

Our Everloving Quest to Control Our Lives by Leo Babuta

Almost our entire lives are spent in a quest to gain control, security and comfort in our lives. Unfortunately, we never really get it, so we keep trying, relentlessly.

This is the main activity of our lives.

What would happen if we stopped?

We could be less restricted by fear, less anxious, less driven by the need for comfort ... and more in love with life as it is.

You might be surprised by how much we strive for control.

The Ways We Try to Get Control

The basic nature of life is that it is everchanging, uncontrollable. When we think we have stability in life, something comes up to remind us that no, we don't. There is no stability, no matter how much we'd like it.

And this kinda freaks us out. We don't like this feeling of instability, of loss of control. So we do things to cope, out of love for ourselves. These are strategies for control, security and comfort.

Some examples among many:

We go on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Pinterest, because doing so is comfortable and feels like we know what we're doing (a feeling of certainty, of things under control).

We make a to-do list or even try out an entire productivity or organizational system, because it feels like we're getting things under control.

We clean, or declutter, or organize our desks.

We tackle email, because it's out of control, and getting it under control sounds much less anxiety-inducing.

We procrastinate on a project that fills us with uncertainty, and procrastinate with our favorite distractions, which have less uncertainty for us.

We get frustrated with other people, even angry, because they're acting in a way we don't like (we don't control that part of our lives, and it's difficult for us) ... so creating a story in our minds about how horrible they are and how right we are and how life would

be better if they just did X, helps us to feel under control.

We try to organize the apps on our phone, to avoid dealing with our feelings of difficulty.

We plan, plan, plan. On paper, in our minds. Everything feels under control when we plan.

We research, google things, so we feel we're gaining control over a topic.

We buy books to gain control over a topic.

We sign up for classes.

We make resolutions and goals and bucket lists.

We create systems.

We try to gain control over our health by creating a diet and workout plan.

Shopping feels comfortable.

Eating for comfort.

Drugs make us feel like we're controlling our state of mind, including alcohol.

There are thousands more examples. Examine everything you do with this lens: is this activity a strategy to somehow gain control?

Now, I'm not saying these strategies are bad. They help us cope with difficult feelings. Some of them result in a healthy life. They all come from a place of love.

But it is good to be aware of this need for control, and perhaps this awareness can even help us free ourselves.

Why These Attempts at Control Keep Failing

So we do everything above, all day long, when things are feeling uncertain, uncomfortable, out of control, unsafe. They are strategies for control, security, comfort.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work.

Let's say you make a to-do list and a plan to make yourself feel under control. Now you have to do the first thing on the list. But this makes you feel uncertain, because it's a difficult task and you don't know if you can do it. So you go to the easier things on the list ... but the difficult task is still there, just put off for a bit, and you feel bad about it.

Eventually you run to distractions, or check your email, so you don't have to do the task. Or you start cleaning up around your desk. You make some calls. The feeling is still there, though, in the back of your mind. None of the strategies work.

Or take another scenario: you're feeling lonely. You don't want to face this feeling, because it's uncomfortable and you don't feel under control. So you eat. Or you shop online. Or you watch TV, porn, Youtube. The feeling doesn't go away. So you do it again. Or you turn to alcohol or drugs.

Maybe you get everything under control — you're organized, have systems for everything, are spot-on with your productivity, have only healthy habits. Congratulations! You win! Except, things keep coming up that are ruining your perfect palace of control. You get anxiety until you deal with these things, and get control back. But when you were doing that, more things came up. People are calling, emailing, interrupting you, and you get irritated often because everything is getting messy. Your OCD is not resulting in a feeling of comfort and control, but just the opposite.

Finally, consider that you might feel things are stable, but then someone dies, you get injured or sick, a family crisis happens, your company goes into crisis mode, there's a crisis in your country. Things are never under control, so you feel anguish because you thought you had stability.

Luckily, we have another way.

The Mindful Way

If life is uncontrollable, and because we don't like the feeling of being out of control, we do all kinds of things to seek control ... but it doesn't work ... what alternative is there?

We can practice mindfulness, and learn to accept the uncontrollable nature of each moment.

Start by just sitting still, and try to pay attention to the sensations of this moment, around you and in your body and even in your mind. Just notice what's going on.

Then notice that your mind wants to run, to planning or worrying or getting a grasp on things. We run from this unknown, uncontrollable moment to a strategy of control.

Notice this urge to run, to control ... and don't act. Do nothing. Just observe, taking no action.

Notice how this feeling of being out of control feels. Where is this feeling located in your body? What is the sensation of it in your body? Is it one thing, or changing? Investigate with curiosity.

Be still with this sensation in your body. Practice with this a little at a time, for days, for weeks. You'll start to get to know it intimately.

And then it won't be so bad. You'll learn to sit with this feeling of out-of-controlledness, and be OK with it. You'll learn to trust in this moment, not to lead to an outcome you want (control!), but to turn out just fine.

You'll need to do fewer things to get under control, to get comfort. You'll still do some of them, because no one ever truly masters this (control!), but you'll need it less.

And then what? What's left when we don't try to control? Love. We still act, but not out of a need for control. We act out of love for others and ourselves.

This is the other way.