

# Drop In

LEAD WITH DEEPER PRESENCE  
AND COURAGE



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SHE WRITES PRESS

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## CHAPTER 2—Being Present: A New Foundation of Awareness

*I exist as I am, that is enough. —Walt Whitman*

MOST OF US HAVE LIVED the majority of our lives in a state of autopilot, operating predominantly from our heads, with varying levels of effectiveness. At some point, we may become aware that we're living from this space and that, as a result, our options for anything else seem limited. Autopilot, or living in an unconscious state, exists as a survival and efficiency mechanism. It's helped humans to stay alive and conserve brainpower.

Dr. John Welwood, author of *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*, explains in his Sounds True interview “Healing the Core Wound of the Heart” that at the time of birth, humans are the least developed mammals on the planet. When other mammals are born, their brains and nervous systems are developed enough to enable them to walk within hours; they are therefore less dependent on their caretakers than human infants are. One of the reason humans are born underdeveloped is so we can fit through the birth canal.

The downside to being born this way is that our nervous systems are incredibly delicate and we are completely dependent on our parents or caregivers to keep us alive. Even for babies with the best upbringing and home environment, the nervous system goes into shock in the days, months, and years after birth. The newborn nervous system is physically, psychologically, and emotionally unable to process their experiences for many decades.

Rather, when children experience varying levels of confusion, pain, and trauma simply by being alive, their nervous system “freezes” those experiences in their bodies. If you think about it, it’s quite brilliant that our systems’ primary survival mechanism is to “store” our experiences until we are mature and safe enough to process them—although, according to Welwood, our nervous systems aren’t mature enough to do so until we’re in our forties, fifties, and sometimes even sixties. It’s only when we have enough distance, stability, and sense of safety that we can go back and metabolize the experiences we unconsciously put “on hold” in our childhood. This perspective makes it clear that staying on autopilot can take only you so far. But what happens when simply surviving isn’t satisfying (or effective) anymore?

When my clients become aware that they have been operating on autopilot, they usually begin to question how they would live their lives in a state of presence. What would it be like not to be so reactive? What would their relationships look like if they weren’t at the mercy of their emotions? What would their experience of parenting be like if they weren’t just going through the motions of getting their kids from one place to another? What would their level of connection with themselves be if their minds weren’t spinning all the time?

When I tell my clients that they could evolve from being on autopilot to living from presence, they are intrigued, though they often aren’t sure what that means or how they would do it. I explain

to them that when we're living in a state of presence, we have a deep awareness of what is really going on in a given situation, so we start seeing things with an astounding level of clarity. I explain that they could live from a place of deep connection with themselves on all levels—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—so they won't always feel as if external circumstances are whipping them around. I tell them they could know in their gut that they no longer need to feel compelled to prove their worth to anyone, ever. As a result, they can access a new, higher level of vitality and contentment.

Before I start working with a new client, I like to discuss their motivation for deepening their level of awareness and presence. I remember a discussion with a potential client who told me, after I'd explained that this process of looking inward isn't for the faint of heart and that it requires a sincere commitment, "This seems like a lot of work." He stopped, seeming to contemplate what was before us, and asked, "Why would I do this?"

I could relate. I'd felt that way early in my journey. Why stir the pot if life is working relatively well? Why actively dive into the unknown when work feels "good enough"? These are very important questions to explore. You need to be clear on why you would explore a new way of being, as your "why" will be an important aspect of sustaining you through the process of deepening your presence.

Some people are motivated to wake up because autopilot is no longer working for them. Suddenly, their tried-and-true tactics for achieving "success" are not as effective as they once were. One of my clients, Debbie, told me in our first session that she took great pride in doing "whatever it took" to get her job done, including losing sleep, skipping meals, and skirting time with her family. Six months prior, she had been put on a major project at work. She confessed to me during our work together that no matter how hard she worked, it wasn't enough. She was no longer getting the results she was used

to. Her kids and husband were complaining about never seeing her, she had been diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome, and she was at an all-time low mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Debbie's strategies of skipping self-care and family time and ignoring her overall health weren't working this time around. She was confused, disoriented, and panicked that her life was falling apart—and on some level, it was.

