

How to Find BREATHING SPACE

in Today's Fast-Paced Society
interview with Jeff Davidson

Are you working ever harder, ever longer, but getting less done that's important? Join the club, says Chapel Hill, North Carolina, speaker and author Jeff Davidson who recently wrote *Breathing Space: Living and Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped-Up Society*: "Today everybody feels that way. We're all time-pressured. I decided to find an antidote."

First, however, Davidson pinpointed the causes: "We exist with an overabundance of people, choices, and information—no wonder we feel a loss of control over time. Yet, because modern technology enables us to gain new information faster, we have greater expectations about what we need to accomplish in our lives. We all seek to do more—but get less done." Is there a cure? Absolutely, says Davidson, and he calls it "breathing space—which we achieve when we've mastered the systems necessary for succeeding in today's sped-up world."

Q: Are you advocating that everyone take it easier?

Davidson: That isn't necessary to achieve breathing space. In my own life, for example, in the last four years I've written 18 books. I got married. We've given birth to a daughter. I've visited sixteen foreign countries. Why haven't I had a nervous breakdown? The answer is: I have personal systems for dealing with the world and creating breathing space. Without it, even if we're successful, we're unsatisfied. We're a "human-doing," not a human being. When I tell people about my systems, they get excited.

Q: Why doesn't time management work any more?

Davidson: You could read every time management book, follow their instructions to the letter, and you'd still be chasing the clock, you'd still feel harried. Time management once worked—when things moved more slowly. Today's world is very different. And we need a new set of perceptions for dealing with the world the way it is, not the way it used to be.

Q: Why is everybody time-pressured?

Davidson: Is it because we're all poor time managers? Of course not. Something else must be at work, and I set out to discover it. In looking for that cause, I discovered there are five "mega-realities." The first is world population. Today it's around 5.5 billion people. The world is not the same as it was when we were growing up: in 1930 there were only two billion people. And that mega-reality has impacts, such as the information explosion which is the second mega-reality.

You cannot read in the rest of your life what the world publishes in a single day. You'll say, "nobody wants to read it all." But information trickle-down is for real. That technological break-through in Japan will impact you. The upshot is that we cannot keep up—trying is folly. All we can do is make choices about where we put our attention.

That's harder still because of the third mega-reality—the expanding global reach of the media. If there's a train wreck in Thailand, we hear about it. But it's not your civic duty to keep up with these events. And it's harmful to try. You can

only stack so many bricks on a table before it collapses. Likewise, there's a point where we collapse under a torrent of information. I'm not saying ignore what you need to know. But you can safely ignore much of the "news." This leads to the fourth mega-reality, which is paper flow. In the United States, the typical person encounters 700 pounds of paper yearly. We are papering each other to death.

Q: What's the fifth mega-reality?

Davidson: Too many choices. Now, you think, isn't choice what democracy is all about? Absolutely—but too many choices effectively become no choice at all. Take a muscovite, plunk him into a suburban American supermarket, and he's gone from one choice of coffee to dozens. He won't know how to cope. But we're all suffering lower-grade versions of that anxiety.

Add up these mega-trends and, for most professionals, the bottom line is anxiety. There is too much to deal with. And the bad news is, tomorrow will be worse. There will be more people, more information, more choices.

Q: What's the solution?

Davidson: To succeed nowadays, we've got to start fine-tuning our choices. Here's a case in point: If you do one thing every day for thirty minutes, that equates to one year in the course of a working life. Yes, a half-hour seems harmless. But one year?

That tells us we've got to be more critical in investing our time. Assess ritual behavior, like watching television. If it gives you pleasure, keep doing it. But if you get no pleasure from watching the nightly news, skip it. Do something more pleasurable or immediately useful—because what's at stake isn't a harmless half-hour. It's a whole year of your life!

Q: What are the symptoms of a lack of breathing space?

Davidson: Are you experiencing any of the following: constantly shortchanging the most important tasks; attempting to do everything yourself; feeling closed

in, cramped for space; having piles stacked up; having too many interruptions to concentrate; or always being late? If you're experiencing these, you are clinging to old-world notions of attempting to stay on top of everything, and your sense of breathing space is bound to suffer.

Q: What's a specific tool for creating breathing space?

