. Her insight into how the ego works and her suggestions for distancing oneself from the ego’s antics are valuable resources in these hectic and stress-filled times. I’ve known Melanie for over twenty years and I am delighted to see that she has used her playful spirit and approach to life to show others how to live with less stress and more passion.

In this book Melanie disassembles the idea of stress, breaking it down into its components and deepening our understanding of its complexity, so that the challenges of life can be more manageable. She shows how to replace upsets and misery with ease, fun, and well-being.

She addresses a wide range of issues and strategies including the very important one of facing emotions and allowing them

to move through you, rather than denying, suppressing, or automatically acting them out. She goes on to address preventive strategies and ends with the examples and an invitation to have your own treatment plan.

The beauty of *Stress Free in 30 Seconds* is in its practicality and ease of use. You will find yourself getting caught in Melanie's creative journey towards relieving stress, and before long, you will be adding your own suggestions.

Judy Borich, PhD, author of  
*Touch and Go, The Nature of Intimacy*

# Acknowledgments

**M**any years ago I was told my only real problem was that I didn't know how blessed my life was. I am happy to say I no longer have that problem. (Let's just skip the problems that may have arisen since then.) My first shout out must go to Judy Borich and Barbara Flood for the transformation I witnessed and experienced at the Sacred Living Workshops so many years ago. Watching this work is what awoke the longing to facilitate change. Experiencing the workshops awoke deep gratitude. Today I am most grateful for the ability to feel gratitude.

My cup runneth over. This book would not have come to form without the comfort, coaxing, pushing, prodding, and validation from good friends and family. Sheila Burns held my hand from page one and sometimes gently, sometimes not so gently, helped steer and stay the course. Kim Wermuth, Dina Proctor, Jean Schoenecker, Cindy Whitmer, and Louise Dobish are the best cheerleaders and listeners anyone could ask for. And for honest and straightforward feedback, I must thank my brother, Perry Shustack, and my sister, Valerie Shustack.

Inspiration came many times through the dance with Jessica Morningstar Wolf. For her wise words and gentle guidance, I thank the spirits that brought us together. Soma provided a space where I could fall apart and come back together in new and wondrous ways. I will be forever grateful.

This book is filled with wisdom that came directly and indirectly from Judy Borich (Sacred Living Retreats), Christine

Caldwell (Naropa University) and Hale Dwoskin (The Sedona Method). I have been given the gift of great teachers and teachings handed down from great teachers. I am fortunate to be part of the legacy.

The nuts and bolts of bringing a book to form comprise a world unto itself. Melanie Mulhall, my editor, gets the credit here. As much as I may have resisted the impeccable editing, I know that the book is better for it. Having an editor that speaks my language is a special blessing. Many thanks to Melanie, as well, for the step-by-step guide to publishing.

I am very grateful to Nick Zelinger for hanging in there to produce just the right cover and for the brilliant layout. Thanks also goes to Lynneil Benschoten, my illustrator, for his abundant kindness and creativity.

And finally, thank you to my dear, dear husband, Gail Smithson, for always being the person who will love me, hold me, laugh with me, and cry with me through whatever life may bring. You are my rock, my champion, and my greatest teacher.





# Introduction

*Everyone I know is busy. Everyone I know is stressed. Everyone I know wants to be happy. Very few know how to be busy, stress free, and happy.*

Some fifteen years ago, six months into private practice as a therapist, I woke up one morning feeling ill. I had six clients scheduled that day and because I was just building my practice, I did not want to cancel. As I sat in meditation that morning, I realized that even though I couldn't afford to cancel those clients, I also couldn't afford to push myself. If I was to make it through the day without collapsing, I needed to rest as I worked.

