

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

**DON'T SWEAT
THE SMALL STUFF...**
and it's all small stuff



**SIMPLE WAYS TO KEEP THE
LITTLE THINGS FROM TAKING
OVER YOUR LIFE**

RICHARD CARLSON, PH.D.

COAUTHOR OF HANDBOOK FOR THE SOUL

Don't Sweat
the Small Stuff...
and It's
All Small Stuff

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Handbook for the Heart
(with Benjamin Shield)

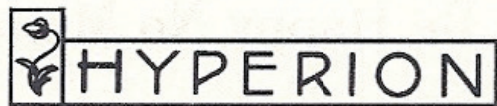
Handbook for the Soul
(with Benjamin Shield)

Shortcut Through Therapy

You Can Feel Good Again

You Can Be Happy No Matter What

Dr. Richard Carlson



NEW YORK

Don't Sweat
the Small Stuff...
and It's
All Small Stuff



SIMPLE WAYS TO KEEP THE LITTLE
THINGS FROM TAKING OVER YOUR LIFE

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I dedicate this book to my daughters, Jazzy and Kenna, who remind me every day how important it is to remember not to "sweat the small stuff." I love you both so much. Thank you for being just the way you are.

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Don't Sweat
the Small Stuff...
and It's
All Small Stuff

Introduction

The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitude.

—WILLIAM JAMES

Whenever we're dealing with bad news, a difficult person, or a disappointment of some kind, most of us get into certain habits, ways of reacting to life—particularly adversity—that don't serve us very well. We overreact, blow things out of proportion, hold on too tightly, and focus on the negative aspects of life. When we are immobilized by little things—when we are irritated, annoyed, and easily bothered—our (over-) reactions not only make us frustrated but actually get in the way of getting what we want. We lose sight of the bigger picture, focus on the negative, and annoy other people who might otherwise help us. In short, we live our lives as if they were one great big emergency! We often rush around looking busy, trying to solve problems, but in reality, we are often compounding them. Because everything seems like such a big deal, we end up spending our lives dealing with one drama after another.

After a while, we begin to believe that everything really is

a big deal. We fail to recognize that the way we relate to our problems has a lot to do with how quickly and efficiently we solve them. As I hope you will soon discover, when you learn the habit of responding to life with more ease, problems that seemed “insurmountable” will begin to seem more manageable. And even the “biggies,” things that are truly stressful, won’t throw you off track as much as they once did.

Happily, there is another way to relate to life—a softer, more graceful path that makes life seem easier and the people in it more compatible. This “other way” of living involves replacing old habits of “reaction” with new habits of perspective. These new habits enable us to have richer, more satisfying lives.

I’d like to share a personal story that touched my heart and reinforced an important lesson—a story that demonstrates the essential message of this book. As you will see, the events of this story planted the seed for the title of the book you are about to read.

About a year ago a foreign publisher contacted me and requested that I attempt to get an endorsement from best-selling author Dr. Wayne Dyer for a foreign edition of my book *You Can Feel Good Again*. I told them that while Dr. Dyer had given me an endorsement for an earlier book, I had no idea whether or not he would consider doing so again. I told them, however, that I would try.

As is often the case in the publishing world, I sent out my request, but did not hear back. After some time had gone by, I came to the conclusion that Dr. Dyer was either too busy or unwilling to write an endorsement. I honored this decision and let the publisher know that we wouldn't be able to use his name to promote the book. I considered the case closed.

About six months later, however, I received a copy of the foreign edition and to my surprise, right on the cover was the old endorsement for the earlier book from Dr. Dyer! Despite my specific instructions to the contrary, the foreign publisher had used his earlier quote and transferred it to the new book. I was extremely upset, and worried about the implications as well as the possible consequences. I called my literary agent, who immediately contacted the publisher and demanded that the books be taken off the shelves.

In the meantime, I decided to write Dr. Dyer an apology, explaining the situation and all that was being done to rectify the problem. After a few weeks of wondering about what his response might be, I received a letter in the mail that said the following: "Richard. There are two rules for living in harmony. #1) Don't sweat the small stuff and #2) It's all small stuff. Let the quote stand. Love, Wayne."

