# WORK CONSCIOUSLY

## AUDIO COURSE

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# INTRODUCTION

Hello, and welcome to the *Work Consciously Audio Course.* I'm looking forward to working with you. I think you'll find that this course takes getting work done and enjoying what you do to a deeper level than what you've probably experienced before.

When most of us think about productivity, a pretty predictable group of images comes to mind. We tend to think of all the usual organization and time management tools people recommend — creative ways to organize your e-mail inbox, color-code your folders, find the right iPhone apps, and so on.

What you're going to hear about in this course will be very different from all that. Don't get me wrong — there are many great productivity techniques out there. But one thing I've noticed about these tips and tricks is that they tend to be almost exclusively focused on our *outer circumstances* — the ways we have our to-do list or our desktop organized, and so on.

What the usual techniques don't tend to focus on, though, is what I think is the biggest obstacle we usually face in getting our work done — and that, we might say, is *ourselves*. It's our own minds and bodies.

## Why There's No "App For That"

Here, I'm talking about those moments when we find our attention getting scattered all over the place — maybe replaying some piece of music in our heads, or replaying memories of that bad relationship from twenty years ago, or something else.

I mean those times when we find ourselves feeling sluggish or unmotivated, like we have to drag ourselves through the mud to accomplish the task we're trying to do, and it's all we can do to keep our heads off the desk.

Maybe we feel paralyzed with anxiety, worrying "what's the boss going to think of this presentation I'm doing," and second-guessing every word we write.

As I'll bet you know firsthand, if you're having one of these experiences, having a really well-organized e-mail inbox probably isn't going to cut it. That is, it isn't going to be enough to keep you on track in what you're doing, no matter how great the tips for time management and organization you're following may be.

If you're paralyzed with fear about what the boss is going to think of this presentation you're doing, that paralysis isn't going to go away because you've achieved a zero e-mail inbox, or because you've made a multicolored to-do list.

## Getting Off The "Time Management (Product) Treadmill"

Unfortunately, because — like I said — productivity literature tends to be focused solely on our external circumstances — on how our workspace is arranged — people tend to assume the only way to get more done is to find the right method of organizing their work environment.

So, people often get locked in a cycle of buying a book or taking a seminar, finding what they learned isn't working for them, going out and buying another one, and repeating this process until they get tired of the whole productivity thing and give up.

Also, to be totally upfront, I think one of the reasons the usual organization strategies are so popular, even though so many people have trouble actually putting them into practice, is that people feel kind of virtuous and responsible when they learn new material on getting organized, or overcoming procrastination, or something along those lines.

They get a temporary high when they buy that new planner, or e-mail application — that frustration they're feeling, and all the self-flagellation they've been doing because they feel like they're not doing enough, temporarily fall away. But very soon, those feelings come back, and the procrastination and inefficiency come back too.

If you can relate, one of my goals in this program is to break you out of that cycle of frustration. I want you to be able to actually benefit from these organization strategies you've been learning, rather than just trying them for a day or for an hour and giving up, which unfortunately is what I think many people do.

So how do we start dealing with the ways our own minds and bodies tend to disrupt our focus as we're trying to get something done? I'll begin to illustrate this by telling you a little story about my friend and the frustrations he's been experiencing around e-mail.

## The Core Experience: An Illustration

My friend is really into these tips and tricks for organization and time management — he's probably what a lot of these productivity websites would call a "productivity ninja." His most recent goal has been to curb his habit of compulsively checking his e-mail. I imagine you've struggled with this at times yourself — or maybe you just, you know, know someone who has.

What my friend has committed to himself to do is to check his e-mail only twice a day while he's at work — at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. In theory, this sounds like it would help my friend save a lot of time. But in practice, he's never actually been able

to keep this commitment to himself.

This is what happens for him.  He gets into work at about 8 or 8:30 in the morning, and he's able to get about half an hour of fully focused work in, even if he's got a nagging curiosity in the back of his mind about whether there's anything interesting or important in his e-mail inbox.

But when that half-hour mark rolls around, my friend's curiosity actually starts to intensify into physical discomfort.  He starts to feel a tension in his shoulders and a tightness in his chest.

