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Stop Ghosting Yourself: The High Cost of Mental Time Travel

Momentum Objectives:

- Recognize the dangers of fixating on your past and future.
- Reframe past experiences for a more balanced narrative.
- Battle the illusion of control with deliberate, intentional action.
- Understand the real cost of absence and the importance of being present.

YOUR MIND IS a mental time machine, allowing you to travel between different eras of your life. One moment, you are reliving a past mistake, replaying a painful memory, or wallowing over a missed opportunity. The next, you are projecting yourself into an imagined future, a land of make-believe, consumed with anxiety about potential failures and worrying about all the uncertainty that comes with the unknown. It is ... exhausting. In fact, the constant mental time travel is creating a burden so significant that it is stopping you from engaging in your life and, more important, from accessing the power within the present moment.

“Check out the big brain on Brad!” The infamous line from the cult classic film *Pulp Fiction* is a fun reminder that the human brain is indeed remarkable, and in the words of Samuel L. Jackson, we all have the capability to be “smart motherf*ckers.” In fact, the brain’s creativity and imagination mixed with the ability to project thoughts, feelings, and behaviors onto someone else isn’t just impressive; it’s potentially dangerous. The brain can trap you in a perpetual cycle of time travel that never lets you experience the present moment. You get pulled into the past, haunted by regrets and the dreaded “what ifs,” while simultaneously being pushed into the future so you can worry about what hasn’t happened yet.

Hear me say this: you are not Marty McFly. (That is a reference to the movie *Back to the Future*. ... I got you, Gen Z.) You are *not* a time traveler.

Loosening the Grip of the Past

Your past, with its Amazon-style warehouse of memories, can be tricky to navigate. It shapes who you think you are, influences your decisions, and provides a sense of how you got to where you are now. While some of these memories are bursting with joy and offer comfort when you need them, others become shackles that bind you to the scabbed-over wounds of the past. These truly painful memories can play on repeat, over and over, becoming energy vampires and preventing you from embracing the moment right in front of you. You become so hyperfocused on what *was* that you miss out on the potential of what *is*.

Did you know the human mind has a peculiar tendency to fixate on the negative? It’s not just you. It’s all of us. Our brains want to dig into the dirty details of past mistakes and shame us for what we should have done differently. This process of reflection, on the surface, appears to be driven by a desire for understanding or even self-improvement. However, it often becomes

a self-destructive cycle that traps you in an endless loop of negative self-talk, crushing your self-esteem and ushering in a sense of overall ... well ... “sh*ttness.” Wait, was I supposed to spell that with a “y”? I could never get that right. You get the point.

This fixation on the past can manifest itself in a variety of ways. You might hold on to grudges a little longer or relive past hurts so tightly that they poison your current relationships. You might constantly compare your present situation to a false, romanticized version of your past, convincing yourself that life was simpler and you were happier. You might relive the “glory days” of your youth so often that you don’t engage in the reality of your current life. You may even sabotage your own success by telling yourself that you are not smart enough, your best days are behind you, or you are not worthy of happiness.

The emotional toll of continuously looking over your shoulder can give you more than a stiff neck. It can suck the life out of you, making you feel exhausted and constantly depressed. It can trigger your anxiety and distort your view of the present moment so much that you miss the opportunity to experience true joy. And then come the physical problems: headaches, stomach issues, sexual dysfunction, lack of sleep, aches and pains, and to top it off, no motivation to want to deal with any of it. Sound familiar?

The truth is you become emotionally unavailable to pretty much everyone. You disconnect, banishing yourself to a private emotional island to play a sad solo version of *Survivor*. You miss the opportunities to create new memories because you have decided to put on your producer hat and splice together a TikTok-worthy reel of the worst moments of your life just so you can watch it on repeat.

Loosening the grip of the past requires deliberate intention. You need to recognize the patterns of negativity and rewrite the stories you tell yourself about your past experiences. However, it isn’t

always a pattern of negativity; sometimes it's an "illusion of negativity" that twists your memories and makes it hard to remember the "happy" stuff but easy to recall an embarrassing moment with vivid detail. The mere aura of negativity has the ability to consume your memory and distort your perspective. Whether a pattern or illusion, it requires amping up your ability for self-compassion and forgiving yourself for prior mistakes. It requires letting go. It's time to accept the fact that you can't change the past and you need to hand over the keys to your time machine.

