

Three Surprising Ways to Feel Less Busy by Christine Carter

Busyness stinks.

Although people tell me all the time they like feeling busy—perhaps because it makes them feel important and significant—I’m not buying it. Would you ever choose busyness over a more relaxed form of productivity? When life starts to feel hectic, here are a few ways to dial back the overwhelm.

1. Give yourself a shot of awe

When researchers induced feelings of awe in people—by showing them video clips of people next to vast things like whales or waterfalls—it altered their perception of time such that the people felt like they had more time on their hands. So much time on their hands, in fact, that awestruck people become likely to give away their time by volunteering to help someone out. They also report fewer feelings of impatience.

Not sure where to find yourself some awe? Look no farther than YouTube. Try searching “awe” and “whales,” or just watch this oldie but goodie video clip—it makes me feel awestruck every time. If the concept of “awe” feels too abstract, try thinking about things that amaze you. What makes you feel a childlike sense of wonder? Makes you feel elevated or inspired? Now take five minutes to let one of those things work their magic on your busy brain.

2. Create an anti-busyness ritual

Cartoonist Gemma Correll

Researchers believe that the brains in both humans and animals evolved to feel calmed by repetitive behavior, and that our daily rituals are a primary way to manage stress. This is especially true in unpredictable environments or situations where we feel pressured, a lack of control, or threatened in some way.

When the pace of life seems to be taking off without you, create a ritual to help you feel more in control. What counts as a ritual? Something you do repetitively in certain situations—usually a series of behaviors done in the same order. Think of your favorite ball player’s pregame ritual.

When I start to feel pressured for time, my own “busyness ritual” kicks in: I stretch my neck (first by looking to the left, and then to the right, and then by tipping my left ear to my left shoulder and my right ear to my right shoulder). I exhale deeply with each stretch, and then center my head, and straighten my posture. On my last exhale, I think to myself: “I have plenty of time.” The stretching and deep breathing may be what helps me feel

calm, but also having and using a ritual—any ritual—can help us feel more in control and less overwhelmed.

3. Find “flow”

Dropping into “the zone” or finding flow is the opposite of feeling busy. Time seems to stand still—if we are aware of time at all. Flow isn’t as elusive a state as you might think, but it does require that we stop multi-tasking, and that we build a fortress against interruption around ourselves. (I also have a “get into the flow” ritual that I use before I write).

I know, I know. You don’t have time to foster awe, or create an anti-busyness ritual, or stop multi-tasking. You’re too busy!

Listen: You don’t have time NOT to do these things. Busyness is a mark of what neuroscientists call “cognitive overload.” This state impairs our ability to think creatively, to plan, organize, innovate, solve problems, make decisions, resist temptations, learn new things easily, speak fluently, remember important social information, and control our emotions. In other words, it impairs basically everything we need to do in a given day. So if you have important work to do, please: Take five minutes to dial back your busyness.

If you liked this post, you’ll love this short and funny documentary, HumanKinda. The premise is that busyness robs us of our humanity, making us only “kinda” human.