Resting meant taking more breaths, not forcing the process, not overthinking. I knew from my psychotherapy training that I needed to use the fundamental action of yielding. From Body-Mind Psychotherapy®, yielding is defined as “a quality of resting in contact with the environment and underlies our basic relationship to the world. It is about the state of being versus doing, and forms the basis for the ability to act effectively in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

That day when I felt sick and chose to work anyway, I knew I had to yield. That day became a turning point for me. Not only did I not collapse at the end of it, I had the best day of therapeutic practice ever. My willingness to yield moved me from trying to figure out what I was going to do in the session to allowing me to be present with whatever arose. Because my

clients felt no angst from me, they were automatically more relaxed and able to work with their issues. I was able to authentically respond to them and allow wisdom to flow.

This was not a brand new concept for me. My training at Naropa University included the skills of observing, allowing, and following intuition. But up until that day, I had struggled with interference from my mind, which was trying to figure out what might be the most important issue to address and what the client might think of me.

As I learned to relax with myself in session, my clients learned to relax in themselves, and the work became fun. Together we explored perspective, changes in posture that could affect behavior, and a continual flow of new possibilities. The work began to feel light with potential. Without fear of judgment, we could enter into wonder and curiosity.

I noticed that I was energized at the end of the day. No doubt, I was on to something. I had accidentally discovered that self-care could be effortless. Not only did I avoid fatigue, illness, and burnout, my clients benefited as well.

Hand in hand with yielding came a natural tendency to not take my problems and the problems of others so seriously. Adding a spoonful of irreverence lightens the weight we carry and gives us another way to interpret experience.

I have learned that the same skills that create a great therapeutic experience also create a great living experience. My clients have also applied these skills to their lives with the same success. I have worked with nurses, executives, caretakers, business owners, lawyers, property managers, salesclerks, rich people, poor people, small people, and tall people (couldn't help myself) to the same effect. Their lives became easier as they began applying these skills.

In a nutshell, my best work happens and my life goes most smoothly when I get myself out of the way. I am referring to the self that gets in the way by being too involved with my own thoughts, feelings, habitual patterns, and concerns about others' thoughts, feelings, and habitual patterns.

There are many strategies I employ and teach to get the self out of the way. I draw largely from the fields of somatic psychotherapy and play therapy, using the wisdom of the body for self-care. I also incorporate many techniques and concepts from The Sedona Method™.

Some of the strategies in this book are in the moment, what I call the 30 seconds or less tactics (or Daily Living Strategies). Other strategies are lifestyle choices and behaviors that result in needing the in-the-moment strategies less often. These can be thought of as preventive strategies.

Ultimately, all the suggestions aim to do the same thing: connect you with the love and the wisdom that reside in you. As you learn to go below the surface where all the chatter lives, you will discover the peace that is always available.

Perhaps your life is too full, you often feel overwhelmed, or you sometimes become reactive. Maybe you simply want your life to flow more easily. When you start applying the techniques and exercises in this book, your life will get easier. But reading about them won't make your life easier. The bottom line is that nobody can do the personal work for you. As you read, I suggest that you pause to do the exercises and contemplate your own experience with the topic at hand. Take notes, put reminders to yourself where you can see them, and earmark or copy the pages that speak loudly to you. And most of all, have fun! Enjoy the ride.





Part I  
Daily Living  
Strategies





# The Trouble Begins with Thinking

One of the most common statements I hear in my therapy practice is, “I can’t figure out why I feel this way.” As soon as I hear that phrase, my mind jumps in and says, *Oh, let me help; we can figure it out together.* And just like that, I can get caught in the spin of the mind. The mind loves to figure things out. It likes to be the hero. It leaps with excitement at the opportunity to solve the problem, anticipating the touchdown celebration dance soon to come.

Unfortunately, when it comes to our emotions, the mind is often at a loss. The mind’s ability to filter, to analyze, and to solve puzzles is great when it comes to math problems. But it’s pretty useless when it comes to feelings. In addition to jumping in where it’s ineffectual, the mind often jumps in with commentary that can be damaging, counterproductive, and stress-inducing.