If he leaves that curiosity for long enough without doing anything about it, it almost starts to feel like a shortness of breath, and he starts wondering "oh my goodness, am I going to die if I don't check my e-mail?"  So, it seems like a pretty serious situation to him in the moment.

So, of course, to relieve this tension that's coming up for him, my friend goes off and checks his e-mail.  When he does this, he takes his mind off the tension he's feeling, and so he gets a break from it.

Unfortunately, while he's checking his e-mail, he's also taking his attention off the work he's trying to do.  And because this keeps happening throughout the day, he keeps arriving at the end of the work day having accomplished less than he wanted.

## The Core Experience:  What It Means

The moral of the story here, of course, is not that my friend doesn't know enough organization and time management techniques.  He knows plenty of those.  He's got a super-organized e-mail inbox with about 100 different sub-directories.  But no matter how he tweaks his e-mail organization, that burning curiosity still seems to come up.

The point of the story is that, when my friend tries to sit and concentrate on his work, these sensations come up in his body that he finds uncomfortable or even disturbing.  And to relieve those sensations — to take the edge off, as people often say — he checks his e-mail.

In other words, my friend is caught up in what I call the *Procrastination Cycle*. He sits down to work and is able to chug along in what he's doing for a short period of time. And then, that pesky sensation, which I call the *Core Experience*, comes up for him.

I call it the Core Experience because, no matter what type of project you're having difficulty moving forward in — whether it's starting your dream business or cleaning out the garage — you're going to find this particular nagging experience lurking in the background.

In order to get away from the Core Experience, my friend uses what I call an *Escape Route* — that is, he checks his e-mail to distract himself from what's going on inside.

Then, after a little while, he returns to work, but within a short time the Core Experience arises again, and he repeats the cycle over and over again throughout the working day.

## Everyone's Experience Is Unique

I imagine you can relate to this story — that you can relate to trying to get your work done, but being confronted with thoughts, emotions and sensations — or, what I call inner experiences — that you'd rather not be having.

Now, of course, not everyone has a problem with a burning curiosity about their e-mail. Everyone's mind and body is different, so everyone has their own variety of inner experience that tends to come up and make their life difficult when they're trying to get something done.

For example, maybe, for you, it's a painful memory that keeps nagging at you while you're trying to accomplish something. For instance, maybe you keep replaying an old argument you had with someone in your mind as you're sitting trying to code your computer program. And, to make matters worse, this only seems to arise when you're trying to do a project that's particularly important to you.

For other people it's just an unpleasant physical sensation

that arises when they're trying to get something done. Maybe they feel this jumpy, anxious energy in their body. Maybe they find their shoulders tensing up. Maybe it's a sinking feeling in their stomach.

Whatever it is, it seems to come up most often, or perhaps most loudly, when you're trying to get something done.

## An Awareness-Building Exercise

What kind of experience tends to come up for you? Maybe the thought or sensation that you keep experiencing is easy to bring to mind. But for some people it isn't immediately clear — when I ask what inner experience is giving them trouble, they'll say "I don't know — I just keep finding myself putting things off."

If you find yourself unsure about what the particular feeling or thought is for you, I think you can start to get an idea of what kind of experience it is by doing a brief exercise.

Right now, think about some project you've been wanting to work on recently, but you've been putting off. As you recall this project and the frustrations you've been having around it, notice what you're feeling in your body.

Notice the places where it's tensing up — where it feels uncomfortably hot or cold — where you feel a heaviness or nausea — or whatever it is you're feeling. Do you get how unpleasant that experience is for you?

Now, what I'd like you to do is consider the possibility that, when you sit down to work on the project you're thinking about, this is the experience you're having — these are the sensations that are coming up in your body. Whenever you put off working on this project, it's because you don't want to be feeling these sensations.

And I think you can see, as you experience the sensations right now, firsthand, why you might be doing that. Of course you've been fleeing from them, given how unpleasant they are.

## The Core Experience: Fighting and Fleeing

So, I think we all have some troublesome inner experience that comes up as we're trying to complete our projects. But importantly, I want to suggest to you that this experience alone isn't enough to create procrastination.

