

BE WELL

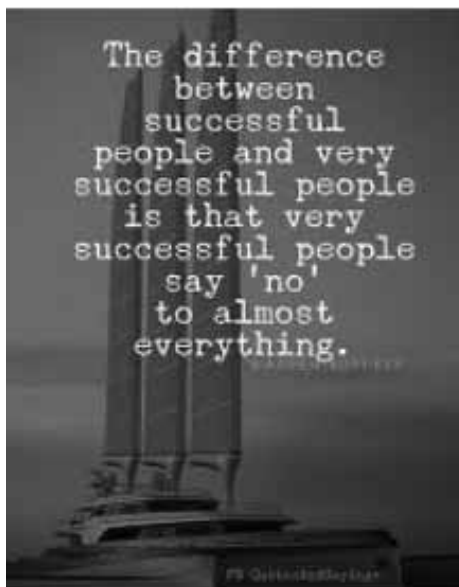
Is it Possible to Do Less to Achieve More?

Prioritizing Doing and Getting Things Done

As a perfectionist and Type-A over-achiever, I find it extremely challenging to just “be.” To carve time out of my life to do what appears to be nothing, just doesn’t make any rational sense. I still recall the first yoga class I ever attended in 2003 just after graduating from law school and starting my legal career while training to run the New York City marathon as my first attempt at 26.2 miles running non-stop. As the yoga teacher told all of us to “find our breath” once we found a comfortable position, I could hear this rather loud voice inside my head saying “What, I am supposed to just sit here and find my breath? This is ridiculous. I have so many things to do right now. Sitting here just focusing on my breath seems like a massive waste of my time. And time is money.” I left the class as soon as the last Om vibration ended and vowed never to waste my time doing “nothing” again!

It was early in my litigation career and I was just starting to integrate the mentality that there may never be any “free” time in my life. One of my partners had pulled me aside when I started and gave me some words of advice: “Now Samara, the biggest mistake new lawyers do is not adequately capturing their billable time. For example, if you are in the shower and you are thinking about your legal analysis or a client’s legal issue, you need to capture that time. If you are out running and outlining your legal memorandum, you need to capture that time. This will be the best way for you to achieve the 2700-hour billable time requirement.” I took these words of advice to heart in a very intense way, which led to billing 3,000 hours/year for a few years in a row, until I started to feel the effects of BURN OUT.

I truly believe everyone handles their



perception of stress differently and individual manifestation of stress can also vary widely. My coping mechanisms were to try to squeeze more and more out of every minute, so I could achieve more so I could make more money and thus, be more successful. The only way I could do that was to numb the stress with alcohol after intense days of triathlon training and litigation tasks. I actually became a triathlete as a “break” from working so hard at the law firm. So, outwardly I appeared healthy and happy, but inside the long-term effects of chronic stress were wreaking havoc with my health. Every 6-8 weeks I would suffer a horrible health setback from walking pneumonia, tonsillitis, mononucleosis and bronchitis. These illnesses were severe and literally stopped me in my tracks...despite my resistance to do so. I still recall having a 103-degree fever and making an error in judgment by contacting a former work colleague, which led to some negative supervisor feedback and made me feel that being sick was also a waste of time that I just

didn’t have time for!

Clearly, my path of obsessive doing was not sustainable and only changed when I realized that I needed to change my current professional path. I desperately wanted to leave the stress. Do something else, anything where I wouldn’t be so stressed and feel so out of control.

Prioritizing Saying “No” and Embody “Being”

It was a drastic shift to consider leaving my current schedule, which started at 4:30 am to fit 10-mile runs in before being the first person working in the law office and then working until I was the last person to leave around 9:00 pm, averaging about 6 hours of sleep every night. It was 2007 and I was still a stressed litigator, but now was also an injured triathlete and after trying all modalities of healing, including: primary care physician, physical therapist, acupuncture, chiropractor and a massage therapist, someone said, “Have you tried yoga?” This question immediately triggered me back to that first yoga class that I didn’t have time for and wasn’t flexible enough to do comfortably. I responded: “I haven’t wanted to do yoga in a group class because I think it is a waste of my time, but I would be open to 1:1 therapeutic sessions.” And my path towards physical healing began with 1:1 therapeutic yoga sessions, where we still focused on our breath, but now I was moving in ways that brought both awareness and healing to my physical body. But then I started to realize something even stranger, I felt happier and less stressed. I was less reactive and just a better human. Kinder and more compassionate to myself and others. This was a MAJOR shift for me!