It’s no wonder we all have a love/hate relationship with the mind. Maybe the following excerpt from my journal will resonate with you.

## A Conversation with the Mind

I have been actively trying to write a book for at least three years. I have come up with at least twenty titles

and thirty different subjects. I have written tables of contents, draft chapters, and synopses of the book. And still I am without a book, without a title. I don't know where I'm going.

So I'm trying something different. Just for now, I'm letting the book write me. I'm forgetting everything I think I want to write about and allowing the words to just show up. What will I learn from the book? Can I give it permission to be the teacher? Can I give up wanting to control the content of the book? Can I really practice what I preach?

Perhaps. If the book continues to write itself, using my hands only as a tool, and if my mind is satisfied with what it is saying, no problem. I can let go, I can let the book be in charge, I can give up control. I can get myself out of the way. But what will happen when the book stops writing itself? What will happen when I am staring at an empty page and my fingers are motionless? I don't know for sure, but my bet is that my mind will jump in and try to be the rescuer. My mind will say, "Let me do that for you."

I'll reply, "Well, no thanks, mind. So far, you've been useless in this process. I think we should just be quiet and wait for the book to keep writing."

The mind will parry. "Well, who do you think the book is anyway? It's just me in disguise."

To that I will reply, "Of course you think that. You always think it's about you and that you're in charge."



The mind will probably get quiet, for a moment anyway, but I will soon hear it plotting. “There must be another way in. I always find a way, I’m always in charge. I’m the one who reminds you to do things, I’m the one who thinks of all the great ideas, and I’m the one who manifests your goals.”

I’ll stand my ground. “Really? But doesn’t that also make you the one who forgets things, the one who can’t settle on a book title, the one who gives up on New Year’s resolutions every year?”

The mind will hedge. “Well . . .” It’s confused. If it takes all the credit, it also gets all the blame. What a dilemma!

The dance with my mind about writing this book portrays the trouble we can get into when we rely solely on thinking or try to avoid thinking all together. I completed the writing of this book employing the practices laid out herein. These same practices are ultimately the tools we all need to harness the power of the mind without being at its mercy.

The mind always wants to have the first say. It doesn’t care about what the heart wants or what the body might be trying to tell us. Most of us believe that if we just think hard enough, we can solve any problem. The mind truly believes it has all the answers. If that were true, I’m pretty sure we would all have a lot more things figured out than we do. Minds are very sharp and creative. They come up with lots of ideas, are good at math and equations, and can even help get us centered if we think to ask. But minds can also get us into a lot of trouble.

## Who Is in Charge, Anyway?

Most of us grow weary of the mind's endless chatter, but you're probably not ready to abandon your mind. It serves us well sometimes, but more often than not, it can make us just a little bit crazy—and not in a fun way. There are times we want it to be quiet, especially when we're trying to sleep or meditate, or when someone else might be saying something we want to hear. There are times when it's useful to explore deeper, beyond the mind's babble. My mother used to say to me and my siblings, "Can you guys quiet down? I can't hear myself think."

So often, we get caught in the constant chatter of the mind and miss the deeper knowing we carry within. When I started writing this book, it felt important to quiet the voices and listen to what was important, to feel into wisdom and go beyond mind. That the mind is on autopilot through most of our waking hours, running itself without direction from us, sets us up to be at its mercy. Our first step into stress free living begins with the mind.

But how do we negotiate between thinking and not thinking? We want to be able to employ the mind to help when we need it without allowing it to take over our lives. Being at the mercy of the mind's questioning, judging, and analyzing every single aspect of our lives is tiresome, to say the least. How do we live life from a place beyond thoughts and still use our minds to complete tasks, solve problems, and create opportunities? Thinking itself is not the problem. Being at the mercy of our thoughts creates undue stress, worry, and feelings of being overwhelmed. Thinking is the strongest contributing factor when it comes to stress. How we perceive any situation affects how we respond to it, internally and externally. The

same comment made to different people often evokes different responses, and the same comment made to the same person can get a different reaction on different days. Some of those reactions soothe and comfort us internally, while others create friction and unrest.