The mere fact that we're feeling some kind of discomfort doesn't force us to put off our work. Instead, procrastination happens when we do what I call fighting or fleeing from the experience — basically, when we choose to try to avoid having it.

What do I mean by fighting or fleeing? I'll start with fighting. By fighting the experience, I mean trying to punish or shame yourself into working when that experience is coming up.

For instance, suppose that, like my friend, you tend to experience a burning curiosity about what's in your e-mail inbox when you're trying to work on a project.

If you try to shame yourself into working despite that experience, maybe you'll tell yourself something like "oh, I can't believe you're so lazy and distractible — I can't believe you're thinking about your e-mail again — what's wrong with you," and so on.

Or maybe you'll threaten yourself with punishment, as I know some people do. Maybe you'll say to yourself "you know, if you check e-mail again, you don't get to play any XBox 360 tonight — no video games for you tonight if you check it again."

Some productivity writers actually recommend doing this — making threats, or using what's sometimes called "negative reinforcement," to force yourself to work — but I don't.

Why not? As I'll bet you've experienced, when you try to beat yourself into submission and make yourself work, that only creates more resistance inside — it only tends to intensify, in other words, that unpleasant experience you're having.

In fact, I know that, for myself and others I've talked to, doing this can actually be physically tiring — by beating ourselves up, we can drain ourselves of the energy we could have been using to accomplish something. This is a good example of

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what I think Carl Jung meant when he said "what we resist persists."

## What Fleeing Means

The other thing we tend to do, as I said, is that we flee from this painful experience. Whenever that unpleasant memory, or that worry about the future, or that pain in our lower back, or whatever it is, comes up, we do something to distract ourselves from it. Maybe we'll play Minesweeper, or call a friend on the phone, or surf the Internet, or something else.

When we take our minds off the sensations we're feeling, the benefit is that we don't have to experience those sensations. Unfortunately, there's an obvious cost as well, which is that we don't accomplish anything when we're in this self-distraction mode. While we're messing around on Facebook, playing video games, or whatever, we aren't getting anything done.

Now, one recommendation you'll often hear from people who write about productivity is that you should just take away all the "toys" you could possibly "play with" when you sit down to do a task for a long stretch.

In other words, take away all the tools you might use to distract yourself — leave your cell phone in your car, disconnect your internet, and so on. When you've got nothing to divert your attention with, you'll be forced to work on your project.

Unfortunately, if you've ever tried this strategy, I'll bet you've seen the flaw in it. No matter how many "outer distractions" you switch off, you'll always be stuck with what we might call your "inner distractions."

You can always use your own mind and body to escape from that pesky inner experience, even if there's nothing else at hand. Maybe you can start thinking about a pop song you like, or drumming your fingers on the table, or getting up and pacing around. The last problem I guess you could solve by tying your legs to your chair, but how far do we really want to take this?

## All Right, Then What?

So, merely rearranging your workspace isn't going to be enough to break you out of the habit of fleeing — of distracting yourself from — these unpleasant thoughts and sensations that you've been going through.

Now, imagine if, instead of fighting or fleeing from the experience, you could just calmly accept that the experience is coming up, and choose to move forward in your work. Suppose that you could stay relaxed, keep breathing, maybe notice for a moment "oh, there's that experience again," and stay focused on what you're doing.

Imagine the sense of freedom and ease that this could give you in your work, and how much more this would allow you to accomplish. Learning how to do that is the heart of what this course is about.

## Awareness of the Core Experience

I see dealing with this inner experience as basically a two-step process, and I call these two steps *Awareness* and *Allowing*.

I'll start explaining this by talking about what Awareness means. By Awareness, I mean that we become aware of the Core Experience that we've been running away from, and the Escape Route we've been using to run away from it — that is, calling friends on the phone, messing around on social media, playing Solitaire, and so on.

Remember I talked about my friend, who came to me and complained that he couldn't concentrate on his work, because this burning curiosity about his e-mail would keep coming up that was almost painful.

In a sense, my friend's situation is unique — perhaps you could even say he's lucky — because my sense is that most people don't have that level of awareness of what the Core Experience and Escape Route are for them.