That was it! No lectures, no threats. No hard feelings and no confrontation. Despite the obvious unethical use of his very

famous name, he responded with grace and humility; no feathers ruffled. His response demonstrated the important concepts of “going with the flow,” and of learning to respond to life gracefully, with ease.

For more than a decade I have worked with clients, helping them to approach life in this more accepting way. Together, we deal with all types of issues—stress, relationship problems, work-related issues, addictions, and general frustration.

In this book, I will share with you very specific strategies—things you can start doing today—that will help you respond to life more gracefully. The strategies you are going to read about are the ones that have proven themselves to be the most successful by clients and readers of mine over the years. They also represent the way I like to approach my own life: the path of least resistance. Each strategy is simple, yet powerful, and will act as a navigational guide to point you in the direction of greater perspective and more relaxed living. You’ll find that many of the strategies will apply not only to isolated events but to many of life’s most difficult challenges.

When you “don’t sweat the small stuff,” your life won’t be perfect, but you *will* learn to accept what life has to offer with far less resistance. As we learn in the Zen philosophy, when you learn to “let go” of problems instead of resisting with all your might, your life will begin to flow. You will, as the serenity

prayer suggests, “Change the things that can be changed, accept those that cannot, and have the wisdom to know the difference.” I’m confident that if you give these strategies a try, you will learn the two rules of harmony. #1) Don’t sweat the small stuff, and #2) It’s all small stuff. As you incorporate these ideas into your life you will begin to create a more peaceful and loving you.

1.

Don't Sweat the Small Stuff



Often we allow ourselves to get all worked up about things that, upon closer examination, *aren't* really that big a deal. We focus on little problems and concerns and blow them way out of proportion. A stranger, for example, might cut in front of us in traffic. Rather than let it go, and go on with our day, we convince ourselves that we are justified in our anger. We play out an imaginary confrontation in our mind. Many of us might even tell someone else about the incident later on rather than simply let it go.

Why not instead simply allow the driver to have his accident somewhere else? Try to have compassion for the person and remember how painful it is to be in such an enormous hurry. This way, we can maintain our own sense of well-being and avoid taking other people's problems personally.

There are many similar, "small stuff" examples that occur every day in our lives. Whether we had to wait in line, listen to unfair criticism, or do the lion's share of the work, it pays

enormous dividends if we learn not to worry about little things. So many people spend so much of their life energy “sweating the small stuff” that they completely lose touch with the magic and beauty of life. When you commit to working toward this goal you will find that you will have far more energy to be kinder and gentler.

2.

Make Peace with Imperfection



I've yet to meet an absolute perfectionist whose life was filled with inner peace. The need for perfection and the desire for inner tranquility conflict with each other. Whenever we are attached to having something a certain way, better than it already is, we are, almost by definition, engaged in a losing battle. Rather than being content and grateful for what we have, we are focused on what's wrong with something and our need to fix it. When we are zeroed in on what's wrong, it implies that we are dissatisfied, discontent.

Whether it's related to ourselves—a disorganized closet, a scratch on the car, an imperfect accomplishment, a few pounds we would like to lose—or someone else's "imperfections"—the way someone looks, behaves, or lives their life—the very act of focusing on imperfection pulls us away from our goal of being kind and gentle. This strategy has nothing to do with ceasing to do your very best but with being overly attached and focused on what's wrong with life. It's about realizing that while there's

always a better way to do something, this doesn't mean that you can't enjoy and appreciate the way things already are.

The solution here is to catch yourself when you fall into your habit of insisting that things should be other than they are. Gently remind yourself that life is okay the way it is, right now. In the absence of your judgment, everything would be fine. As you begin to eliminate your need for perfection in all areas of your life, you'll begin to discover the perfection in life itself.

3.

Let Go of the Idea that Gentle, Relaxed People Can't Be Superachievers



One of the major reasons so many of us remain hurried, frightened, and competitive, and continue to live life as if it were one giant emergency, is our fear that if we were to become more peaceful and loving, we would suddenly stop achieving our goals. We would become lazy and apathetic.

You can put this fear to rest by realizing that the opposite is actually true. Fearful, frantic thinking takes an enormous amount of energy and drains the creativity and motivation from our lives. When you are fearful or frantic, you literally immobilize yourself from your greatest potential, not to mention enjoyment. Any success that you do have is despite your fear, not because of it.