Debbie may be an extreme example of what can happen, but the “crisis” she was in was what helped her wake up from her old patterns and explore a new way of living. Unfortunately, Debbie's experience is also incredibly common. For many of us walking around on autopilot, it often takes a significant wake-up call to direct us to reflect inwardly. What's important to remember is that no matter how intense the wake-up call is, the invitation is to reorient ourselves to a new foundation of awareness and presence and free ourselves from the conditioned patterns we've relied on for so long.

Perhaps you can relate to the experience of an old pattern no longer working as smoothly as it once did. Maybe the success of your external life is perfectly satisfying, yet you're experiencing an internal inkling for something “more.” For me, after my Bell's palsy got my attention and I made some initial shifts in my life and practice of presence, my motivation shifted, too. Instead of being motivated not to get sick again or have a relapse, I became motivated by something more subtle and internal. This drive inside me was a deep, quiet, ever-so-subtle nudge to keep exploring. It was, and continues to be, an internal pull that draws me to a deeper level of presence.

After working with many people over the years around being more present, I have learned not to assess the timing of how, when, or even if someone chooses to become more present in their life. The truth is that I can't convince anyone, nor do I want to convince anyone, to become more present. The desire has to come from

something within you—as a longing for, or an inkling that there is, something else available to you. What lies ahead of you is an opportunity to explore a new version of reality. Only you will know if or when the timing is right for you.

## What Is Presence?

Presence is not something that resides or originates in your head, and that's why your mind has a heck of a time understanding it. Think back to your last great vacation. Can you recall a specific experience when you felt grounded and present? You might remember vividly the temperature, what the air felt like, the sounds and sights—remember how you *felt*. Now, imagine trying to explain that feeling of fullness and vitality to someone who wasn't there. It sort of loses its luster, doesn't it? The person you're talking to will likely be able to imagine your trip and even be happy for you (or envious), but they won't be able to feel it like you did. The best they can do is relate because they've had a similar experience.

This happens because being present is more than just a concept in your mind. When you're present—which can happen on vacation, because you finally allow the trappings of your day-to-day life to fall away—you experience things with all of your senses, beyond what only your mind can perceive.

When I was first learning about presence, I found the concept intriguing and exciting. My teacher at the time lived in Kona, Hawaii, and I went there to spend a week immersed in my own growth and learning. In preparation, I typed up all my questions about presence and e-mailed them to my teacher in advance. My questions were things like “How do you get present?” “Can anyone do it?” and “How do I teach it?” Once I got there, I sat down with my teacher for what I expected to be my first “official” learning

session. I eagerly asked her if she'd received my questions. She said yes and then was silent. With much earnestness, I whipped out my printed list and said, "Okay, so my first question is—"

She interrupted me and said, "Let's head to the beach."

On the drive there, I was confused, excited, and a little nervous at the same time. I thought I was going to be learning from her—and now we were going to the beach? When we arrived, we sat on the sand for about an hour in silence. The entire time, my mind was spinning. I thought, "I spent a lot of money on this retreat. If I had wanted to go to the beach, I could have done that on my own." This was nice and all, but when were we getting the real stuff? The whole time we were on the beach, I was so preoccupied with analyzing, dissecting, and trying to "get" something that I completely missed the fact that my teacher was giving me an opportunity to drop in.

When I couldn't stand it any longer, I finally asked, with a distinct tone of desperation, "So, what about my questions?"

She replied, "You can't learn about presence from your mind, which is where your questions came from. Presence is about *remembering* something you already know instinctually."

I wanted to yell, *Then why the hell did I spend the money and time to be here with you?* Luckily, I kept that comment inside my head, but at the same time I felt frustrated and confused. I badly wanted a formula, instructions, or a recipe to follow, and she flat-out wasn't giving that to me.

