

Practising undoing: three ways to free up time and headspace

Constant 'doing' comes at a price, and we become enslaved by our doings. They rule our business and home lives as if we have stepped onto a doing travelator with no end. There is pressure to do, deliver and – of course – delete from the to-do list.

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When life starts to slide away from us, it's no surprise we say we've been 'overdoing it'. So, let me introduce the concept of 'undoing'.

Undoing requires you to flick a mental switch into 'anti-achievement' mode. Trust me, it's incredibly freeing – it allows you headspace and gives you back some of your precious time. What you do with that new-found freedom is your business.

Undo tension

In 'doing' mode, you put your mind and body under pressure to perform. Driven to reach your goals, you push yourself into low (or even high) levels of stress. When you are stressed, your accessory breathing muscles – shoulders, neck and chest – become overused, creating tension in these areas. Pressure can lead to the clenching of stomach muscles, and this stops you from accessing calming belly breathing.

Here are three ways to undo tension:

1. Lie in semi-supine position to allow for free belly breaths. You should be on your back, knees drawn up and feet flat on the floor. Once you

are in this position, it requires no muscular effort to stay there. Your belly will feel soft, the perfect state for practising two to ten minutes of deep belly breathing. This undoes tension and calms your nervous system.

2. Step off the doing travelator and into nature. Walk or sit in nature (or sit with a view of nature). Research has proven the calming effect of nature on the human body. Engage your five senses and let yourself be absorbed into this nourishing environment.
3. Use your exhale to release. Consciously prolonging your exhales allows you to release any emotional tension that has built up. Use this exercise to free your mind from the constraints of the day, and let it find a sense of ease.

Undo thinking loops

Thoughts think themselves. You cannot clear your mind of thoughts, and nor should you try. However, allowing your mind to be hijacked by negative thoughts can be harmful and self-destructive. The problem is that your primitive brain cannot tell the difference between fear and anxiety, and anxious thoughts lead to a triggering of the body's stress response.

Here are three things you can try to undo thinking loops:

1. Use your body to lead your brain out of your thought tangles. This is called a bottom-up approach and involves focussing your attention on your breath so that you can reconnect with your body. Feel your body breathe and notice tension dropping out of your shoulders and neck as you relax.
2. Make an appointment to let your thoughts loop the loop later on. If when I come back later, I'm still looking for a solution, I take a piece of paper and a pen and brainstorm what's making me anxious. I add script and squiggles until I see a solution or part solution appear. This

helps to free the mind from any mental hijack, and it puts you back in charge with options to consider. Sometimes, just giving yourself a bit of space to mull something over is all that you need.

3. Tune into your other senses as a way of bringing yourself out of your mind. For instance, giving your hands something to do helps to undo thought loops as you engage your brain in practical thoughts instead. Cook, garden, knit – do something tactile with your hands and enjoy the grounding of the physical activity.

Undo override

Your body, programmed to maintain the stable conditions necessary for survival, is constantly sending you signals. Eat. Drink. Rest. Sleep. Procreate. And so on! Listening to these positive and negative feedback signals and balances is the purest form of self-care. If you start ignoring them, or override the signals, you put yourself in peril. By tuning back into your body's needs, you can manage the conflicting stresses and motivations of your (work) life with more energy, level-headedness and reflection.

Here are three ideas to help you undo override:

1. Tune into and act on your body's need for rest. It's easy to push the tiredness override button in order to squeeze in one or two more doings. But quality sleep and relaxation are essential for optimum performance and concentration. The more tired you are, the less capacity you'll have to make sensible decisions. Now, get some rest!
2. Recognise you need time to charge your batteries. With so many work and home demands on your time and energy, when do your needs get to the top of the list? You will find that it is counterproductive to reject the urge to take the time you need to build your resources – whether that is for sport, a creative pursuit, nature, social time – in order to cross another doing off your list.

3. Respond to your need to connect to others. We are social creatures; sometimes our role is to protect the people in our community and sometimes we need their support. Both roles help us build empathy, trust and ultimately resilience. If you feel you need outside support, you do! Make sure you resist overriding that basic need.

When you catch yourself overdoing it, think “What can I undo?” The three areas we’ve explored may not be the three that need your attention - apart from maybe undoing tension. What other areas could do with your undoing: habits, multitasking, numbing, overthinking?

Bridget Rooth runs training programmes for stressed entrepreneurs and executives on how to manage and mitigate stress so they can thrive. An entrepreneur, trainer, language buff and lifetime adventurer who has worked all over the world, Bridget is now based on the west coast of Norfolk where she runs her wellness company MindSteadyGo.

Article by Bridget Rooth