

Mindfulness, Motivation and Productivity



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HOW TO THRIVE AT WORK

Mindfulness, Motivation and Productivity



STEPHEN J MORDUE

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Meet the author



Stephen J Mordue

Stephen is a lecturer at University of Sunderland and is a passionate advocate for how self-care and being organised can promote productivity. He has 19 years' experience in the social work profession, initially as a practitioner and then as team manager supervising a team of social workers, before moving into academia. He worked in Information Technology industry as a Computer Operator and an Operations Analyst for the first 12 years of his working life, in the days when computers filled rooms, before retraining. He understands in first-hand the impact that stress can have on people and

his personal experience, as well as trying to help others manage the demands of professional life, led him to explore what supports well-being and productivity both in the workplace and throughout our lives.

He found some self-care ideas more by chance than design as an avid runner and a spiritual enquirer. He's a great fan of mindfulness and meditation as an '*easy to access*', '*no gear required*' approach to well-being. Having spent most of his life completely disorganised, he was told about David Allen's '*Getting Things Done*' methodology and so his new life began.

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I dedicate this to the people who have been my managers – for the wisdom they imparted:

- Judith Chapman for teaching me that sometimes 'good enough' is 'good enough';
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I would also like to express my grateful thanks to Lisa Watson. Chapters 4 and 6 of this book are based heavily on her material in *How to Thrive in Professional Practice*, also by Critical Publishing.

The man who *moved a mountain* was the one who began carrying away small stones.

Chinese Proverb

Introduction: mindfulness, motivation and productivity

LIFE IS THE NAME OF THE GAME

If you are of my generation, then you may well have immediately started to hum the theme tune to The Generation Game in your head. 'Life is the name of the game, and I want to play the game with you'. If you are younger, then you'll know how to use Google to figure out what I'm talking about. The golden era of The Generation Game, in my humble opinion, was the 1970s when families gathered around the TV on a Saturday night and watched Bruce Forsyth pit teams of two people from the same family but different generations against each other in a battle to the ultimate conclusion 'The Conveyor Belt', where prizes past before the eyes of the victorious family. They then had to recall as many of the items as they could in 45 seconds and whatever they remembered they won. Fabulous tele. The game show of life has some parallels. We are thrown together with people often very different to us to find a way through complex tasks that we sometimes have the skills to achieve and sometimes don't. Contestants on The Generation Game were often asked to create something, maybe ice a cake, or sit at a potter's wheel and make a bowl, talents that sadly were at their disposal in very short supply. The result was hilarious and bore no resemblance to the one they'd been shown by the professional. When in real life we don't have the skills or knowledge to do what we need to do, to be master of the task, there are often consequences that are difficult to cope with and the impact is not hilarious. And sometimes life is like the finale of the show – the conveyor belt. Things pass us by in a blur of activity and we try to remember, make sense of, and then do something with what we've seen afterwards to try and win the prize at this game of life.

In the game of life, when we experience problems, when things have been difficult and sometimes traumatic, the body, to use the words of Bessel Van Der Kolk (2014), keeps the score. We shall see, as we read on, that experiencing stressful events has a physical and mental impact on the body, and that the physical and mental are inextricably linked. Do well in one and you will do well in the other, do badly in one and you will do badly in the other. In his writing about recovery from trauma, Van Der Kolk says that the recovery process is about taking back ownership of mind and body which in turn helps you take back control of your *self*. Sometimes in life we feel out of control. Our minds are busy and full of stuff. Stuff that we need to get done and stuff that we need to control. Too much stuff. We become overwhelmed. When we can't find a way through our motivation suffers and we can't even initiate any activity to begin to get us out of the mess we feel we're in.

If we can't even make a start with regaining control, then how do we ever fit in exercise or how do we ever think about eating well. Often, when struggling to try to make sense of everything we find it difficult to sleep. Making a start is the hardest part. But making a start is the first step to taking back control.