What I now know, many years removed from that experience, is that my teacher sensed that my initial hunger for learning was coming from my mind's need to control. My mind wanted answers so it could feel safer in a situation that was confusing and disorienting. As a result of my disorientation and fear, my conditioned mind was trying to come up with all sorts of reasons why I shouldn't be there, or why it was a waste of time and money. Luckily, I trusted her because of our prior work together, and, looking back on it, I now

see she was essentially exhausting my mind's chatter and allowing it to have its tantrum. She knew my mind would eventually give up trying to control the situation, and it did. My learning from there on out consisted mostly of experiencing presence, versus talking conceptually about it.

Presence is hard to explain, because it's something you experience viscerally, and that's what I learned on my first trip to Hawaii. I was so used to accomplishing, striving, and doing that when asked to "be," I became anxious and frustrated because I felt more comfortable "doing." Doing was something my mind could lock onto and something I'd been rewarded for my whole life. I know firsthand how hard it is to move from compulsively doing to resting into experiencing the moment. I didn't get to a place of deep presence on my first try. I stuck with it and continued to inquire about my conditioning and learned patterns that made it harder to sense presence. Every time I had the courage to explore more deeply, I experienced a more profound sense of rest, ease, and presence. Bottom line: presence is first and foremost an experience of being that can and will permeate your entire being.

## Present-Moment Awareness

One of the easiest ways to access presence is to experiment with present-moment awareness. This means tuning into all of the richness and subtleties of the moment you are *in*, rather than thinking about moments in the past or the future. I know this sounds incredibly simple, but, as you might already know, tuning into present-moment awareness is not easy.

Since we operate on autopilot most of the time, it's easy to miss the details of the present moment. Can you remember the details of your last drive home? Can you remember the flavors of your last

meal, or the emotional subtleties of your last conversation? Tuning into present-moment awareness itself can be life-altering because you're bringing conscious awareness to what you are thinking, feeling, and doing. Instead of missing the details of the moment, you can see and feel them at deeper levels. Present-moment awareness is life-altering, not only because you are setting yourself up for the chance to experience the wholeness that the moment has to offer, but also because you will begin to see your own and others' behavior with more clarity than ever before.

My client Joe had been actively experimenting with being more present both at work and at home. One strategy that helped him stay present was attending meetings with nothing in his hands other than a pad of paper and a pen. This was a radical, old-school decision, given that he worked for a technology company. After a week of experimenting with attending meetings technology-free, he said, "I cannot believe how much I was missing before." Joe explained that when he had previously attended meetings with his tablet or phone, his attention went to e-mails and the next urgent issue sitting in his inbox often triggered his mind to spin. He told me that now, instead of being distracted by something he couldn't do anything about (since he was physically in the meeting), he was able to give his full attention to the topic being discussed. He reported that, much to his surprise, he had a lot to offer, where previously he'd believed some topics irrelevant to him. He also noted how he could pick up on subtle body language from others and how that prompted him to ask about other people's perspective. He couldn't believe how much information he was gleaning simply by giving his full attention to the present moment. Joe ended our session by saying, "It's like, before I worked with you, I didn't know I had a vision problem, and you came along and gave me glasses. Now I can see everything more clearly."

When we're on autopilot, we don't see the situations we're in

clearly. How could we? During the last ten years, I have observed hundreds of meetings, and I can say for sure that most of the people I've witnessed in those meetings were operating on autopilot, not in a state of present-moment awareness. I have seen the inefficiencies and costs of autopilot, including redoing conversations (because someone wasn't listening), emotional reactivity (because someone made an assumption based on past experience), rework (because all people weren't clear on the decision), and confusion (because many people were "checked out"). I could go on and on about the costs of autopilot, but I suspect you have experienced them firsthand.

The costs of the lack of present-moment awareness may be obvious, but the benefits may not be so much. In my last book, *Get Present*, I wrote in detail about the "benefits of presence," such as ease, efficiency, precision, creativity, and a sense of connectedness to yourself and your loved ones. These are benefits, for sure, but as I have deepened my own experience of presence, I've seen how they are actually side effects of returning to your natural state.

Although I see and experience many benefits of present-moment awareness, it is important to know that it doesn't necessarily ensure that you will have a peaceful life, void of frustration and pain. In fact, being fully present in the moment can and often does evoke a new level of awareness, and you may not enjoy what you're becoming aware of. Your practice of presence may reveal situations for what they actually *are*, versus what you want or hope them to be.

