

The Stories That Stop Us From Being Present & Taking Action

Most of us have spent our lives caught up in plans, expectations, ambitions for the future; in regrets, guilt or shame about the past. To come into the present is to stop the war. ~Jack Kornfield

I get emails all the time from people who are struggling with very common difficulties:

- Wanting to overcome anger
- Wanting to deal more calmly with stress
- Hurt by other people's inconsiderate actions
- Getting stuck in resentment and thinking about how others have wronged you
- Struggling with change because it's hard
- Struggling with letting go of clutter because of various emotional attachments
- Finding all kinds of obstacles to taking on a project, side hustle, new business, writing a book/blog, etc.

And I completely understand these difficulties, because I struggle with them too. Here's the thing — there are just two things stopping us from being present or taking the action we want to take:

1. The stories we have in our heads about other people, what's happening, and ourselves
2. Our habitual pattern of staying in those stories instead of being present or taking action

It's really one thing: our mental habit of staying stuck in the stories in our heads.

When I say "stories," this isn't a judgment about whether what we're saying in our heads is true or not. It's just what our minds do — they make up a narrative about the world, including other people and ourselves. Our minds are narrative machines. You could see the narrative as true or not, but that's not the point — the narrative is getting in the way of being present and taking action.

What kind of stories do I mean? I mean things that we make up and spin around in our heads (true or not):

- They shouldn't act that way
- If they loved me they wouldn't be so inconsiderate

- This is too hard, I don't want to do this
- I suck, I keep failing, I am inadequate
- They keep doing this, I don't know why they keep doing that to me
- They hurt me, they are not a good person
- I can't start my business/blog/project until I learn this, or get to this place in my life, or have perfect peace in my day and am in a good mood
- This shouldn't be happening to me! This sucks!

These stories have some truth to them, which is why we cling to them so much. But these stories block us from being present. They are not helpful.

What would it be like if we didn't cling to them so much? What if we could develop a mind that clings to nothing?

Dropping the Stories & Becoming Present

We can't stop the mind from coming up with the stories, as it is a narrative machine. However, that doesn't mean we have to cling to the stories and keep them spinning around in our heads.

Notice when you're stuck in a story. Hint: if you're angry, stressed, frustrated, disappointed, feeling shame or fear, dreaming about the future, thinking about something that happened ... you're stuck in a story.

Notice that the story is causing you to be stressed, angry, afraid, whatever. Notice that you are spinning it around in your head, and it is occupying your attention.

Now see if you can drop out of the story and into the present moment. Become curious: What is happening right now, in front of you? What sensations can you notice in your body? What is the light like? What sounds can you notice?

When you go back to your story (you will), try coming back to the present moment. Stay longer. Come back gently, without judgment.

What can you appreciate in this moment? A feeling of appreciating the sacredness of this moment can counteract the story, and change your way of being.

Dealing with Stress & Anger Without the Story

Stress and anger can be difficult things, because we have such a hard time letting them go.

But what if you could drop out of the stories that are causing the stress and anger (or frustration, resentment, complaining) and just be present with whatever you're feeling?

Drop into your body and notice what sensations are there.

If you have difficult sensations in your body, see if you can be curious about them and stay with them, rather than spinning around a story about them. Stay with them longer (they might be located in your chest area), as you would try to stay with the sensations of your breath during a breath meditation.

Again, when your mind wanders back to the story, just come back gently. Stay with the sensations. Be present with them.

Touching the sensations in your body, of stress or anger, is a way to transform yourself. It doesn't necessarily get rid of the feelings — but it changes your relationship to them. You no longer need to get rid of them, because you are fine just being with them. You develop a trust that you can stay present with them, without running or hiding or needing to *do* anything about them.

Each time you get stressed, each time you feel anger or frustration or resentment ... this is an opportunity to practice and develop trust in yourself. Every spike of fear or stress is an opportunity to transform, to open, to stay and be present.

In this way, every stress is making you more mindful, less attached, and more open to life.

Taking Action Without the Story

The stories in our heads also stop us from taking the action we want to take in our lives — from changing habits to eating better to getting rid of clutter to tackling that difficult project.

Some examples:

- I don't feel like exercising, I feel lazy, it's too hard
- I don't know how to tackle this big project, it's too complicated
- I don't know how to blog, there is so much I don't know, I have to learn it all before I can start
- There's too much clutter, and I don't know what to do with it all, I can't tackle all of that
- Maybe I should do something else, I don't really like this kind of work, I think I would be better trying one of the other options I like

There is some truth to each of the stories, but the fact is, they are getting in the way of action. They aren't helpful.

What would happen if we just dropped the stories and took action, staying in the present as we did so?

Imagine dropping into your body when you have a story about why you shouldn't exercise ... and getting present. Then putting on your workout clothes and shoes, staying present without the story. Then doing some pushups or starting to run.

You don't need the story to take action. Drop into the present, and just act. Stay present as you act. Be curious about what it's like, rather than thinking you know what it will be like ahead of time. Take a "don't know" mindset, and find out!

Don't have any clarity about a project? Start doing it, and clarity will come as you discover what it's like.

Afraid you're not good enough to do the project? Only one way to truly know — take action on it and see!

Feeling overwhelmed because there's too much clutter to tackle? Declutter one thing. Take action on one spot on your counter. There's no need for the story about it being too much.

The truth is, even if we can't avoid generating these stories, we don't have to get stuck in them, especially if they are unhelpful. Sometimes it's good to have a narrative that helps us plan and figure things out, but often it's better just to find out by being present and taking action.

And you can do that very simply: just drop into the sensations of your body and surroundings. Notice. Get curious. Stay. Come back gently. Appreciate the sacredness of this moment.