I have had the good fortune to surround myself with some very relaxed, peaceful, and loving people. Some of these people are best-selling authors, loving parents, counselors, computer experts, and chief executive officers. All of them are fulfilled in what they do and are very proficient at their given skills.

I have learned the important lesson: When you have what you want (inner peace), you are less distracted by your wants, needs, desires, and concerns. It's thus easier to concentrate, focus, achieve your goals, and to give back to others.

4.

Be Aware of the Snowball Effect of Your Thinking



A powerful technique for becoming more peaceful is to be aware of how quickly your negative and insecure thinking can spiral out of control. Have you ever noticed how uptight you feel when you're caught up in your thinking? And, to top it off, the more absorbed you get in the details of whatever is upsetting you, the worse you feel. One thought leads to another, and yet another, until at some point, you become incredibly agitated.

For example, you might wake up in the middle of the night and remember a phone call that needs to be made the following day. Then, rather than feeling relieved that you remembered such an important call, you start thinking about everything else you have to do tomorrow. You start rehearsing a probable conversation with your boss, getting yourself even more upset. Pretty soon you think to yourself, "I can't believe how busy I

am. I must make fifty phone calls a day. Whose life is this anyway?" and on and on it goes until you're feeling sorry for yourself. For many people, there's no limit to how long this type of "thought attack" can go on. In fact, I've been told by clients that many of their days and nights are spent in this type of mental rehearsal. Needless to say, it's impossible to feel peaceful with your head full of concerns and annoyances.

The solution is to notice what's happening in your head before your thoughts have a chance to build any momentum. The sooner you catch yourself in the act of building your mental snowball, the easier it is to stop. In our example here, you might notice your snowball thinking right when you start running through the list of what you have to do the next day. Then, instead of obsessing on your upcoming day, you say to yourself, "Whew, there I go again," and consciously nip it in the bud. You stop your train of thought before it has a chance to get going. You can then focus, not on how overwhelmed you are, but on how grateful you are for remembering the phone call that needed to be made. If it's the middle of the night, write it down on a piece of paper and go back to sleep. You might even consider keeping a pen and paper by the bed for such moments.

You may indeed be a very busy person, but remember that

filling your head with thoughts of how overwhelmed you are only exacerbates the problem by making you feel even more stressed than you already do. Try this simple little exercise the next time you begin to obsess on your schedule. You'll be amazed at how effective it can be.

5.

Develop Your Compassion



Nothing helps us build our perspective more than developing compassion for others. Compassion is a sympathetic feeling. It involves the willingness to put yourself in someone else's shoes, to take the focus off yourself and to imagine what it's like to be in someone else's predicament, and simultaneously, to feel love for that person. It's the recognition that other people's problems, their pain and frustrations, are every bit as real as our own—often far worse. In recognizing this fact and trying to offer some assistance, we open our own hearts and greatly enhance our sense of gratitude.

Compassion is something you can develop with practice. It involves two things: intention and action. Intention simply means you remember to open your heart to others; you expand what and who matters, from yourself to other people. Action is simply the "what you do about it." You might donate a little money or time (or both) on a regular basis to a cause near to your heart. Or perhaps you'll offer a beautiful smile and genuine

“hello” to the people you meet on the street. It’s not so important what you do, just that you do something. As Mother Teresa reminds us, “We cannot do great things on this earth. We can only do small things with great love.”

Compassion develops your sense of gratitude by taking your attention off all the little things that most of us have learned to take too seriously. When you take time, often, to reflect on the miracle of life—the miracle that you are even able to read this book—the gift of sight, of love, and all the rest, it can help to remind you that many of the things that you think of as “big stuff” are really just “small stuff” that you are *turning into* big stuff.

6.

Remind Yourself that When You Die, Your “In Basket” Won’t Be Empty



So many of us live our lives as if the secret purpose is to somehow get everything done. We stay up late, get up early, avoid having fun, and keep our loved ones waiting. Sadly, I’ve seen many people who put off their loved ones so long that the loved ones lose interest in maintaining the relationship. I used to do this myself. Often, we convince ourselves that our obsession with our “to do” list is only temporary—that once we get through the list, we’ll be calm, relaxed, and happy. But in reality, this rarely happens. As items are checked off, new ones simply replace them.