It's not unusual for my clients to experience an initial "honeymoon" phase with being present as they start feeling and seeing things more clearly. That first level of awareness is most certainly powerful and energizing. But the honeymoon phase can fade as they start realizing how few people around them are fully present. They attend a meeting, and no one makes eye contact or listens to each other. They sit down for a conversation, and the person they're meeting with is distracted. Or they go out to eat and see how many

people are on their devices, rather than engaging with one another. Their new level of clarity highlights the reality of our culture and can evoke a range of emotions, from frustration to loneliness, anger, and even despair.

As clients deepen their understanding of presence, they express that the beauty of presence is that the external events of their life—good or bad—no longer take them on a ride of emotional ups and downs. They have access to a sense of internal stability that eluded them before. They report that the life events that took them off center no longer impact them in the same way. They feel more rooted, connected, and even guided in every aspect of their lives. Again, it's not that they are experiencing bliss or happiness all the time; rather, they have a sense of well-being and abiding awareness that is far deeper, more reliable, and more stable than any fleeting emotion.

Present-moment awareness is a state of being, and the next sections of this chapter are designed to guide you through a few different entry points to experiment with how to cultivate this awareness. I consider it a win if anyone can strengthen their awareness of the present moment, because that means they have moved beyond autopilot and entered into a new and foundational awareness that will support them the rest of their lives. In the words of one of the readers of *Get Present*, “It doesn't feel like I'm trying to do much differently, but I can't help noticing more, and that alone has been worth the time I put into reading your book.”

## Experimenting with Present-Moment Awareness

The beauty of experimenting with present-moment awareness is that you can try it anytime and anywhere. The goal of experimenting is to increase the quality of your attention and observation in any given moment. When you acknowledge presence, you are no longer

on autopilot. The moment you bring your attention to and observe fully where you are, what you're doing, what you're thinking, feeling, or experiencing, you have left the world of unconsciousness and entered the world of presence. Our days, months, and years are made up of moments—one right after the other—so there are countless opportunities to explore present-moment awareness.

As with any new habit or practice, you will remember to be present, and then you'll forget. Then you'll remember and forget again, and so on. Every time you remember to be fully present in the moment, you are changing your brain's wiring and your entire system's makeup. If the path in your brain is used to being mostly on the autopilot superhighway (unconscious thought and behavior), it makes sense that blazing a new trail in your brain will take a little while. I work with a lot of overachievers, and I often need to remind them that presence is not about getting it “all right, right now.” Have some compassion and patience with yourself as you start. Remember, every time you bring your attention to the present moment—no matter what you're doing—you've jumped the track of autopilot to the new track of conscious awareness. When you jump the tracks enough, you will have created a new super highway and way of relating to your entire world!

It's important to understand that experimenting with present-moment awareness may bring up some triggers. In other words, your mind will have some things to say about being present. In fact, almost as soon as you notice a sensation or experience in the moment, your mind will want to judge, assess, understand or otherwise categorize it. That's what our conditioned minds do. We are all conditioned—and wired—to make assessments of our experience, but when we judge what we're experiencing, we have left the present moment. I'll get into the brain science behind our conditioned reactions in Chapter 3, but for now the invitation is to experiment with deepening presence without judgment.

## Body Awareness

Your physical body can be one of the most effective and precise tools to help you tune into awareness of the present moment. The challenge with tuning into body awareness is that some of us are so in our heads that awareness of body sensation can easily elude us. One of my clients said it best when she admitted that she thought the purpose of her body was to hold her head in place. She was blown away when she figured out that her entire body was packed with powerful information to help her process her experience of the present moment.

Since what we're going for is a deepened awareness of presence, tuning into any sensation you are experiencing is a step toward it. Since you reside in your body every moment of the day, you have a lot of opportunities to tune into what it is experiencing. The following ideas are intended to help you notice physical sensation for the purpose of tuning into the present moment. Remember, the key is not to judge your experience but simply to acknowledge it.