Take a Moment

That's Not How I Remember It...

Let's reframe a past experience to reduce its emotional grip. Write down a painful or regretful memory that often invades your thoughts. What are the lessons learned from this experience, and how has it contributed to your growth? How does this new narrative make you feel about the memory?

It's important to point out that the process of letting go isn't about forgetting or denying the past. It's about reframing your experiences, both good and bad, into a more balanced narrative of your life. You can honor your past without being defined, fooled, manipulated, or controlled by it.

Reframing My Own Past

I know this intimately. In 2012 my eldest son, Theo, was diagnosed with a rare blood cancer called myelodysplastic syndrome that required a bone marrow transplant to survive. On August 12, 2012, Theo received his transplant and began a 263-day nightmare in the Kids Beating Cancer Pediatric Transplant Center at Florida Hospital in Orlando.

While the transplant was successful, Theo developed a horrendous case of graft-versus-host disease, or GVHD, which happens when the donated bone marrow doesn't recognize the transplant environment and begins to attack the body. The only treatment when this happens is to suppress the immune system and hope for the best. If you reach level 4 of GVHD, it's fatal. Theo had reached that level and was seemingly going for a world record. Unfortunately, this treatment places the body at extreme risk of infection. As fate would have it, he contracted a deadly fungus called mucormycosis. The proper treatment for this infection is to radically boost the immune system so the body can attack the fungus. Two necessary treatments with opposite tactics created a zero-sum game. On March 23, 2013, the team of doctors called me into a room and explained that no matter which issue they treated, the other would take Theo's life. They recommended that I call who I needed to and go back to my son's hospital room and say my goodbyes.

I was living my real-life nightmare, and I couldn't wake myself up from it. I walked back to the room desperately trying to think about what to say and how to explain this to Theo's younger brother, Brady. As I sat on the edge of Theo's bed, I gave away every ounce of hope I had based on the recommendation of a room full of doctors. I didn't want to. I knew they didn't have the kind of power to determine who lives and dies. But I did it anyway. And instead of fighting for a miracle, I made the worst decision I have ever made. Against my better judgement, I said goodbye.

Hearing your child quietly whisper "I'm going to miss you, Daddy" is something you don't get over. Ever.

But meanwhile, something miraculous was happening. When I called my younger brother, Todd, to tell him the dire news, he was devastated. To make matters worse, he lived 1,500 miles away and couldn't make it to the hospital in time. So instead, he threw a Hail Mary. He filmed a video of himself holding up 55 different

posterboards explaining Theo's case and pleading for help from anyone who could. He never actually said a word in the video. He only played the song "Fix You" by Coldplay as the soundtrack for a desperately needed miracle.

Almost overnight, the video had 500,000 views. We started to receive calls from people all over the world who believed they could help. The callers included brilliant doctors with uniquely specific experience in the challenges we were facing. Come to find out, the zero-sum game our doctors perceived wasn't entirely true. An experimental treatment would allow us to address both diseases at the same time—an option our doctors hadn't been unaware of. Within 24 hours of my brother's video going viral, we had a crazy plan to try to save Theo's life.

It worked.

Theo's body began to recover, and after a few more months in the hospital, he was able to come home. I couldn't foresee the fairytale outcome of my living nightmare. In the moment the doctors suggested to say my goodbyes, my feelings suffocated any other possible option. Sometimes your feelings don't leave room for fairytales.

Those desolate moments can breed the worst decisions. Relying solely on your scattered emotions rather than your non-negotiable values to make important decisions is a recipe for regret. When your emotions run hot, there is a real danger of saying things you don't mean and overreacting to things in order to "protect" yourself from danger. You place any positive impact you hoped for at risk when you don't ground yourself in the things that matter most to you.

My memory of sitting on the edge of Theo's bed and saying goodbye has been the cause of many sleepless nights in the years since.

The question inside my head plays over and over in an endless loop: *I wonder if he thinks I gave up on him.* I beat myself up for years over this. I couldn't celebrate the reality of the moment because I was trapped in the past.

