



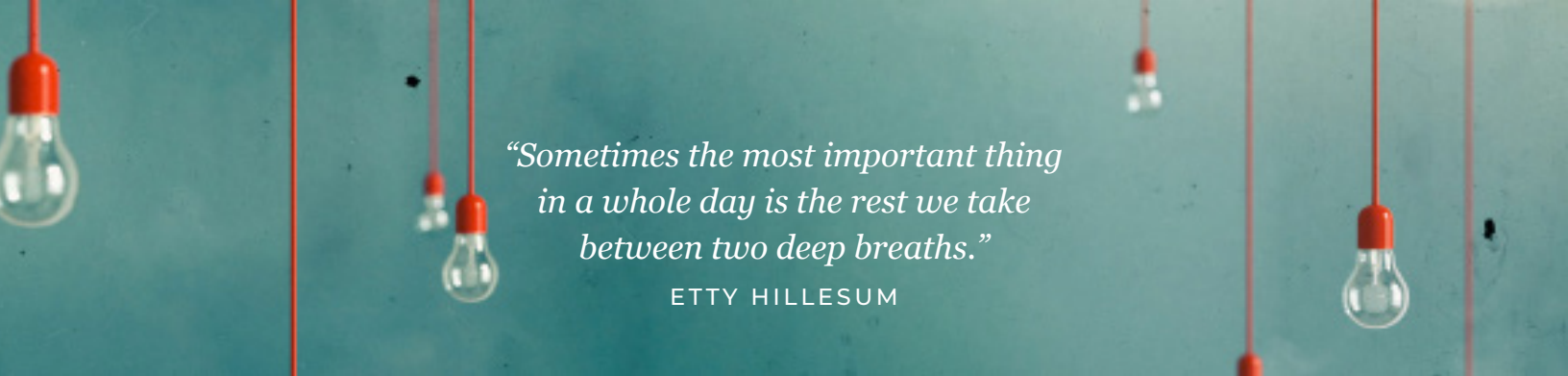
# GET OUT OF YOUR HEAD

*15 Easy Ways to Move from Autopilot to Presence*

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*by Sara Harvey Yao*





*“Sometimes the most important thing  
in a whole day is the rest we take  
between two deep breaths.”*

ETTY HILLESUM

# GET OUT OF YOUR HEAD

## *15 Easy Ways to Move from Autopilot to Presence*

Do you ever get home from work and when your loved one asks, “What did you do today?” it takes some time for you to remember? Or maybe you attended a meeting, but don’t really know what was said because your mind was elsewhere? These are signs that you might be operating on autopilot—not fully aware of the moment you’re in. When we’re on autopilot and not fully present, our minds tend to run the show, constantly thinking and strategizing, and sometimes just plain spinning. In fact, the average adult has around 70,000 thoughts a day, 90 percent of which are exactly the same as the thoughts they had the prior day. Talk about autopilot!

When you’re on autopilot you miss out on important information, fail to connect with loved ones, are unable to focus. You can feel (and often are) cut off from your inner wisdom and resilience, and experience the negative impact of stress, including loss of sleep and lack of clarity and motivation.

When you’re present, you have the ability to pay attention in the moment, on purpose. You’re able to tune in to a deep awareness of everything you are experiencing in any given moment. You are aware of your own experience—your body’s sensations, thoughts, and emotional reactions. When you are in the moment, you can also tune into others’ experiences and reactions, gaining access to important data, both visible and not. By being present you become a non-attached observer of the moment.

Presence is our natural state, and we have the opportunity to return to presence at any time. The challenge for most of my clients is in remembering to be present in the moment, especially when they are running from meeting to meeting. In my first book *[Get Present: Simply Strategies to Get Out of Your Head and Lead More Powerfully](#)*, I discuss the benefits of presence, why being present is so hard, and the brain science behind our reactions. I also offer several in-depth tools to help strengthen your presence—but if you’re like most of my clients, you want to know how to remember to move from autopilot to presence in ways that are tangible and quick.





# HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

**INSTANT RELIEF:** When you are feeling emotionally triggered—angry, surprised, or embarrassed—read through these tips to find one that’s easy and doable and will help you get grounded and calm again. These tools help you create a moment in time to choose presence or autopilot. In fact, if you can remember to come back to these tools once you’re triggered, you have already taken the first step toward presence. The richness lies within the moment you choose to do something different rather than react on autopilot.

**BUILDING BEST PRACTICES:** If you’re not in a triggered place, use these tools as a way to strengthen your ability to be present in the moment. Read through all of the tools and exercises and identify two that you feel most inspired to try. Then experiment with those tools for a week or two, and come back and add to your repertoire.

You may notice a theme in these tools. None of them should feel “hard.” In fact, the act of returning to presence creates a sense of ease and well-being. Many of my clients feel guilty or think they are getting away with something when they experiment with these tools because as a practice, they don’t feel like “work.” The beautiful thing about presence is that because it’s our natural state, coming back to it feels good. The only trick is simply to observe your thoughts when your mind wants to make you feel guilty or tell you that you don’t have “time” for these tools.