- When walking, notice how your feet hit the ground or how they feel.
- Notice the temperature or smell of the air when you're walking outside.
- Pay attention to how your clothes feel on your body.
- When washing your hands, pay attention to how the water and soap feel on your hands.
- When eating, notice the texture, flavor, and temperature of the food.
- Move your neck side to side and pay attention to the sensation.
- Experiment with the quality and speed of your breath; notice how far into your belly it goes, and see if you can slow it down and deepen it.

- Place the tip of your tongue right behind your front teeth and relax your jaw.
- Lift your shoulders up, hold for five to ten seconds, and then release them.
- The next time you are exercising, bring more attention to the details of your experience (e.g., your foot placement, arm movement, breathing).
- While standing in line, notice the placement of your weight. Is it forward or more on the left or right? Can you feel your feet on the ground?
- When driving, notice the sensation of your hands on the steering wheel.

These are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of opportunities to tune into your body sensation as a way of strengthening your awareness of the present moment. You can be aware of body sensation anytime, anywhere, so the next time you're bored in a meeting, standing in line, or sitting in a waiting room, leverage that time to tune into your body sensations and deepen your experience of presence.

Another powerful tool to tune into the present moment through the body is a body scan, designed to methodically bring your attention to different parts of your body and simply to cause you to notice what is occurring in that section of your body in the moment. I will walk you through a body scan here, but note that it's difficult to do a body scan and read at the same time, so I invite you to read this section a couple of times to get a feel for it, then take yourself through the practice mentally or have someone read this section aloud to you. I also offer a free recording of this body scan on my website: [www.yaoconsulting.com/whole leadership corner/resources](http://www.yaoconsulting.com/whole_leadership_corner/resources)

## Body Scan

*Note:* The body scan can take as little or as much time as you desire. I like to do a daily scan that takes about five minutes, and then other days I spend twenty to thirty minutes diving deeply into the experience. During any part of this scan, you may experience emotions or thoughts arising, and that's perfectly normal. Your job is simply to notice them, not to assess or make judgments about your experience. Your anchor (always) is your breath, so whenever a sensation or experience begins to feel overwhelming or too difficult, bring your attention back to your breath. Also, the body scan process is mostly about practicing being present in the moment, so try not to worry about "getting it right." If you're noticing more than you were before you did the body scan, you're on the right track.

Find a comfortable place to sit with your feet on the ground and your spine supported and upright. Close your eyes or turn your gaze down toward the ground. Bring your attention to the sensation of your breath. Notice how far your breath goes into your belly, or if you mostly feel your breath in your chest, notice that. Don't make a judgment about how deep your breath goes; again, this experience is about noticing and observing your experience in this moment. Take three more natural breaths, paying attention to the quality and depth of the breath in your chest and belly.

Bring your attention to your head and notice if there is any tension. Focus behind your eyes, then the back of your head, and then your jaw. What sensations do you feel? Bring your attention to any spot where you feel tension, and take a couple of conscious breaths. When you are ready, bring your attention to your neck. Move your head side to side to help you notice the sensation. When you feel any pain or tightness, don't judge it or try to make it go away. Simply bring your attention and deepened breath to that spot. It may shift, or it may not. Either way is okay.

Bring your attention to your shoulders. Tune into the position of your shoulders. Are they tense or shrugged? See if you can relax them and bring them away from your ears. Take two deep breaths while paying attention to the sensation of your shoulders. When you're ready, move to your chest and specifically to your heart. Pay attention to how your heartbeat feels. Is there tightness in your chest? If so, again, no need to judge it. Simply bring your breath to your chest and heart. Notice if the sensation changes when you simply bring your awareness to the tension.

Now bring your attention to your solar plexus (the area right below your chest and above your lower abdomen) and abdomen. Take another deep breath and see if you can bring your breath a bit more deeply into this area of your body. Take another nice, slow breath as you bring your attention here, and remember that your job is simply to notice what you are experiencing.

Bring your attention to your tailbone and hips. Move your hips and the base of your spine from side to side to help you tune into the sensation of this area of your body. Bring your attention to your sits bones. When seated, is the weight of your body evenly distributed between the right and left sides? What sensation do you experience when you bring your attention to this area of your body? Take another deep breath.