The nature of your “in basket” is that it’s *meant* to have items to be completed in it—it’s not meant to be empty. There will always be phone calls that need to be made, projects to complete, and work to be done. In fact, it can be argued that a full “in basket” is essential for success. It means your time is in demand!

Regardless of who you are or what you do, however, remem-

ber that *nothing* is more important than your own sense of happiness and inner peace and that of your loved ones. If you're obsessed with getting everything done, you'll never have a sense of well-being! In reality, almost everything can wait. Very little in our work lives truly falls into the "emergency" category. If you stay focused on your work, it will all get done in due time.

I find that if I remind myself (frequently) that the purpose of life *isn't* to get it all done but to enjoy each step along the way and live a life filled with love, it's far easier for me to control my obsession with completing my list of things to do. Remember, when you die, there *will* still be unfinished business to take care of. And you know what? Someone else will do it for you! Don't waste any more precious moments of your life regretting the inevitable.

7.

Don't Interrupt Others or Finish Their Sentences



It wasn't until a few years ago that I realized how often I interrupted others and/or finished their sentences. Shortly thereafter, I also realized how destructive this habit was, not only to the respect and love I received from others but also for the tremendous amount of energy it takes to try to be in two heads at once! Think about it for a moment. When you hurry someone along, interrupt someone, or finish his or her sentence, you have to keep track not only of your own thoughts but of those of the person you are interrupting as well. This tendency (which, by the way, is extremely common in busy people), encourages both parties to speed up their speech and their thinking. This, in turn, makes both people nervous, irritable, and annoyed. It's downright exhausting. It's also the cause of many arguments, because if there's one thing almost everyone resents, it's someone who doesn't listen to what they are saying. And how can you really listen to what someone is saying when you are speaking for that person?

Once you begin noticing yourself interrupting others, you'll see that this insidious tendency is nothing more than an innocent habit that has become invisible to you. This is good news because it means that all you really have to do is to begin catching yourself when you forget. Remind yourself (before a conversation begins, if possible) to be patient and wait. Tell yourself to allow the other person to finish speaking before you take your turn. You'll notice, right away, how much the interactions with the people in your life will improve as a direct result of this simple act. The people you communicate with will feel much more relaxed around you when they feel heard and listened to. You'll also notice how much more relaxed *you'll* feel when you stop interrupting others. Your heart and pulse rates will slow down, and you'll begin to enjoy your conversations rather than rush through them. This is an easy way to become a more relaxed, loving person.

8.

Do Something Nice for Someone Else— and Don't Tell *Anyone* About It



While many of us frequently do nice things for others, we are almost certain to mention our acts of kindness to someone else, secretly seeking their approval.

When we share our own niceness or generosity with someone else, it makes us feel like we are thoughtful people, it reminds us of how nice we are and how deserving we are of kindness.

While all acts of kindness are inherently wonderful, there is something even more magical about doing something thoughtful but mentioning it to no one, ever. You always feel good when you give to others. Rather than diluting the positive feelings by telling others about your own kindness, by keeping it to yourself you get to retain *all* the positive feelings.

It's really true that one should give for the sake of giving, not to receive something in return. This is precisely what you

are doing when you don't mention your kindness to others—your rewards are the warm feelings that come from the act of giving. The next time you do something really nice for someone else, keep it to yourself and revel in the abundant joy of giving.

9.

Let Others Have the Glory



There is something magical that happens to the human spirit, a sense of calm that comes over you, when you cease needing all the attention directed toward yourself and instead allow others to have the glory.

Our need for excessive attention is that ego-centered part of us that says, "Look at me. I'm special. My story is more interesting than yours." It's that voice inside of us that may not come right out and say it, but that wants to believe that "my accomplishments are slightly more important than yours." The ego is that part of us that wants to be seen, heard, respected, considered special, often at the expense of someone else. It's the part of us that interrupts someone else's story, or impatiently waits his turn to speak so that he can bring the conversation and attention back to himself. To varying degrees, most of us engage in this habit, much to our own detriment. When you immediately dive in and bring the conversation back toward

you, you can subtly minimize the joy that person has in sharing, and in doing so, create distance between yourself and others. Everyone loses.