Below are the four gateways I use with my clients (and myself) to strengthen presence and to help remember our natural state of presence.





*Gateway #1:*

## YOUR TIME

**BUILD IN WHITE SPACE TIME:** This is time that's blocked just for you with no preset agenda. When you arrive at your White Space time, use it first to become present to what you're experiencing in the moment. Then ask, "What do I need?" or "What am I inspired to do?" Many of my clients use this as time to reflect, think, or move forward on a project. It doesn't matter so much how you use your time as long as you give yourself the opportunity to make a choice about what will you do with it.

**TAKE 5 MINUTES:** My days are often full of coaching sessions, meetings, and taking kids to/from practices, so I know how hard it feels to find time to simply tune in and be quiet. One month I decided to do an experiment of giving myself 5 minutes each day to just be. Sometimes I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing; sometimes I did 5 minutes of yoga or simply enjoyed my cup of tea. Either way it was 5 minutes of presence, and it very consistently helped me feel more focused. My favorite app to help time me is called [Insight Timer](#).

**LEVERAGE RESTROOM BREAKS:** Everyone needs to use the restroom, so why not leverage that time? I use restroom

breaks as time to take a few deep breaths, mentally scan my body for tension, and try to become aware of my experience in the moment. I might take a few moments to set my intention for my next meeting or remind myself that my last meeting is over, so I don't let my mind ruminate upon the past. I tend to keep myself fairly hydrated, so I generally have to take multiple restroom breaks throughout the day. I've started looking forward to these trips because they provide me with moments of sanity during my busy day.

**JUST WAIT:** How often do you find yourself waiting—in line, in a lobby, or in a restaurant? How often do you do that waiting without a phone or device in your hand? I highly recommend using waiting times—in the lobby in your doctor or dentist's office, waiting to meet a friend for coffee, or standing in line at the grocery store—as an opportunity to practice presence. Instead of picking up your electronic device, try looking around, observing other people, taking a few deep breaths, and noticing what your body is feeling. The practice of presence is to become an objective observer, so what better way to practice than when you have a few extra minutes of waiting time on your hands?





*Gateway #2:*

## YOUR BODY

**3 CONSCIOUS BREATHS:** The Dalai Lama says that just three conscious breaths can help you come into a more conscious state. It can be as simple as that. When you are feeling stressed, stuck in your head, or triggered, try to take three conscious breaths. Take a slow, deep inhalation through your nose without force, hold it for a second, and then slowly release the breath through your mouth. Repeat two more times, or until you feel better. You might be surprised at the calming power of your breath.

**FOCUS ON GREEN:** When you're feeling stressed or emotionally triggered, use your sense of sight to calm you down. Looking at the color green, particularly in nature, calms the nervous system. If possible, try to get outside, even for just a few minutes, and find something green to focus on. Remember to breathe while using your visual senses. If you can't get outside and find a beautiful tree or plant, just close your eyes and imagine you're in nature, surrounded by lush, green plants and trees.

**TAKE A DRINK:** I almost always have a water bottle or cup of tea with me during meetings, and I use it very intentionally. When I feel myself getting frustrated or impatient, I consciously take a slow, mindful sip of my beverage. I do this to help create a moment in time for me to consciously choose my response. And not only does taking a drink help to silence me for a few important moments, it also hydrates me during the day!

**MOVE YOUR BODY:** The fastest way to metabolize and clear rushes of adrenaline and cortisol (the stress hormone that is released when you're emotionally triggered) is to move your body. Leave your office or desk and simply walk and pay attention to your breath. If you don't have time to take a break and walk, take a nice deep breath and slowly bend at the waist so your head moves toward the floor. The inversion of your head helps settle your nervous system. It doesn't really matter how you move your body, however; any kind of movement can help you remember your natural state of presence.







### *Gateway #3:*

# YOUR HEART

#### **WHEN IN DOUBT, GO FOR GRATITUDE:**

The act of gratitude is very simple. It means noticing how much you *do* have instead of how much you don't have. Notice both the quality and quantity of the support you have around you, including loved ones, friends, and colleagues. Think about all the people and animals you love. Give thanks for the material items in your life, such as your home, clothing, food, money, or job. Pay attention to how many opportunities you have to impact others positively, and how often others positively impact you. You might even have gratitude for the people or things that feel like "problems." It's nearly impossible to stay in a triggered state when you truly feel gratitude for the abundance in your life.

**CONNECT WITH SOMETHING LARGER THAN YOURSELF:** One of my favorite ways to open my heart is to connect with something larger than myself. When we get triggered, our mind becomes overly focused on safety and can become self-centered. We can return to presence when we remember that we are a part of something far greater than ourselves. Some clients tune in to their spiritual beliefs as a way of connecting with something larger than them. Others simply notice the greatness

of Mother Nature. No matter what you believe, each of us has something in our lives that helps us feel we're a part of something. The point of connecting with something larger than yourself is to move you toward feeling expansive as opposed to contracted. For me, every time I look at a mountain, body of water, or children playing on a playground, I remember that I'm a part of something greater than just my experience in the moment. This usually gives me a sense of compassion, calm, and even creativity.