When I told my counseling therapist this news, she excitedly asked me if I had ever heard of Eckhart Tolle’s book, “A New Earth. I responded I had not, but purchased

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it and upon listening to it on my daily commute my mindfulness awareness exploded. I started to see my existence in the world in an exciting and multi-dimensional way and I wanted to share that with everyone around me. Also, I started to see the value of just making space in my life to "Be" because that is where you can realize all of the magic that is around you. In every moment. I started to yearn for a less stressful life. One where I could spend more time in nature as well as teaching, which has always been something I am passionate about. So, in 2009 I left the litigation job and dove into aligning with my passions around practicing yoga and embodying a more mindful path. I made space for the people I cared about and activities that brought me joy. I spent more time in nature. I moved to Vermont to teach at the law school and started my path towards becoming a yoga teacher.

One of the largest aspects of my yoga teacher training was implementing a disciplined practice of yoga, breath control or pranayama and meditation on a daily basis. I was forced to carve out time to just "be" in these activities as there is no goal to attain or end product to create. It was really hard in the beginning. I would be lying if I didn't still have pangs of tension when I tried to do less instead of attending to my long To Do list. When would I get these items done? Where would I find

the time? But, after I have completed my activities of doing nothing, I feel so much more spacious and open. I look at my tasks and just complete them in a timely manner without any anxiety or stress. *It is as though time extends and expands to allow me to complete my tasks with more efficiency and clarity than if I hadn't taken the time to do less.* It has been my experience that the work product is of a higher quality as a result of my mindfulness practice. So it is truly a win-win: accomplish all tasks in a timely manner with less anxiety and higher quality results! When I am under stress the converse seems to occur – I NEVER have enough time to do what I need to accomplish and feel horrible during the entire task or activity!

With regard to my athletic endeavors, the power of doing less or nothing has had a profound impact on my ability to stay in better shape while doing less. I was initially resistant to attend yoga classes titled "gentle," "yin," or "restorative" because the descriptions didn't involve enough vigorous action. They were actually described as slow and easy with an emphasis on either doing less or nothing at all. I observed my initial cardio-obsessed reaction of "what a waste of time" but then forced myself to grab a bolster, an excessive number of blankets and other props and do as little as possible for up to 2 hours. It wasn't easy

to get both the body and the mind to slow down, but then I started seeing the results in my training outcomes. My body was able to recover from harder workouts faster. I wasn't injured as much or at all. I was more flexible. I was able to sleep through the night without my calves and arches cramping. And I found I had more fun and was more relaxed when I did my workouts and races. Another win-win!

With my journey in mind, my advice is to start small. Take 5 minutes each day to just "be" with no agenda or plan. Find time to take a conscious breath. One where you pay attention to the inhale and the exhale. Just once. Even though it sounds silly. Try it. Find a yoga class that isn't described as vigorous and try to do less than you normally do. Take time to stretch after a workout or a race. Slow down. Notice what arises when you shift your focus from "doing." Just observe your reactions as I did and still do. Without judgment. Just awareness. That is the first step in cultivating your self-awareness, which is so critical in moving away from a stressed out human to one that is relaxed, happy and focused.

And now, I am really pushing my own personal "Being" envelope as I close this decade of mindfulness evolution with a 9-day silent retreat (from December 26 – January 5) at the Vipassana Retreat Center in Shelburne, MA where I cannot speak, read, write or make eye contact. Then, I will be staying at the Kripalu Center in Lenox, Massachusetts for 4-days to re-enter life through a Reflect and Renew Retreat, full of yoga, meditation, nourishing food, journaling and integrating such an intense "Being" experience into "Doing" as I plan my next year and decade! I truly believe that I could lose my mind during this intense period, which may be the point of spending that much time alone with your mind? I look forward to sharing my experience with stressed professionals and athletes in January 2020, so stay tuned! Contact me to be included in my monthly newsletter to learn more (anderson_samara@yahoo.com).

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