Let me put it this way — have you ever gotten to the end

of the workday, and wondered to yourself "where did the whole day go? Why didn't I get anything done? What could I have been doing with all that time?" And you feel frustrated and confused. I think most of us have had that experience from time to time.

My sense is that, when we have a day like this, this Procrastination Cycle I'm talking about is happening outside our awareness. It's happening unconsciously.

Throughout the entire day, this is what's happening: we work for a few minutes, then that Core Experience — that jitteriness or resentment or whatever it is — comes up, and then we turn our attention away from our work — we follow our Escape Route. The cycle repeats again and again, and we're not even aware that it's happening.

How could this be? What I'm going to suggest is that you're doing unconscious behaviors like this all the time. For instance, have you ever gotten into the car, and just watched your hand shoot out and turn that car radio on, as if you didn't even have to participate in the process?

Breathing, of course, is another good example — most of the time it's happening even though we're not doing it consciously. This Procrastination Cycle, if we're not aware of it, becomes just another one of these unconscious behaviors going on in the background for us.

## Awareness by Itself Can Be Curative

The good news is that, when we become aware that this Procrastination Cycle is happening, we start to gain some control over the way we move through our workday.

Sometimes, just being conscious of the Core Experience we're avoiding, and the Escape Route we're using to get away from it, can free us from this Procrastination Cycle, without us having to develop a lot of self-discipline and constantly monitor ourselves to see whether we're back in our usual habits.

Fritz Perls, the creator of Gestalt psychotherapy, said that

"awareness by itself can be curative."  In other words, awareness by itself can create transformation.  I think this is true, and I've certainly seen evidence of it in my own life.

For example, I used to be in the habit of clenching my jaw and grinding my teeth.  I wasn't consciously aware that I was doing it — the only thing I knew was that my jaw would be strangely sore a lot of the time.

Eventually, someone close to me pointed out that my jaw seemed really tense, and I had an amazing experience — my jaw just spontaneously relaxed.

In other words, I didn't have to do any work to accomplish this — I didn't have to get a jaw massage, or acupuncture on my jaw, or something like that — thankfully, no needles needed to be involved.  All I had to do was become aware of the tension, and it naturally fell away.

I'll bet you've had an experience like this — you were doing some habit, like tapping your fingers on the table, or tensing up your shoulders, or something like that, and when someone pointed out to you that you were doing it, you effortlessly let go of the habit.

That's what I want for you when we do the awareness-building exercises I'm going to talk about in this program — to spontaneously let go of ways you may have been hindering your progress in what you do.

## Allowing the Core Experience

Unfortunately, just becoming aware of this procrastination cycle I'm talking about isn't enough to help some people break out of it.  Some people are acutely aware of the Core Experience — of that troublesome thought, feeling or sensation — that keeps coming up when they try to focus on their project.  But that doesn't stop them from habitually running away from this experience.

I think one reason is that, for many people, this Core Experience is actually kind of disturbing and scary.  When that

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anxiety, or anger, or distraction, or whatever that sensation is comes up, it can seem like a really serious or dangerous situation.

Some people get the sense that, if they just let that feeling be there without trying to do anything about it, it might stay there forever, or they might somehow be hurt or destroyed.

It's almost as if your body is a steel pipe, and there's pressure building up inside when this Core Experience is arising, and if you don't open the valve and let some of that pressure off, maybe you'll explode or implode or disintegrate or be destroyed in some other horrible way.

## What Allowing Means

This is where what I call Allowing comes into play. Allowing a sensation means to keep breathing, relax your body, and let that sensation pass away on its own — to just let that feeling flow through you and dissipate, without resisting it.

For example, suppose you're sitting there chugging along in a project at your computer, and suddenly, like my friend I described earlier, you start to have this burning curiosity about what's in your e-mail inbox.

Before, you may have been in the habit of beating yourself up for feeling that curiosity, like "oh, I can't believe you're so lazy and distractable," and so on; or, perhaps, you may have been in the habit of giving into the urge by checking e-mail.

But this time, I invite you to try something different. Instead of fighting or fleeing from that sensation, just sit there, and breathe, and relax your body, and allow that burning curiosity to pass away on its own. Just let that tension or discomfort, wherever it may be coming up in your body, just drain out of you by itself.