Davidson: Get—and stay—organized. Being organized is not a moral issue, not today. In the era of over-information, it's a survival issue. How do we get organized? A key technique is managing the beforehand. That's the flipside of managing the aftermath which is far more typical approach. When we manage the aftermath, our file cabinets are jammed to overflowing, our desks are piled high.

When we can manage the beforehand, we clear away space—keep at least 20 percent of it vacant. That means file cabinets, desk drawers, even the car's glove compartment. Why? We know more information is coming. The crucial principle in managing the beforehand is to condition our work environments to handle what's coming. It involves clearing out the old and unsupportive and making room for where you are headed, the new and supportive. It requires anticipation and vision. Why invest the effort? It enables you to maintain control. You are better able to focus on what you choose, rather than be inundated by what confronts you.

Q: What's an instance of managing the beforehand?

Davidson: Have you conditioned your work area to support what you do? For example, many of us do most of our work at a desk but, in the majority of cases, the desk doesn't assist our efforts. It may even work against us, by being too messy, too jammed, in the wrong place, and so on. Do you have the tools you need—be they computers or pens or whatever? If not, why not? Most are inexpensive and easily purchased.

Why don't we have what we need to be more efficient? Usually it's because we haven't thought about it ahead of time. But the area where you work, be it a desk or a sales counter or a worktable, is the focal point of most work lives. Whatever it is, exactly the same principles apply; make the physical environment support what you're doing.

Q: How can we manage the mountains of information to which we're now exposed?

Davidson: Odds are, you daily face one hour or more of job-related reading. That's the norm. It's a lot and it's growing. Do the job quicker by conditioning the reading environment. Read at a table or desk and have at hand scissors and file folders. Whenever you come across information of importance, cut it out and file it. Right then. Then, too practice skimming, reading the first sentence of each paragraph, and scanning—looking through the entire body of material to see which parts are important to you.

Q: It can be a vicious circle, though, with all the files building up and soon nothing can be located. What's the strategy for that?

Davidson: Creative trashing. Make a routine of going through every piece of paper, document, book, what have you and tossing any that do not immediately support your priorities. Excess baggage is hazardous to your breathing space. Clut-

ter is endemic to the twentieth century, but we can break free.

Q: Aren't we fearful we'll throw away something that tomorrow could make or break us?

Davidson: That's common—but not usually realistic. The antidote for those second thoughts about tossing things is to view the items on five separate days. If the item is of value, then you intuitively feel this. After five reviews, if it still passes muster, feel free to retain it.

Q: Beyond getting organized, what's a proven survival tactic for today's world?

Davidson: Reward yourself with the winning minute. You say that you don't have time to relax, that every part of your day is taken? Linger an extra minute at lunch, in the powder room, and at your desk at the start and close of each day. This allows you to have transitions between activities and decreases your feelings of being rushed.

Magnify these good feelings by taking the minute, or a part of it, to briefly recall a pleasant experience or a time when you felt particularly relaxed. It seems like a small thing to do, but this technique can instantly bring on a powerful feeling of relaxation.

Q: Does more information lead to more procrastination?

Davidson: Absolutely, and today we all procrastinate much more than we care to admit. Some days you can't make yourself get started on the task at hand. What's a remedy? Practice "creative procrastination"—shift focus to another important task and get it done. Or practice "the three to five method"—ask yourself what are three to five things you could do right then to make headway.

Lastly, in especially tough cases, there's facing the procrastination head-on. When you still can't begin, ask yourself what's blocking you, what is the real reason you don't want to get started. This exercise may dislodge something and help you begin.

Q: What one tactic for making breathing space would you say is the crucial one?

Davidson: Completions. These are moments of silent self-acknowledgment for having finished something, concluded a task. Completions are a mental partition which energize us for what's next. The greatest completion is the realization that your whole life up to this moment can be seen as a completion: all the things that went well, and the ones that didn't go so well. Completions can be achieved on multi-year projects, or activities that last only a few seconds.

Large or small, however, completions provide a mental and emotional break. They make you feel good. And they are energizing because they offer a clean end to tasks, activities, even thoughts, and a good beginning for what's next. If you walk away from reading this with just one idea, make it this one. Completions are central to a productive, satisfied life.

To contact Jeff Davidson,
2417 Honeysuckle Road
Chapel Hill, NC 27514
or call 1-800-735-1994.