The next time someone tells you a story or shares an accomplishment with you, notice your tendency to say something about yourself in response.

Although it's a difficult habit to break, it's not only enjoyable but actually peaceful to have the quiet confidence to be able to surrender your need for attention and instead share in the joy of someone else's glory. Rather than jumping right in and saying, "Once I did the same thing" or "Guess what I did today," bite your tongue and notice what happens. Just say, "That's wonderful," or "Please tell me more," and leave it at that. The person you are speaking to will have so much more fun and, because you are so much more "present," because you are listening so carefully, he or she won't feel in competition with you. The result will be that the person will feel more relaxed around you, making him or her more confident as well as more interesting. You too will feel more relaxed because you won't be on the edge of your seat, waiting your turn.

Obviously, there are many times when it's absolutely appropriate to exchange experience back and forth, and to share in the glory and attention rather than giving it all away. I'm re-

ferring here to the compulsive need to grab it from others. Ironically, when you surrender your need to hog the glory, the attention you used to need from other people is replaced by a quiet inner confidence that is derived from letting others have it.

10.

Learn to Live in the Present Moment



To a large degree, the measure of our peace of mind is determined by how much we are able to live in the present moment. Irrespective of what happened yesterday or last year, and what may or may not happen tomorrow, the present moment is where you are—always!

Without question, many of us have mastered the neurotic art of spending much of our lives worrying about a variety of things—all at once. We allow past problems and future concerns to dominate our present moments, so much so that we end up anxious, frustrated, depressed, and hopeless. On the flip side, we also postpone our gratification, our stated priorities, and our happiness, often convincing ourselves that “someday” will be better than today. Unfortunately, the same mental dynamics that tell us to look toward the future will only repeat themselves so that “someday” never actually arrives. John Lennon once said, “Life is what’s happening while we’re busy making other plans.” When we’re busy making “other plans,” our children are

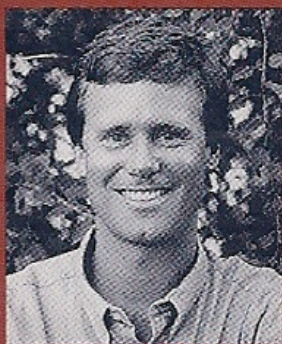
busy growing up, the people we love are moving away and dying, our bodies are getting out of shape, and our dreams are slipping away. In short, we miss out on life.

Many people live as if life were a dress rehearsal for some later date. It isn't. In fact, no one has a guarantee that he or she will be here tomorrow. Now is the only time we have, and the only time that we have any control over. When our attention is in the present moment, we push fear from our minds. Fear is the concern over events that might happen in the future—we won't have enough money, our children will get into trouble, we will get old and die, whatever.

To combat fear, the best strategy is to learn to bring your attention back to the present. Mark Twain said, "I have been through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened." I don't think I can say it any better. Practice keeping your attention on the here and now. Your efforts will pay great dividends.

Don't Sweat the Small Stuff . . . and it's all small stuff is a book that shows you how to keep from letting the little things in life drive you crazy. In thoughtful and insightful language, author Richard Carlson reveals ways to calm down in the midst of your incredibly hurried, stress-filled life. You can learn to put things in perspective by making the small daily changes he suggests, including advice such as "Think of your problems as potential teachers"; "Remember that when you die, your 'in' box won't be empty"; and "Do one thing at a time." You should also try to live in the present moment, let others have the glory at times, and lower your tolerance to stress. You can write down your most stubborn positions and see if you can soften them, learn to trust your intuitions, and live each day as if it might be your last. With gentle, supportive suggestions, Dr. Carlson reveals ways to make your actions more peaceful and caring, with the added benefit of making your life more calm and stress-free.

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Richard Carlson, Ph.D., is a frequent lecturer and a stress consultant in private practice. He is the author of *You Can Be Happy No Matter What, You Can Feel Good Again, Shortcut Through Therapy*, and coauthor of *Handbook for the Soul* and *Handbook for the Heart*. He lives with his wife and children in Northern California.

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