## The Core Experience Is Fleeting

What I think you'll discover, when you practice Allowing in the way I've described, is that this Core Experience — this

sensation you haven't wanted to be with — is actually *fleeting*. That is, it's temporary, and it passes away quickly when you don't resist it.  In that sense, it's like any other thought or emotion we experience as human beings.

Take anger and sadness, for example.  If you feel angry or sad, as I'm sure you have at some point in your life, usually those emotions don't stick around forever.  Normally, they pass away, and they're replaced by some other thought or feeling.  That's just the human experience.

What you'll find when you take on this practice of letting the difficult experience pass away is that, in fact, the Core Experience is exactly the same as other thoughts and emotions in this sense.

Just letting it be there, without trying to force it away, isn't going to make you spontaneously combust or disappear or be harmed in some other way.  Instead, it will simply fade away on its own.

Once you experience, firsthand, the fact that this Core Experience is fleeting and temporary, I think you'll start to observe something remarkable, which is that you'll actually begin to get more comfortable and more familiar with that Core Experience.  It will start to seem more manageable, and less disturbing and scary.

## Moving Through The Core Experience

And ultimately, when you get comfortable enough with this Core Experience, this experience that used to be difficult for you to tolerate, you become able to keep moving forward in your work, even when that Core Experience is coming up.  In other words, you become able to make progress in the project you're working on, even when that sensation is arising.

It's as if, when that anxiety, sadness, tightness, or whatever it is comes up, you become able to say "yes, I'm feeling this sensation — and, I'm going to keep drafting this presentation, or coding this computer program, or sculpting this sculpture," or

whatever activity you happen to be doing.  And when you develop that ability, that's when you really start to get the sense of ease and flow you want in your work.

This attitude of Allowing is similar to the practice of yoga. If you've done yoga, you've probably had the experience of getting into a pose that involved a really deep stretch — and choosing to hold that pose, despite the intensity you were experiencing, and just allowing the sensations you were feeling to be there, without trying to do anything about them.

You may have had the urge to get up and run out of the yoga studio, or take a break and fold your socks, but you consciously chose to stay with that feeling.

I imagine you noticed that, as you stayed in that challenging pose, the intensity you were feeling in your body started to seem more comfortable.  You started to understand that you could be with that feeling, and that it wasn't going to envelop you or destroy you if you just allowed it to be.

In the same way, when we allow the difficult sensations that come up as we're working to just be, rather than distracting ourselves from them, we start to see that we can actually handle that intensity, and that nothing awful is going to happen to us if we continue working when that intensity is coming up.

## How To Use This Course

So, like I said, the method of finding focus and motivation in your work I'm talking about in this program has two basic steps:  first, becoming Aware of the Core Experience you're avoiding, and the Escape Route, the way you're habitually escaping from that Core Experience; and second, learning to just Allow that Core Experience to pass away on its own, without resisting.

The exercises we're going to talk about in this program are all about bringing this two-step process of Awareness and Allowing into your everyday working routine.

One last note:  as you'll notice when you listen to this

course, the course consists mostly of exercises. It's important to actually do those exercises if you want to get the benefits out of this program — this isn't about just passively soaking up information. The good news is that, for all of the exercises, you don't need any special props — you just need your own mind and body.

With all that said, let's dive right into the perspectives and exercises I'm going to talk about in this program.

# MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR
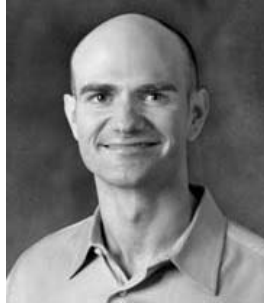
Thanks for checking out the *Work Consciously Audio Course* introduction.  If you found it helpful, and you're interested in more focus, motivation and peace in your work, I think you'll find the complete version worth looking at.

The audio program includes both three hours of audio and the full text of the course, which is great for those who prefer reading to listening. You can download the program, or learn more information, here.  Also, if you'd like to find out more about the coaching and speaking I do, and the workshops I lead, you can do so at my website.

All the best in your work and elsewhere,

Chris Edgar