Then bring your attention to your legs and feet. Can you feel all the way down to your feet? Tune into the solidness of the ground under your feet. Take a breath and simply notice any sensation that is presenting itself now.

Bring your attention to any other part of your body that is requiring your attention now. Spend as long as you'd like paying attention to the sensation. When you feel complete, take three slow and conscious breaths. Wiggle your fingers and toes to help bring you back to the present moment, and when you are ready, open your eyes.

Our physical bodies are chock-full of information about how we are doing, our stress level and even how we feel emotionally about any given situation. Our culture is not taught to tune into our bodies for information, but the more you practice tuning into body sensation, the more you will likely learn about yourself and your experience of the present moment.

## **Awareness of Thoughts**

One of the most common experiences people have when they start practicing present-moment awareness is that they become acutely aware of just how much mind chatter is occurring in their heads. In fact, many people don't enjoy the experience of tuning into the present moment (at first), because when they do, they realize how much their mind is spinning, thinking, analyzing—all the time.

One of my friends and I were discussing meditation, and she said she didn't like it because she wasn't "good" at it. When I asked what she meant, she said, "Every time I sit down to meditate, I can't get my mind to settle down, so I just end up getting more stressed out because of all the things my mind is thinking about." One of the biggest misunderstandings I see with people starting to experiment with meditation or tuning into the present moment is that they think they should have a clear and quiet mind. The reality of tuning into the present moment is that it's likely your mind will be anything but quiet—and that is perfectly okay. I speak in detail about noticing the content of the mind in the "Interlude" section, but for now, know that quieting your mind is *not* the goal in acknowledging present-moment awareness.

The purpose of tuning into the present moment is simply to tune into what's going on in your mind, not to try to change it. When my friend asked me, "What do I do when my mind is so busy? How do I get it to calm down?" I said, "Nothing." There's nothing to do except notice. That's the brilliance of presence. About a year later, she

told me that my simple answer—to do nothing—had been incredibly freeing for her. She no longer felt like she was meditating “the wrong way” when she had a busy mind. She also explained that she had noticed her experience of tuning into the present moment was different each time she did it, and that sometimes it was peaceful, sometimes her mind was really active, and sometimes she just felt the sensations in her body. Of course, her experiences were different each time, because the moment she was in was different.

It’s important to keep in mind that if you are not familiar with tuning into presence, you might feel as if you are at the mercy of your spinning mind, and I know personally that is not a fun experience. You don’t have to get on the merry-go-round of your mind; in fact, the more you realize your spinning mind just comes with the territory of our stressful twenty-first-century lives, the more you might feel empowered to relate to it differently.

When my clients become more aware of their daily thoughts, they are usually overwhelmed and annoyed by the incessant chatter. Have you ever truly paid attention to what your mind is saying at any given point in the day? If we had to sit next to a person who said out loud all the things our minds say to us during a thirty-minute period, we might think we were sitting next to someone insane! Mind chatter itself has qualities of insanity, as the thoughts are often random, judgmental, disjointed, repetitive, unhelpful, and not rooted in present-moment reality.

Our minds are conditioned to comment on, judge, assess, and evaluate all of our experiences, so mind chatter is something we can’t do away with, but when we know mind chatter is part of the experience of life, we can bring some perspective to it. Unfortunately, when we’re operating on autopilot, it’s easy to identify with myriad thoughts and get taken on a mental or emotional ride. When we’re on autopilot, we don’t stop to observe or question our thoughts and we get caught in the thought, versus simply being aware of it.

When we have looping thoughts, and when we think the same thoughts over and over again, those thoughts become habitual. When your mind is looping, you are strengthening the neuropathway for the thoughts. The more you do that, the more it reinforces the same thoughts, again and again, until they become so ingrained that they happen “automatically.”

Joe Dispenza, author of *You Are the Placebo*, says that “we have anywhere from sixty thousand to seventy thousand thoughts in one day, and 90 percent of those thoughts are exactly the same ones we had the day before.”<sup>6</sup> The only way we can shift our thinking, emotional responses, and behaviors is to bring consciousness to them. The only way to bring consciousness to our habitual thinking is to practice present-moment awareness so we have some space to start questioning the validity and helpfulness of our thoughts.