CONTROL WHAT YOU CAN

You can only control what you can control. Let me explain. Stoic philosophy talks about the dichotomy of control. There are some things that we can control, some things we can't control and some things that we can't control fully but have influence over. Knowing this, understanding it and implementing it as an idea for life will take us some way towards happiness. The things you can control are where you need to focus your attention. This is where you can make your decisions. You can decide to exercise, or not. You can decide to have that second glass of wine, or not. You can decide whether to go to bed at 10pm or not. Focussing your attention on getting these things right is the foundation to self-care. Because, like it or not, there is a *right*, or at the very least there is a more right than wrong. We have the pleasure (in my view) of living in an age where science can explore on our behalf, what the impact of exercise is, how our guts effect our mood and what is going on when we sleep. These things are the content of this book. Getting these things right, the things we can control, helps us to manage how we feel about the things we can't control. Because when it comes to the things we can't control, we have to simply take them as they come. Or do we? I'd suggest that even the things we can't control, 'I need that report done by Friday' requests, that are handed down to us can be, in some way, controlled. We can control how we plan them, how we approach them, how we get them done. Establishing the right mindset about what we can't control means we are more productive. I get the things I can't control out of the way first, so I can free my mind up to enjoy the things I can control, a worst first, 'eat that frog' approach. More on that later.

The place where you can't control something but have some influence is the confluence of the, 'I have control'/'I have no control' continuum. Knowing where your influence is relies on being able to stand back and take an objective view. Not necessarily a view devoid of emotional content but certainly not one born out of emotions. In the business and professional world, there is a place for subjectivity and emotion without doubt, but there is also a need for pragmatic realism to fuel decision making. Your ability to influence will help you take some control at least of the job you need to do as a consequence of a request over which you have limited, or no, control. The best advice I was given by a manager was, 'Never miss a meeting. You miss a meeting you get the jobs no one else wants'. You need 'skin in the game' to have some influence. And if you find that having exerted your influence, you are still left with something to do that was outside of your control to decide whether to do or not – you do it – gracefully. You control how you do it. You control your approach to the task and that's how you feel in control. More on this later. While I'm not religious, not now anyway, I'm still drawn to the Serenity Prayer.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

DEFINING LIFE

If the game we are playing is *life*, then what is a *life*. What is in this name. I'm drawn, in trying to describe what I think a productive life fuelled by self-care and being organised is, to existentialist ideas of human existence and a definition of existentialism put forward by Sarah Blakewell (2017). Existential philosophers are interested in concrete human existence, the reality of the lived moments. Surely, that is our business in this book. We need something concrete to stand upon to reach the heights of our life, to become the best version of ourselves that we can be. Existentialists go on to claim that you can be whatever you want to make of yourself because you are free to do so. You are free to decide, for better or for worse. You are therefore responsible for yourself. Free to choose but having to stand by your choices. You can choose to take some exercise and be a person who exercises and reap the outcomes of that, or, you can choose to be a person who doesn't exercise and reap the outcomes of that. This is not a binary decision, and certainly I am not here to judge. You need to decide because you are free to do so. You will also have to *enjoy* the consequences. Just to be clear, I am not a perfectionist. My view of the world is to understand what various things do to me. Take red wine. I love red wine. I drink it and have read about what it does to me. Some of the things it does to me are potentially good and some things are potentially bad. I know this and I understand it, so I try to mediate the bad by balancing things in other ways leaving myself to enjoy the good. You need to find out for yourself and make your decision. This book might help. An informed life stands more chance of being a good life than an uninformed one. This book is not about telling you what to do. That might seem strange. It's about telling you what the research and the literature that's out there about self-care and productivity says. You'll decide for yourself. That's how it should be.