I decided to figure out what my true non-negotiable values were so that if I ever found myself in a similar situation, I would know exactly what to say and how to approach it. Creativity, hope, impact, empathy, authenticity, and family are the values that now guide my actions. Every decision I have made since discovering them has been filtered through these six things. Living with this deliberate intention has transformed my life so greatly that I even wrote a book about it in 2020 called *Black Sheep: Unleash the Extraordinary, Awe-Inspiring, Undiscovered You* to help others discover their core values and start living a life of deliberate intention.

Unfortunately, I was given another chance in 2021. Sometimes, the treatment is worse than the disease. Theo's body had taken an awful toll over the nine years he battled. While his mind was as strong and witty as ever, his body was weak—too weak to withstand a global pandemic. In early 2021, Theo contracted COVID-19, and I soon found myself sitting on the edge of his hospital bed, having to have the same conversation I did years earlier. This time, I purposefully didn't say my goodbyes. Instead, I spoke my values into existence. Even though Theo was intubated and in a medically induced coma, I talked to him about the creative things he loved to do. I told him I wouldn't give up hope. I spoke about all the people he had impacted and how it had changed their faith and view of what's possible. I also told him how proud I was of him for fighting, and if he felt like he was too tired to fight anymore, I understood and would support him in whatever he chose.

On February 27, 2021, Theo lost his battle.

Having suffered an immeasurable loss, it would be easy to cover myself with the blanket of suffering and find others to lament with. For a while, I did just that. But how is that honoring my past? It isn't. You can choose to move forward to the present moment and cherish the memories that helped mold you into the human you are today. It isn't easy, but it is necessary if you want to create the type of momentum that has legacy-worthy impact.

You are not your past mistakes or wounds. You are wholly human, and though you are filled with the scars of your unique experiences, you have the power to decide what will shape your present and future. You decide what to let go of and when to open yourself up to new opportunities, relationships, and possibilities.

Don't allow your past to imprison you. You hold the keys to unlock a future worth living for.

Future Fantasy: The Illusion of Control

When you think about the future, the anxiety that tags along stems from the desire to control everything. I am a self-professed, card-carrying diamond club member of Control Freaks Anonymous. If you invited me to dinner, I would say yes and then drive *your* car to get us there. I need control, or at least the feeling of control. That can be a problem. Let me rephrase that: that is often a problem.

Here's the thing: the human brain craves certainty. This need can become dangerously obsessive, especially when living in a world where uncertainty is the only constant. Your brain will do anything, even lie to you, to satisfy the need for a sense of believable certainty. Your brain wants to avoid pain at any cost, so it will have you try to predict and plan for every possible outcome to avoid getting hurt. You become seduced by the illusion of

control, but the uncertainty only amplifies your anxieties and pulls you out of the present moment.

Your anxiety about the future is all about fear: fear of failure, fear of the unknown, or even fear of loss. Because of this, you try to meticulously plan every detail to mitigate your fears. You create contingency plans to account for every possible scenario, hoping to preempt any potential setbacks. This can manifest itself as:

- **Olympic-level worrying:** You become obsessed with what “could” happen, worrying about all the “bad stuff” that is potentially lurking around the corner. You deplete your emotional reserves and become increasingly unstable. You begin to remove yourself from the present moment, lost in a world that hasn’t happened yet.
- **Obsessive list-making:** You begin to make lists for everything: groceries, to-dos, worries, problems ... hell, you make lists of lists! This is your way to avoid engaging in the present moment. You document every detail so you don’t have to take any action, simply adding to the lists continuously. While you tell yourself you are getting “organized,” you really are paralyzing yourself.
- **Strict schedules or routines:** You create rigid schedules and routines to try to control your environment. You become increasingly inflexible and refuse to adapt to change, causing you to become more anxious when things don’t go according to plan. You become so focused on sticking to the schedule that you miss the moment happening right in front of you.

All of these create a feeling of control to give you a temporary sense of comfort, but in reality, they provide a false sense of security in a chaotic and unpredictable world. It makes you believe

that you are in the driver's seat, following your GPS to your destination. But it's not real. In fact, it is a fragile perception that can be shattered by the smallest of pebbles kicked up by unforeseen circumstances or unexpected challenges leaving you feeling overwhelmed and helpless.