When my clients are practicing becoming more conscious of their thoughts, I ask them to keep track of their most repetitive thoughts for one week. This exercise is what I call a “twofer,” not only because they learn more about their unconscious thoughts but also because the exercise sets up present-moment awareness, as it’s not possible to do this exercise without being present. Logistically, I ask my clients to get a notebook and reflect on as many thoughts as they can for that day. After a few days, they start to see a pattern in their thoughts. At that point, they are to identify the three to five most prevalent thoughts that arise for them. For example, one client wrote down these four predominant thoughts:

- I don’t have enough time to complete my work.
- I’m behind.
- My boss is going to scrutinize this.
- I’m not good at this.

These thoughts were all driving her to work longer hours than she wanted to. When we met to discuss her list, I asked her not to assume these thoughts were accurate and instead to inquire about the validity and impacts of these thoughts from an objective perspective. I first learned about this process of examining thoughts from a friend and colleague who had attended a weekend event with author and coach Byron Katie. With a slight adaptation from Byron's process, I guided my client to use this inquiry with each of her thoughts. I suggested she ask herself:

1. Is this thought true?
2. Is this thought helpful?
3. Is this thought necessary?

She was surprised to discover not only how often she had these thoughts, but also how unhelpful they really were once we asked these questions. She had the hardest time with her thought of feeling behind. She told me that it felt absolutely true that she was behind on her project and it was difficult to move past that. When I asked her if the thought was helpful and necessary, she could easily have answered no. When I asked her to inquire about how the thought of "being behind" impacted her, she told me it paralyzed her. Once she felt behind, her mind started thinking about all the things that would happen if she didn't get her project done, and then her stress level spiked, resulting in her not eating well and staying up late, spinning her wheels, which only put her further behind on her project.

When we identify and believe the thoughts we're having, or, worse yet, don't have awareness of our thoughts, we will forever be at the mercy of our busy (and sometimes insane) minds. The only way off the runaway thought train is through present-moment awareness.

## Awareness of Emotions

Through the process of the body scan, or really any process of tuning into the present moment, we open ourselves to deeper levels of awareness. When I take groups through the body scan process, a few participants inevitably stumble upon emotions they weren't consciously aware of stored within their bodies. When I asked one particular corporate group to share their experiences after the body scan, one woman raised her hand and said, "I was perfectly fine before I did the body scan, and now I feel like crap." I inquired a bit further, and she explained that she felt a pain in her shoulder that "wasn't there before" and that she'd come out of the experience feeling sad and tired.

I listened with curiosity and compassion because she was clearly agitated and frustrated, but I also reminded the woman that we didn't "do" anything except turn our attention inward. It's not as if the five minutes of deepening awareness "created" her pain in her shoulder, her exhaustion, or her sadness. Those were there the whole time; she had been operating on autopilot and didn't have awareness of what was going on for her internally. I also reminded her that the only thing that happened was that she became *aware* of her experience. The great news, I told her, was that she was now aware of what she was working with. She now had information that she was tired, sad, and in pain. Autopilot was giving her a false sense that everything was okay, but the truth was that everything was not okay for this woman. Because she tuned into the present moment, she now had a fighting chance to make choices to address her physical and emotional pain.

Everyone experiences varying levels of pain, trauma, disappointment, betrayal, grief, and a host of other painful emotions throughout their life. As a collective culture, we are not well trained on how to express and metabolize those painful emotions in healthy ways. What we are wired and conditioned to do is ignore, stuff, deny, reject, and despise uncomfortable emotions. When we

do this, however, it's not as if those emotions suddenly "go away" (as much as we might think or hope they do). Rather, those unprocessed emotions get stuck and stored in our physical bodies.