Existentialists live in the real world though, not some philosophical ivory tower – that's what I like about them. They understand that we are only free within the situations we find ourselves in. We are liberated or constrained by our biological makeup. I am not an athlete, so my physical endeavours are limited by this – but endeavour I must. We are influenced by psychological dimensions. How things make us feel, how we think about things, and our quiet moments of contemplation all have an impact. We tell ourselves stories about the world around us, often fuelled by our upbringing and culture, that impact on how we think. There are also environmental and social variables. Sometimes, as I've already identified, some things we have to do are outside of our control and have an impact. The office environment, our home environment and the other environments we inhabit, all have an influence on our emotions and our productivity, but there is much (or at least some of this) we can control.

What we shall see as we embark on this self-care journey is that the physical, mental, social and environmental dimensions are all inextricably linked. Taking small steps in all of these areas, over time, will lead to big changes. But it takes time. There is no quick fix, no silver bullet. But what's the alternative? Just to keep going in the same way? If what you are doing isn't working, then maybe it's time to try something different. You owe it to yourself. Who you are is born out of what you do, born out of the choices you make.

YOU ARE UNIQUE

We have all got a unique story because we are all unique. I have my own and you will have yours. Your life has brought you to this point, so well done for getting here. At various points during your life you will, I'm sure, have tried very hard to do things. Sometimes, you will have succeeded at your endeavours and sometimes, like we all have, you will have failed. Occasionally spectacularly. Such is life.

Self-care is like life. We try, we fail and we try again. The self-care prescription you require is unique to you. You will need bits of everything I talk about in these pages but in a unique balance that is all yours. Experimentation is key.

This book comes with a guarantee. All of the ideas that are in here have been tried and tested and are the ones that have worked for me. In that sense, it is a very *real, lived*, book. I come to you as someone who have given things a go and generally ended up a little better off as a consequence. Small steps lead to big changes. Self-care is not about getting it right all of the time. It's about getting it right as much as you can, realising you have neglected to get it right for a while, and knowing where to go back to in order to reengage with it. For engage with it we must.

Some of the things I write about I was doing more by chance than design but, as I read more, what started to become clear was the impact of positive habits wasn't simply a *chance* thing. These things I was doing had scientific ideas behind them. I ended up on a journey of discovery to find out just what lay behind my attempts to care for myself and what was hindering me. That journey led me to keep some things I was already doing, modify some things and develop some new positive habits. I found out what the science was behind sleep, what the research said about nutrition, and discovered that there really was something to mindfulness and meditation that was more than a hippy hangover from the sixties.

What I've discovered is that everyone, to one degree or another, is involved in the same struggle. Trying to cope with the emotional labour of life. Trying to figure out how to explore feelings. Trying to figure out how to get things done and control the chaotic world. Trying to balance everything. Trying to fit everything in. Knowing that there must be a better way but not knowing what that better way might look like.

We live in an 'information society' and one of the positives of that is I knew all the relevant information was out there. There's lots on what to do, but I discovered that what wasn't there in people's heads was the underpinning theory and science that said '*do this because this is why it works*'. So, people were often cynical. '*How can going for a walk help?*' '*How can focusing on my breathing make the slightest bit of difference?*' What is also missing, I feel, in many people's lives, is the feeling that it's ok to give yourself permission to look after yourself. Self-care is not selfish.

Hopefully, this book is an adventure into the depths of what actually works in regard to self-care and why it works. The advice is not about running marathons, it's about the benefits of what is really only a small amount of regular exercise that gets you a little breathless. It's not about dieting, so you are in a size 8 dress or have a 30-inch waist. It's about how what you eat influences your emotions and therefore your productivity. It's

not about reaching the dizzy heights of a zen-like state when attempting meditation, but is about how small steps into mindfulness and meditation can influence how you emotionally respond to events around you. Mostly, this book is about what we can do to help ourselves to have the best lives we can have, by being the best versions of ourselves we can be. Not perfect but living in a way that is productive and helpful to us and to those around us. Keeping ourselves in order so that we cope with the chaos out there.

I'm not perfect and I don't always get things right or even heed my own advice. We have all been on a journey to get to this point and there is more of the journey in front of us. I know what it's like to struggle, so I thought it might be useful to share a little of my story about what led me to contemplate self-care ideas before we get down to business.