If your mind is talking to you in a nonproductive way, do you have to listen? Personally, I know I don't believe half the things I think. Some thoughts just seem to hold little or no sway. Other thoughts appear to have more power. And still other thoughts only seem to have power certain days of the week. Is it hormones? The moon? Resistance?

Ah, yes, resistance. "That which we resist persists." No matter how many times we've been told this or how many times we've told others this, resistance still shows up. Credited to Carl Jung, the theory is this: That to which we give energy multiplies. And resistance is energy. When we try to hold a thought away or try to stop thinking something, the thought hangs around, gets stronger, and just won't let go. When we can remember to stop resisting and recognize the thought as just a thought, it releases on its own. We need do nothing.

According to the research of Dr. Fred Luskin of Stanford University, a human being has approximately 60,000 thoughts per day—and 90 percent of these are repetitive!<sup>2</sup> This translates to about one thought per second during waking hours. If you stop and pay attention to your breath for thirty seconds, you can potentially eliminate thirty stress producing thoughts. When you can remember that you are not your thoughts and that 60,000 thoughts come into your awareness every day, it's easier to just notice them. You can acknowledge that just because you think a mean thought, you're not necessarily a

mean person. Or you can have a momentary thought that you don't know what you're doing, then question if that is true. A pin I found many, many years ago, says, "Don't believe everything you think." Those are words to live by.

What if you could hear your thoughts and nonjudgmentally evaluate them? That sounds good, but it also sounds like a lot of work. It sounds like thinking about thinking. Even more work. Yuck! Just the thought of it probably makes you want to go back to trying to figure it out.

Stop! Wait! Too much thinking.

## The Mind as Generator

The mind is like a generator that goes nonstop during waking hours, resting only when we sleep. Do we only need to sleep to give ourselves a break from the mind? The body knows how to rest without being asleep, but not the mind.

Even the most dedicated meditators I know can't seem to stop their thoughts for more than a few moments. And yet, so many of us seem to think that we should be able to stop thinking. *It's not in our control!* Thinking happens. Period. Trying to stop the thoughts doesn't work, trying to think only positive thoughts doesn't work, and resisting thoughts doesn't work. The mind is going to do what the mind does. It's going to think thoughts—some good, some bad, some positive, some negative.

What if a thought really didn't mean a thing? What if thoughts held no significance whatsoever? Our thoughts do not have to define us. When we recognize this, we can enjoy the constant rambling of the mind in the same way we are able to enjoy a young child learning a new language. For a

child learning a new language, it's like playing with nonsense. And that's talking my language!



One of my fondest memories occurred with my nephew Nathan when he was about three years old. It was early in the morning, and we were the only ones awake in the house. He crawled into bed with me and said something silly. I started laughing. I rhymed something back to him, and his infectious giggle was launched. For about thirty minutes, we rhymed sounds with made-up words and laughed until it hurt. We knew that making sense was not necessary for fun or bonding.

In the same way Nathan and I played with words, we can play with our thoughts, making a game of them.

## Mind Play

I have taught many workshops about the power of play to restore health, well-being, and vibrancy. I have also taught workshops about how play can help us have more of what we want. It's no coincidence that the same things that support

health and well-being also support living a life we love. When we learn to care deeply for the self, we become aligned with our own highest good and learn to act in ways that supports success, however we define it. In those workshops, I speak about the different types of play we engage in as adults, including sports, the arts, sex, and mind puzzles. I also speak about embedding play in daily activities—making fun of yourself when you start rushing through your chores, changing your accent when making a phone call, or bouncing in your seat when you are waiting for someone.

You can play with every thought that arises as if it were an inanimate object sitting on the desk. You can imagine rolling the thought around in your head to see if it makes it to your lips. Instead of mulling it over, you are rolling it over.



