

# Does ‘Living in the Present’ Make a Difference?

By John Kuypers

Living in the present is a frequently-quoted inspirational thought: “*Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. That’s why they call today the present.*” But is it really better to “live in the present?” What’s wrong with spending time planning tomorrow and going over what happened yesterday? One could argue that the idea of living in the present is actually quite foolish! What if something terrible lies ahead and you do nothing to prepare for it? What if something terrible *already* happened, and you don’t stay on guard, just in case it happens again? There is truth to the notion that living in the present is dangerous. However, its rewards make it worth doing *anyway*.

I first heard of living in the present six years ago. I had already spent four years searching for answers to a deep unhappiness that I couldn’t seem to shake, no matter how many career and personal successes I achieved. **Since then, I have poured all of my energies into learning and mastering this life skill.** I gave up a lucrative executive career. I left my first marriage. I lived off of my life savings. I spent two and a half years writing my first book, *What’s Important Now: Shedding the Past So You Can Live in the Present*. Why would a normal, well-educated businessman make such a radical shift in life?

**There is only one reason. Living in the present is tremendously rewarding.** When you are fully present, all of your mind, body, heart and soul are focused on what you are doing now. In those moments, you feel clear, confident, and centered. You will recognize this experience if you recall the times in your life that were filled with joy, excellence and contentment. You felt relaxed, focused and very aware of your surroundings. You remember the experience as a positive one. Perhaps it was when you were traveling, enjoying athletic achievements or

having a satisfying social life. Your relationships with other people were likely warm, vibrant and rich. It doesn’t matter if you were penniless, or had no clear future. You were living in the present during those times.

**You will also recognize the times in your life when you have not been very present.** Your memory will be foggy, even to the point that entire periods of your life may seem blank. The events and circumstances were stressful, negative and unhappy. You didn’t feel good about yourself, as you forgot things, performed less well, found it harder to concentrate and felt emotionally distant from the people around you. Your mind may have been absorbed almost obsessively about work or other personal trials. Your athletic skills may have dropped considerably, as mine did when I became consumed by my career.

There is just one characteristic that lets us live in the present. **We must feel safe.** We feel safe when we are confident that we are doing what’s right and important for us to be doing, *now*. We are not second-guessing ourselves, nor are we feeling pressure to do more, or be better and quicker. **We are good enough.** We may feel this way when we are on vacation, playing a favorite sport or playing with the kids. We may feel this way during major life events, like a wedding or having a baby. We are often fully present during precious moments with a loved one. In these situations, we are aware that no matter what we say or do, we will not be criticized nor will our words or deeds be used against us.

**We must learn how to feel safe, even when the circumstances around us are unsafe.** Otherwise, the only time we will experience the joy and the peace of mind that come with living in the present, will occur when we are secluded on a mountain top! Even then, it will only happen if we can be fully present on that mountaintop. If this feeling of being present is a rare one for you, then it is likely that you do not feel safe in the situations in which you commonly find yourself. In retrospect, I felt unsafe at work and in my marriage, or about ninety-eight percent of the time!

**We feel unsafe under two circumstances:**

1. We don't *know* what's right for us to do, or...
2. We don't *do* what is important for us to do.

Knowing what's important for us to be doing, and then doing it, *right in the present moment*, is the means by which a person can create the feeling of safety for themselves.

**Naturally, the more dangerous the situation, the harder it is to stay present.** When you are facing an avalanche of crises – troubles at work, misbehaving children at home, personal illness – living in the present is very difficult. The risks of not being able to please everyone and of making a mistake go up. As they do, the odds of the situation feeling unsafe increase even more! Other people react unhappily if we fail to solve the crises satisfactorily. Their unhappiness then provokes us to feel angry or resentful towards them or towards ourselves. A vicious cycle is spawned that takes us ever more deeply into resenting past mistakes and fretting about future backlashes from our mistakes. In these moments, we are often driven to analyze the past and strategize the future in order to figure out how to feel safe again.

**Failing to live in the present fuels this vicious cycle.** Consider what it feels like when someone is not present with you. They have a blank look on their face. Their eye contact is poor. They may be staring into space and their body language appears shut down and uptight. They seem to not hear what you are saying, nor do they remember it because they are not “here”. How do we feel when others are like this? We feel like “they don't care” about us. We feel unloved, unimportant and even rejected. Most of us respond by either feeling angry, or by ignoring or avoiding that person in the future. When that happens to us, we feel even more threatened and unsafe. We become aware that we've offended someone and they may strike back at us or avoid us.

**Being present makes an immediate difference in the quality of all of your relationships.** Others see and feel that you are fully *with* them and they often respond in kind. The vicious cycle is broken, as true thoughts and feelings emerge and issues get addressed right in the moment. When you are fully present, you let others see your true thoughts and feelings. The result is that issues get dealt with immediately and you do not collect any baggage called “the past.” Dealing effectively with conflict is

an important part of learning how to live in the present.

If you have not been present for a long time, as I was not, you may well have collected a lot of baggage in the form of unresolved hurts from your key relationships. Unraveling this baggage is very challenging, but is a crucial part of learning how to live in the present. **The pent-up past can emerge harmfully unless you learn how to manage yourself in a constructive way.** That's why learning to live in the present can be dangerous. You must dare to make mistakes and take risks. You try to discern what is important for you and then you must actually do it. You must do it with the full awareness that you may later regret it. To live in the present, you must learn how to let your past go, over and over again.

**The biggest hurdle to living in the present is believing that you can actually do it.** Our instinctive desire to try to *alter* the present moment is a strong one. We alter the present by becoming angry in order to pressure others to do things our way. We also alter the present when we avoid conflict, thereby escaping our truth in that moment. This book, *What's Important Now*, outlines six strategies and dozens of practical tips and techniques with which to overcome these two common symptoms that we are not feeling safe enough to be fully present.

**You can only live in the present when the actions of others do not define your sense of feeling safe.** You will be able to do this when you trust yourself that you know what's important for you, and that you will act on that in a fair, just but definite way. As you learn to trust yourself to do what's important for you in the moment, your sense of personal safety will grow and grow. As it grows, your desire to dwell on past mistakes and speculate about future uncertainties will diminish, slowly but surely. After all, if you did was right for you at that time, what more could you have done, given what you knew at the time?

**The journey towards living more fully in the present is a lifelong one that pays off every day.** You will rise to the occasion in the moments that matter – the quality of your time with your children, the calm response you give your spouse even when

you feel criticized, and in pressure moments on the job, in your love life and on the playing field. You will feel good about yourself because you will know that you did what was important for you at that time. And that is as good as it gets.♣

*John Kuypers is a former corporate vice president who writes, speaks and teaches on how to live in the present. He is the author of **What's Important Now: Shedding the Past So You Can Live in the Present**. He can be contacted at [john@presentliving.com](mailto:john@presentliving.com) and at [www.presentliving.com](http://www.presentliving.com).*