The self-medication cycle

As I've said, I've been quite lucky that over the years, I have done many things by chance rather than design that have contributed to being in general good health and well-being. As you'll find out later in the book, I wasn't a fan of exercise at school, but as a young adult I found a great passion for running, weight training and squash, all of which helped mitigate my other passion, food. I do like to eat. Although again, by chance, I do enjoy for the most part quite healthy food. I just enjoy a lot of it.

I was brought up going to church, so was conscious of the benefits of quiet contemplation and as a child and teenager, in a pre-computer game era, hanging out with friends was largely an outdoor pursuit. I carried this love of the outdoors with me throughout my adult life and, as we know, being outside is good for you. I have translated my faith as a younger person into adult enquiry about mindfulness and meditation, as there are many parallels between those pursuits and the prayer that people of faith engage in.

I hadn't really had much cause to consider self-care as I was engaging in self-care activities without really realising I was. Before my life as a lecturer, I was a social worker and during this time things took a bit of a turn. I found myself struggling with difficult cases and lots of paperwork and found it difficult to keep myself organised. I got into the habit of leaving things until the last minute. I hit that dangerous place most of us get to where we think we know what we're doing. In reality, especially in a profession like social work, you never completely know what you are doing and always need to be learning and developing. I lost focus and felt as though I was always trying to keep up. I did keep up, nothing went wrong, everything got done, but it was all done in quite a chaotic way. This was exacerbated when I became a manager. There's an assumption that because you are good at one thing, you will be good at another, and while I think I did a fine job as a manager, it came at a cost.

My solution was to drink wine. Every night. This was the only way I could get to sleep. This inevitably led to a hangover the next day, which meant that I drank copious amounts of coffee. I was an expert in the caffeine crash. Drinking so much wine and coffee made me feel dreadful, but all was well as I found a solution. Over-the-counter medication in the form of codeine took away the dreadful stomach pains and headaches I was feeling in the early afternoon and gave me a relaxed feeling. Codeine is an opiate, so is very

addictive. It also makes you constipated, and coffee, as you may know, agitates the bowel and can help you go to the toilet. Can you imagine? Internal uproar, which led to feeling even more lousy, which meant the cycle of alcohol, caffeine and codeine to try and feel better started again. A conversation with a friend who is a doctor alerted me to the harm codeine was doing to me when taken regularly and I stopped immediately. I had found a *self-care* strategy, but it was a negative one, as some of our strategies are. What I thought was helping me get through the days and nights was having a detrimental effect on everything.

I look back on that period of time now, probably a period of around six months, and reflect on how dreadful I felt day in, day out. That cycle was driven by stress and by not knowing how to manage the stress I was feeling in a positive way. I chose a negative route. Ultimately, choosing a negative route makes you feel worse in the long run. The difficulty is that negative routes are often easier. It takes commitment to look after yourself properly and do the right thing for your body and mind. It's all about developing healthy habits.

THRIVING

You will see as we go through the various chapters of the book that developing a mindful way of approaching things is crucial. This is nothing scary. Mindfulness is simply being able to focus yourself in the moment to the exclusion of everything else. All of the things I'll talk about will help you develop this way of being. Because mindfulness is just that. It's not a thing you do it's a way you *are*. We shall see that mindfulness fuels motivation, and that a range of self-care activities and *being-organised* techniques beat procrastination and keeps you moving forward. This is not only an idea for work but also for things beyond work, so that we can have productive lives whatever we are doing. It's a whole life approach.

Anyway! Enough! Let's get started. I have found out so much on my journey that I want to share with you. Small steps really do make a big difference. I'd suggest you grab yourself a pen and a notebook because I think you'll find it really useful to make notes as you go and jot down your responses to some of the questions I will pose for you. Writing things down helps to consolidate ideas and makes action more likely. Books are tools, so I give you permission to write in the margins and underline things and put big asterisks against the bits you want to find again. And if you want to break the spine of the book so you can lay it flat, go on, do it.

Let's go.

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