### **30-Second Play Break**

*Think of a thought that has been stuck in your head for any reason. Give yourself a moment to feel what happens in your body as you “think hard.” Then just stop and imagine rolling the thoughts around in your head, like a merry-go-round, and notice how your body responds.*

---

I tested the practice above on myself. When I practiced rolling nagging thoughts around in my head, I was able to see the thoughts rolling around, swirling together. For a moment or two they chased each other like a cat and mouse. In one of my practice sessions, while I was rolling them around, I

decided to see if I could bounce them up and down. I know that when I physically bounce my body, I can't hold on to a thought. So I rolled the thoughts, then bounced them . . . and they were gone.



### **30-Second Play Break**

*Think the same thoughts from the prior play break. Roll them. Now, add bouncing the thoughts to rolling them. What do you notice in your body?*

---

## **Challenging the Things You Say to Yourself**

In my years of practice, I've noticed some common thoughts that contribute to stress. These include, but are not limited to:

1. You must have all the answers.
2. You're doing it wrong and you're going to get in trouble.
3. You have to be perfect.
4. You're never going to get it done.
5. You don't know what you're doing.
6. You have to work hard.

These messages come from the internal critic or self-moderator, and though well-intended, they are not supportive. For those who grew up hearing these same things from their caretakers, the message feels even more powerful.

But you can challenge these thoughts. Let's take them one at a time.

### ***You Must Have All the Answers***

However you spend your waking hours, whatever you do, it's easy to get caught in an expectation that you should always know what you're doing and should always have the right answer. We also have this expectation of others in our lives, especially when we're paying for their opinion.

We impose upon ourselves and others the role of know-it-all. We strive to meet the high standard; we criticize and judge when we inevitably fail. Always having all the answers is virtually impossible, and it takes a toll on the body and the psyche. Another side effect of believing you must have all the answers is the paralyzing effect it has when you don't have the answers. The mind has a very hard time with not knowing, and when it can't figure something out, it either makes something up or starts to feel lost or stuck.

Some years ago, Lizzie came to me seeking help. After years of schooling to get the education and licensing she needed to do her job as a health professional, she recognized that she hated her work. No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't find a way to enjoy her practice. She knew she wanted to do something else, but didn't know what that was. She repeatedly told me that she felt stuck.

In Lizzie's case, her mind wasn't interfering with the care of her patients, it was interfering with self-care. It was telling her that she had to keep doing what she was doing—which wasn't working—until she knew what else to do. We played with the feeling of being stuck and with enjoying movement in her body that went along with the I don't know what to do thought. As Lizzie allowed herself to enjoy the movement of not knowing, it broke the paralysis she was feeling in her



mind about having to have all the steps laid out before she made any move. Her body showed her that she didn't have to know the answer to be able to explore possibilities.

Shortly after the session of expressing I don't know through movement, she entered an online contest to be a company spokesperson. It was a step way outside the box for her. And though she didn't win the contest, she had begun the process of giving herself permission to experiment. A few months later, she created a new direction for her life and a way to help others that excited and fueled her. And she did it through play and curiosity.

In Lizzie's case, it was the thought itself that kept her stuck, not the fact that she didn't know what she would do next or how to make a change. The belief that you must have all the answers has embedded within it the capacity to create feelings of low self-esteem because nobody will ever have all the answers.

When we stay with wonder and curiosity, we don't have to know where we're going. We can experiment and see what happens.

### ***You're Doing It Wrong and You're Going to Get in Trouble***

If you were raised by a parent who was always looking for someone to blame or if you have an employer who operates this way, it's likely you are always worried about getting it right. Unfortunately, worrying about getting it right often leads to mistakes. When you are looking over your shoulder while doing something, you cannot be fully present.

The fear of getting in trouble is connected to the vicious cycle of wanting approval and trying to avoid disapproval.