**LISTEN:** I can't stress enough how the act of simply listening can bring you into the present moment. The next time you're engaged in a conversation, try to listen without thinking about what you're going to say next. Listen to great music or the sounds outside. Even better, try to be in silence, and listen to the subtle sounds you hear, like the clock ticking or the sound of the wind. Even a few minutes of really listening can transform your experience of the present moment. Most of my clients are blown away by how much information they receive when they mindfully listen in their meetings and with their families. Truly listening is a profound act of presence, and one that can radically transform your life.





*Gateway #4:*

## YOUR MIND

**ASK YOURSELF, “WHAT’S MY INTENT?”:**

Asking yourself what your intention is before a meeting, or an interaction with a loved one, or in any given moment, really, is a powerful tool for bringing yourself into the present moment. So many of us walk through our days on autopilot, simply reacting to what’s thrown at us, as opposed to taking a few moments to intentionally decide what impact we want to make, and how. When I walk to my next meeting, I silently ask myself, *What is my intention with this meeting?* Having an “agenda” for the meeting is different from your intent. Your intent should be positive and constructive and something you could (but don’t have to) verbally express, either at the beginning of an interaction or if things go sideways. Having a clear and productive intent can be your anchor for presence when conversations get heated.

**GO TO YOUR HAPPY PLACE:** I love the saying: “Go to your happy place.” Sometimes people say it as a joke, but I use this saying as a tool, and I find it to be incredibly powerful when used with intention. For example, I woke up in the middle of the night recently and immediately started thinking of things I needed to get done the next day. I felt my heart start to race. Instead of letting my mind run the stress show, I went to my “happy place,” which is my last trip to Maui. During that trip I unplugged from technology for ten days and felt deeply present and relaxed. I tried to remember as much detail of that experience as I could, and essentially by “reliving” that experience of calm, I got my body to start to relax. Once I calmed my body down by remembering the sounds of the waves and the sights of the sunsets, I was then able to turn my attention to my breath and fall back asleep for the rest of the night.





*Gateway #4, continued:*  
**YOUR MIND**

**ASSUME YOUR LIFE IS RIGGED:** Famous poet and theologian Rumi wrote, “Assume your life is rigged in your favor.” This is a powerful perspective because it allows for very little negative judgment of your experience. I notice that when I assume things are rigged in my favor, I am able to experience the moment in a more positive and constructive way. Things that might otherwise trigger me emotionally, such as negative feedback or bad traffic, lose their emotional charge because I assume there is something going on (that I can’t “see”) that will turn out to be in my favor. This perspective especially helps bring me to a calm, grounded place when I feel something that seems like a loss, such as not getting a new client contract or not being invited to a meeting. Believing life is rigged in your favor helps you to be resilient and to look for areas in your life and work that are in your favor.

**IF YOU LEAVE, TAKE YOUR BODY WITH YOU:** One of my coaches, Marie-Rose Phan-Le, always says to me, “Sara, if your mind is going to leave the room, take your body with you.” How often does your mind wander away from the task or discussion at hand? Think about how ridiculous it would be if we all physically left the room when our minds started wandering. Seriously, though, if you are in a meeting so boring that you can’t stay present, experiment by taking a restroom break or grabbing a drink and then coming back when you feel you can be more present. You are doing everyone, but especially yourself, a huge favor by take responsibility for the quality of your attention.







Rest assured, there is no such thing as “perfect” when it comes to being present. It’s a natural part of the human process to be on autopilot, and then “remember” to become present. The practice is in noticing how often we forget and experimenting with ways to help bring our attention back to the present moment.

If you like what you read here, my book, *Get Present: Simple Strategies to Get Out of Your Head and Lead More Powerfully*, offers even more tips on how to strengthen your presence in practical and accessible ways. My second book, *Drop In: Lead with Deeper Presence and Courage* guides you to explore your conditioned patterns (the things that keep us on autopilot) and how to access deeper levels of presence.



## SARA HARVEY YAO

specializes in personal transformation for leaders. She guides them in deepening their awareness of the present moment and recognizing and taking action from the wisdom and clarity of their head, heart, and gut. She has worked with thousands of leaders across the globe and her thought-leadership has been seen on MSNBC, MindBody Green, Self Magazine, NPR and Wall Street Select. She is the author of *Drop In: Lead with Deeper Presence and Courage* and *Get Present: Simple Strategies to Get Out of Your Head and Lead More Powerfully*.

Sara lives in Seattle, is a mother of two teenage boys and has been married to her husband, Jesse, since 1998. She’s a constant seeker of wisdom and is committed to leading from presence and wisdom in every aspect of her life.





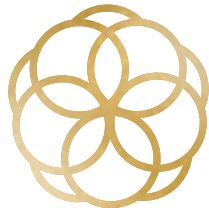
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Watch this video about her book,  
*[Get Present: Simple Strategies to Get Out of Your Head and Lead More Powerfully](#)*



# LEAD FROM WISDOM

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*personal transformation with Sara Yao*