Each emotion possesses a certain kind of energy or frequency. I like to think about emotions as "energy in motion." When we don't deny or avoid our emotions, they move, are metabolized, and clear out of our system organically. When my clients come upon uncomfortable emotions in our sessions, I guide them not to judge or evaluate the experience of the emotion, but rather first to breathe and simply be with the experience of the emotion. An emotion, even an old, painful one that's been stuck for some time, can clear quickly if you stay very present to the experience of the emotion arising. I discuss working with emotions in Chapter 5, but, depending on the intensity of the emotion, you may want to find additional support in guiding you through processing your emotional experience.

I'm the mother of two school-age boys, and I work diligently to help them tune into their bodies and emotions so they can process them and get them out of their systems. For years, as a family, we have talked about the concept of feelings "getting stuck" in our bodies and how much better we feel when we let them out. When my oldest son was eleven, he was having a rough time in school. For a couple of weeks he was mopey and quick to react emotionally, and it was tough to connect with him. His moodiness wasn't the standard preteen angst, either; I sensed it was something different.

I trusted that an opportunity to address it with him would present itself, and it did. I came upstairs during a weekend day when we didn't have much going on. I was puttering in the linen closet outside his room and caught a glimpse of him facedown on his bed. I asked if I could come in, and I sat down, saying nothing. After a few minutes of just being with him, I said, "Honey, I get the feeling that something isn't quite right for you. You seem sad." He shrugged

his shoulders and didn't say anything. I asked him if he would be willing to tune into his body. He agreed, and, since this wasn't a new conversation, he was familiar with what I was asking and also with what he normally feels like. I asked if he noticed anything in his body, and he pointed to his chest and said, "It's in here."

I put my hand on his chest and encouraged him to breathe into the tightness there. I breathed with him. Then I asked, "What do you need, honey?"

With much clarity, he said, "I need to cry."

I said, "Well, go for it. Let's get this out of your body."

He cried hard for about two minutes, although it felt like a lot longer because it was so intense. After the initial wave subsided, I asked him to tune back into his chest and asked again what he needed. He said, "I need to cry again."

The second wave was even more intense than the first, and all I could do was support him by breathing and being a loving presence as the emotion was clearing his system. After the second wave passed, we sat quietly for a while, and then I asked him again what he needed. He told me he wanted to be alone for a bit, and I gave him a kiss on the head and left the room. After about thirty minutes, he came downstairs and looked visibly lighter. As the day progressed, he was naturally more conversational and started playing with his brother, and I heard him laugh for the first time in a couple of weeks.

The beauty of doing this work with children is that they usually don't have much of an interest in or need to create a mental story about the stuck emotion, or a desire to figure out what is happening on an intellectual level. My son had enough experiences of tuning into his body and releasing emotion that this experience was no different than any other time he had done it. My son and I sometimes talk about this experience of his letting go of emotion, and now he practices a body scan on his own when he's feeling stressed or

down. We can all get important information from our bodies and help clear stuck emotion if we tune into presence and the intelligence of our bodies.

Present-moment awareness is the antidote to being on autopilot. As long as we're on autopilot, we will not be able to see our experiences with clarity. When we don't see our experiences with clarity, we are unable to make empowered choices about how to shift our physical, mental, or emotional experience. Although you may not like what you see as you initially become more present, you will at least be informed about the reality you are in. In my experience, present-moment awareness and the clarity that comes from it is the single best place you can start to truly transform your experience of life.

## About the Author



Photo by Ingrid Papa-Sheldo

SARA HARVEY YAO is a leadership consultant and coach who specializes in helping people lead from a state of presence by accessing the wisdom of their head, heart, and gut. She has developed and trained thousands of leaders across the globe, and her work is favored by leaders at companies such as Microsoft, Smuckers, and Brooks Athletics. Whether working one-on-one, as a facilitator, or presenting in front of large audiences, she is committed to guiding people to their innate clarity and presence. Sara is also the author of *Get Present: Simple Strategies to Get Out of Your Head and Lead More Powerfully*.

Sara lives in Seattle, Washington, with her husband, Jesse, and their two boys, Ethan and Logan. She leads and inspires others through her own commitment to presence in every aspect of her full life. To learn more about Sara or her work, visit [www.yaoconsulting.com](http://www.yaoconsulting.com).

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