Wanting external approval—approval from someone other than yourself—is a bottomless pit. If you succeed at getting it, you may feel temporarily satisfied, but you will soon need another fix. External approval validates the concept that love comes from outside of us. Like pouring water into a bottomless barrel, there will never be enough to feel full.

Tied in with the fear of getting in trouble and the desire for approval is an underlying expectation of disapproval. Sometimes the aversion to disapproval is so strong that it is paralyzing. If you've ever had an employee who hemmed and hawed over anything they were asked to do, you were probably seeing this program in action.

If the thoughts *I'm doing it wrong or I'm going to get in trouble* resonate with you, the first step towards breaking the cycle is to just start noticing it in action. As best you can, refrain from any judgments about yourself and just observe. You can gently engage with yourself and say, "Wow, her approval is really important to you." And then, if you can, give yourself some approval.

When we learn to let go of wanting approval, we actually start to feel better about ourselves. We free energy and allow for more spontaneous and appropriate action.

Another fun way to play with the critical voice is to simply agree with it. When the voice tells you, "You're going to mess this up, big time," just say to it, "Yes, you're right. I will." Everyone wants to be validated, including your internal voices, and when they feel validated, they move on to something else—in less than thirty seconds.

### *You Have to Be Perfect*

The feelings of wanting to please others, wanting to make others happy, and needing to be perfect may also have seeking approval at their core. In these situations, we try harder, we try to figure out what we're doing wrong, we try something different, or we try the same thing—all to get the ever-evasive love or approval. Often, the program of trying to be perfect arose in childhood when our developmental needs were not met. A child automatically blames himself or herself when a parent is not giving them the love or attention they need. Long after the child is grown, the program lives on.

Control is another aspect of wanting things to be perfect. We live for the satisfaction of getting something just so, and when we achieve it, we feel good—for a little while. The downside is that the fix is temporary. And in the circumstances where we can't get it just so, we worry and feel bad about ourselves. Again, the first step out of this cycle is to notice when it shows up. Acknowledging the longing for perfection will also help to dispel it. Another mantra I like to work with is this: Perfect is good; done is better.

Below is the Cult of Done's manifesto "by a couple of guys who gave themselves 20 minutes to write it."<sup>3</sup>

Dear Members of the Cult of Done,

I present to you a manifesto of done. This was written in collaboration with Kio Stark in 20 minutes because we only had 20 minutes to get it done.

## The Cult of Done Manifesto

1. There are three states of being. Not knowing, action, and completion.
2. Accept that everything is a draft. It helps to get it done.
3. There is no editing stage.
4. Pretending you know what you're doing is almost the same as knowing what you are doing, so just accept that you know what you're doing even if you don't and do it.
5. Banish procrastination. If you wait more than a week to get an idea done, abandon it.
6. The point of being done is not to finish but to get other things done.
7. Once you're done you can throw it away.
8. Laugh at perfection. It's boring and keeps you from being done.
9. People without dirty hands are wrong. Doing something makes you right.
10. Failure counts as done. So do mistakes.
11. Destruction is a variant of done.
12. If you have an idea and publish it on the internet that counts as a ghost of done.
13. Done is the engine of more.

### *You're Never Going to Get It Done*

If it has to be perfect, it's never going to be done. But even if you don't operate from a belief that it has to be perfect, you may be in the habit of telling yourself that you are never going to get it finished in time. This internal dialogue is one of the

most common precursors to stress I see. And the reality is that most of the time, it's a lie. Most of us are much more competent than we acknowledge in our self-talk, and most of the time we do get it done. When I catch myself with more to do than seems manageable, I tell myself that since I have a lot to do, it's a good thing I'm so competent.



