

Maine-based psychologist AMY WOOD, Psy.D., created Law and the Good Life, a research-based attorney wellness coaching and training system designed to address the challenges of lawyering. She frequently offers CLE opportunities through the MSBA. To learn about upcoming events, visit www.mainebar.org. For more information about Dr. Wood, go to www.amywoodpsyd.com.



Living in the Moment: A Realistic Approach for Your Life

I need to start living in the moment.

If I had a dime for every time I've heard a wiped out, over-extended attorney client say that to me, I'd be the wealthiest psychologist this side of the Mississippi.

This concept of living in the moment is a mirage, a panacea, and an intangible goal that many attorneys – and adults in general – long to achieve as the ultimate remedy to stress. Self-assured celebrities, cocky self-help book authors, high-priced life coaches, and enigmatic podcasters and bloggers claim to be happy with their lives because they have accomplished this coveted goal. They tell us that we can join them in their in-the-moment bliss if we just “be here now” and “breeeeeeeeeeeeeeeathe.” And so we struggle to conquer this great feat of stopping time – despite our jam-packed schedules – to soak up the moment. We end up feeling increasingly inept because we can't get it right, and ever more guilty and deprived because moments continue to fly by despite our best intentions to pin them down.

When my attorney clients tell me they need to start living in the moment to reduce their stress, I ask them what living in the moment really means. Most of them have trouble answering the question because they haven't really ever thought about it. They just know they need to do it because they've been inundated with the media message that “living in the moment” is the answer to their problems. After a little reflection, they typically respond with something like, “Living in the moment means being able to block out my negative thoughts and appreciate what's going on right now”; “It means being totally present where I am and feeling the joy, beauty, and possibility in and around me”; or, “It means slowing down my mind and becoming fully engaged with where I am, what I'm doing, and who I'm with.”

What I say to attorneys in response to their “living in the moment” definitions is that they are setting impossible standards for themselves that are most likely exacerbating the stress they're already experiencing. Is it really feasible, I ask them, to “live in the moment” in the ways they are describing, in an exceptionally demanding profession, in a culture where we are perpetually distracted, interrupted, and jostled; where we are constantly pushed and persuaded to leave the moment we're in to pursue new and improved products, personal growth ventures, and other greener grass; where we are told that if we don't embrace change and move forward, we run the risk of being left behind? I ask my clients to consider that even people who have devoted their entire lives to “living in the moment” – cloistered inhabitants of monasteries and seminaries – work hard to quiet their minds enough to bask in the rapture of time standing still. Isn't it ludicrous to presume, I ask, that if the most spiritually advanced people on earth deem “living in the moment” an ambitious dream, that we time-pressed, attention-challenged amateurs can do it? I advise attorneys that aspiring to live in the moment will very likely bring them the peace of mind they long for, but only if they come up with a “live in the moment” concept that makes sense for the times we live in.

Take Your Intellect Out of It

The first step to transforming “living in the moment” from an unreasonable, stress-inducing standard to a productive, attainable goal is to take your intellect out of it. Time is not something we can literally grab onto and manipulate, so a deliberate decision to live in the moment by thinking certain thoughts – for instance, “I will be present” or “I am completely immersed where I am right now” – will only exacerbate the sensation of time passing. The harder you try to embrace the moment you're in, the more detached you will

Aspiring to live in the moment means making room in your life for your emotions to be heard and reckoned with, no matter how unappealing, frightening, or inconvenient those emotions may be.

feel, and the more elusive that moment will become. The best approach is to simply start by throwing your hands up, giving in to time, and saying to yourself, “I can’t stop time and I can’t control time and that’s okay.” Once you give up trying to hold time hostage, once you stop trying to grab onto it, you will actually experience the sensation of time opening up a little bit and giving you more room to move and breathe.

Navigate with Your Senses

The next step to realistically living in the moment is to approach the task from a sensory rather than an intellectual perspective. Instead of willing yourself to enjoy each moment of your life, which is a ridiculously tall order considering that many moments of life are just plain dull and not worth savoring, strive instead to navigate some moments of your life with your senses whenever you think of it. Make it a habit to stop and notice, at various points throughout your day, what you are seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling. Absorb information through all of your senses. Go beyond the words on your computer screen, the familiar face across the table, or whatever else is right in front of you and drink in the nuances. Feeling the air on your skin, noticing the color of your friend’s shirt, taking in the aroma of dinner cooking, discerning one instrument from another in a song on the radio, and savoring the flavor of the coffee you’re drinking deepens the experience of various moments so that you appreciate them more and remember them better.

Understand That “Living in the Moment” Isn’t Always Ideal

Another way to pragmatically live in the moment is to accept that “living in the moment” is not always an agreeable experience. Media messages suggest that living in the moment is all about pushing away off-putting noise and negativity and being one with stabilizing, centering joy and tranquility. While it’s certainly true that slowing down and being more present is a way to enjoy the ease of cheer, delight, and other pleasurable emotions, it is more true that uncomfortable feelings like anxiety and grief are apt to arise when you slow down and let emotions float up – especially if slowing down is something new and pent up emotions are waiting to greet you.

Meet Your Emotions in the Present

Aspiring to live in the moment means making room in your life for your emotions to be heard and reckoned with, no matter how unappealing, frightening, or inconvenient those emotions may be. The more you organize your life around the emotional experiences that are integral to real adult growth – taking sufficient time away from work either to celebrate the birth of a new family member or to mourn the death of a loved one, for example – the more you will feel that you have really been there for the important events of your life. Meeting your emotions in the present, rather than putting them on hold to be dealt with later or maybe never, frees up the energy and focus needed to be as present as possible amid everyday distractions.



Minimize Disruptions

Another aspect to rationally living in the moment is taking control where you can by reducing the interruptions that splinter the moments of your day. Time appears to go by more quickly when it is intruded upon, so you can create the experience of time slowing down and the moment lingering simply by minimizing as best you can the disruptions in your life. Turning your phone on only at specific times to check and return voicemails is one way to do this. Regularly scheduling opportunities for your mind to wander in solitude – walking in nature or driving without the radio – is another way. The more you expose yourself to periods where you don't have to be on the alert for incoming beeps, rings, and other invasive signals for your attention, the more you will experience the moments of your life as expansive and meaningful.

Resist the Impulse to Acquire More Than you Need

One more important element of living reasonably in the moment is living within your means. What takes us out of the moment we're in is regret about the past and worry about the future, emotional states we can avoid by managing money prudently and making the most of available resources. Resisting the impulse to acquire more than you need or can afford and taking the time to manage your money prudently will lead you to an increasingly calm and confident state of mind. And spending your money cautiously, buying only what you truly want and desire deep down only when you have the

disposable cash will help you to slow your rate of consumption and ground yourself more fully (and appreciatively) with what you already have.

View “the Moment” as a Stage or Chapter in Your Life

A final key to living rationally in the moment is taking the concept figuratively. Seeking to live in the moment literally by being present in each and every second only creates an unnecessary sense of urgency. A more achievable goal is to view “the moment” more generally as a stage or chapter of your life. If you succeed at applying the reasonable in-the-moment strategies I've outlined here most of the time – not the impossible all of the time – you will be able to look back at this part of your life knowing that you did the best you could to embrace the overall episode you were in. What the appeal of living in the moment comes down to, after all, is our desire to be able to look back and conclude that we participated as fully as possible in life. What that means for an overwhelmed attorney is reaching the end of your life and saying, “Considering how fast work and life were moving, and how much pressure there was to do it all, have it all, and be it all, I did a pretty good job of being present for the important things.”