The irony is the more you “think” you have control, the less you actually do. The obsession over what might be pulls you from engaging in the moment at hand. You become so focused on alleviating potential problems in the future that you miss all of the opportunities right in front of you. You once again become a prisoner, this time of your own anxieties.

Taking up residence in the future disconnects you from the only place you can affect change—the present moment. It's here where you make the decisions that will influence the course of your life. When you tie yourself up with the chains of the future, you forfeit the power to actually change it. You become a timid hitchhiker afraid to stick your thumb out and move toward your goals.

Letting go of the illusion of control isn't about abandoning your plans or leaving it up to fate. It's about recognizing the importance of deliberate intention and making the best decisions possible in the present. These are decisions that are rooted in your core values; consider all the facts and honor your feelings in the moment. This is the best you can do because the truth is you can't control outcomes. You can only control the deliberate intention that goes into making a decision.

If you want to influence your future, it starts in the present. This is where you will learn to navigate change and overcome unexpected challenges with resilience and grace. You will learn to appreciate the present for what it truly is: a fleeting moment waiting to be captured and embraced.

Take a Moment

Tear It Up

Let's reduce your anxiety about the future by recognizing and releasing the need for control. Identify a current situation where you feel a strong need to control the outcome.

Take a piece of paper and draw a vertical line down the middle. On the left side, list the aspects of the situation that are within your control, and on the right side, list those that are not. Focusing on the left side, write down several ideas on how to approach the things that are within your control. Cut the paper down the middle vertical line. Take the right side of things that are out of your control and tear it to pieces. This exercise is a powerful way to signify that you can let these things go.

The High Cost of Absence

When you are living your life like *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*, trapped in mental time travel (another 1980s movie, Gen Z—it might be a good idea to take notes), you end up paying a steep price: the cost of absence. Absent from your own life. Absent from harnessing the power of the present moment and all it has to offer. You ultimately end up ghosting yourself.

If you stopped reading for a moment and just listened, what would you hear? Is it a bird chirping, your children laughing, rain falling on the roof, church bells ringing, or your dog snoring? It's these subtle wonders and simple joys that are the very essence of the present moment. When you are absent from your own life, you miss these everyday miracles.

How are your relationships at the moment? Do your loved ones feel seen and supported? When you are hyperfocused on only your issues, you become impatient and less empathetic. You stop truly listening and nurturing even your closest connections. This is one of the worst side effects of being emotionally unavailable. At some point, it is imperative that you address the improper illusions that you carry around in your mind, as they have a very real impact on those around you. Reframing your illusions is not just about being in the moment; it's often the best thing you can do for your relationships with loved ones.

Do you consider yourself a creative? Having your mind clouded with worries and anxiety makes it nearly impossible to be creative or productive. Your concentration will wane, your motivation will dwindle, and your ability to generate new ideas will diminish. The romanticizing of being a frustrated artist or musician is a toxic thought. It doesn't have to be that way. Everything you need to pull yourself out of creative constipation is in the present moment.

Ultimately, being absent can disconnect you from your physical self. You find yourself gaining weight, eating poorly, not exercising, and missing the signals your body is trying to send you to stop ignoring your well-being. You get used to the tension in your neck, the tiredness, and the general feeling of blah.

Can we make a deal right now? If you agree to hand over the keys to the mental time machine, I will give you a simple four-step process to capture the power of the present moment and catapult yourself toward achieving your biggest goals.

Deal? Deal.

Moments to Remember:

- Your brain can trap you in a perpetual cycle of time travel that never lets you experience the present moment.
- The human mind has a peculiar tendency to fixate on the negative.
- Your brain will do anything, including lie to you, to satisfy its need for certainty.
- Loosening the grip of the past requires recognizing the patterns and illusions of negativity and reframing the stories you tell yourself about your past experiences.
- You are not your past mistakes or wounds.
- The illusion of control over your future gives you a temporary sense of comfort but a false sense of security.
- Being absent from the present moment can disconnect you from your physical self.