### **30-Second Play Break**

*Stop for a moment and think about something you have been pressuring yourself about. And become your very own cheerleading squad. Tell yourself, "I'm so competent, I'll get it done. No problem," or "Way to go. You've got this." Then just see what you notice.*

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If, on the other hand, you know it's not going to get done, it's time to renegotiate. You may need to approach your boss and ask, "What's the highest priority?" or you may need to have this same conversation with yourself. Some years ago, I caught myself in the habit of making a very long to-do list on my days off and then getting stressed about getting it all done. Not a good plan! Now I may make the same list, but, even as I make it, I know that I'm putting too much on the list to get done in one day without feeling resentful when I go to bed. So I prioritize the list and add in play breaks. Some of it gets done; some of it doesn't. I don't feel bad about it.

### ***You Have to Work Hard to Succeed***

Maybe; maybe not. Yes, there are many case studies that appear to show a connection between hard work and success, but there are also many, many case studies that show success happening without much effort. And some even demonstrate that hard work can lead to burnout. One story I've heard about Oprah Winfrey and her partner, Graham Steadman, comes to mind. I was told that in a presentation they did together, Graham Steadman spoke about how important it was to set goals, take action, and follow through. When he was finished speaking, Oprah stood up and said, "I've never set a goal in my life." It appears that goals work for some and not setting goals works for others.

The belief that you have to work hard to succeed is a thought you can challenge. Simply ask yourself what would happen if you didn't believe that. Notice what responses come to mind and keep asking the same question of those responses. You may find you ultimately come up with answers that don't even make sense to you.

### ***Does Work Really Have to Be Hard?***

I've been told since childhood that work is important and play is trivial, but this really never sat well with me. During my preteen and teenage years, my father and I had an ongoing and playful exchange. It would begin with some silliness on my part. My father's line was, "When are you going to grow up?" or "Come on, grow up already!" said in a nonserious tone. I would respond in song, and my father would then feign exasperation.

Peter Pan was my hero. I did not want to grow up because I knew growing up meant not having any fun. Though my father still knew how to play, my mother had given it up long before my childhood. The messages I received from her were much more serious, and the older I got, the more crucial it was that I get down to the business of life. These messages were reinforced in school and in my work life. Like many others, I was left with a longing to play combined with many messages that told me, in one way or another, that I was wrong to play.

And so, wanting to be a member in good standing with society, I got down to the business of working hard and being hard at work.

The words “hard” and “work” are so fused together that it is difficult to contemplate work not needing to be hard. And that takes us back to resistance. When I think that writing or helping others is going to be hard, I don’t want to do it. Sure, I can push through it, but is that how I want to go through life?

I might be the only one with that line of thinking, but I don’t think so. I have worked with way too many people who can’t seem to make themselves do what it takes to achieve their goals. What if we didn’t have to work so hard? Is it possible that work could be effortless? That helping could be fun?

That brings up another common misperception: The opposite of hard work is laziness. When not hard at work we are goofing off, fooling around, or shucking responsibility. To be accurate, the opposite of “hard at work” is “easy at work.” We do not use this expression in our society, though we may

say, “He’s got it easy” and devalue his work because there is less effort involved.

Work can be fun. Most of us went into our respective fields because we had passion for the field. Somewhere along the way, effort and suffering took the place of joy. My goal, besides getting things done, is to have fun doing those things. And I also want to have fun with life. Sometimes that means not listening to everything I think.

### *Miscellaneous Unsupportive Thoughts*

When dealing with any intrusive thought, stop and ask, “Is this thought helpful?” If it is, great. Use it in your service. Use it in service to others. If not, see if you can just drop it, or at least set it aside. Without replacing it with another thought, simply notice that you don’t have to believe it.

Use the techniques suggested above with other thoughts. Bounce them, roll them, challenge them, validate them. What all the techniques have in common is this: You have to be conscious of the thoughts to use them. As soon as you become conscious of a thought, its power over you begins to dissolve.

When you begin to question thoughts as they arise, you will get more distance from them. You will break the identification with old beliefs and have the freedom to choose new thoughts and new beliefs. The need for this practice will likely continue throughout your entire life, but you will get so good at it, you won’t even need thirty seconds.