

THE BIG IDEAS

Building Agency
vs. Reducing anxiety.

The 7 Principles
For building agency.

Step 1: Control Stimuli
To create a calm, clear mind.

Mirror Mirror in My Brain
And in yours!

Energize to Agency-ize!
Eat, move, sleep to power up!



The Power of Agency

The 7 Principles to Conquer Obstacles, Make Effective Decisions, and Create a Life on Your Own Terms

BY PAUL NAPPER AND ANTHONY RAO · ST. MARTIN'S PRESS © 2019 · 336 PAGES

“What we’re witnessing in our practices, and indeed across every spectrum of the human experience, is an increasing number of people who have lost their ability to adapt to stress—with the result that they lose the ability to direct their lives. Psychologists refer to this as a *loss of agency*. Agency is what allows you to pause, evaluate, and act when you face a challenge—be it at work, home, or anywhere else in the world.

Agency is about being *active* rather than *passive*, of reacting effectively to immediate situations and planning effectively for your future. When you become too overwhelmed you lose your agency, you can no longer evaluate your circumstances, reflect on the challenges and opportunities you’re confronted with, make creative decisions, and act in ways that open up possibilities for a meaningful life on your own terms.

In simple words, agency is what humans have always used to *feel in command of their lives*. With it, people are able to live in ways that reflect their interest, values, and inner motivations. Building agency is central to what therapists and consultants like us do in helping people improve their lives, it has been debated and written about by mental health scholars for years.

And yet only recently has it begun to penetrate the popular consciousness as essential for coping with the obstacles that life throws our way and building a healthy fulfilling life. Its erosion is linked directly to the crisis levels of anxiety we see in current times, for physiological reasons we will get to below, and because when we don’t have agency, problems fester, and plans don’t get made, leaving us with the constant sense of worry about the things that aren’t getting done and the impending consequences of inaction.”

~ Paul Napper and Anthony Rao from *The Power of Agency*

“Agency is the ability to act as an effective agent for yourself—reflecting, making creative choices, and constructing a meaningful life.”

~ Paul Napper and Anthony Rao

Agency.

It’s one of my favorite words and psychological concepts (and a cornerstone of our [Optimize Coach program](#)). So, when I saw this book I immediately got it and read it and here we are.

Paul Napper and Anthony Rao are leading consultants and clinicians (who have both held academic positions at Harvard Medical School).

In their great book, they define agency as *“the ability to act as an effective agent for yourself—reflecting, making creative choices, and constructing a meaningful life.”*

Then they provide practical, scientifically-grounded wisdom on, as per the sub-title of the book: *“The 7 Principles to Conquer Obstacles, Make Effective Decisions, and Create a Life on Your Own Terms.”* I loved it. (Get a copy of the book [here](#).)

As always, the book is packed with Big Ideas. And, as always, I'm excited to share a few of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

"Managing your exposure to external stimuli will increase the quality of your thinking, the quality of your judgment, and the quality of your life overall."

~ Paul Napper and Anthony Rao

BUILDING AGENCY VS. REDUCING ANXIETY

"When we set out to write this book, we were struck by one thing above all. We observed the link between people's general confidence and their ability to meet significant challenges. It seemed that those who were confident more of the time—that is, they were feeling more in charge of their lives and connected to their sense of agency—reported less anxiety and overwhelm, *even when they were placed under highly challenging pressure situations.*

For us, this was a eureka moment. It wasn't just that less anxious people felt more confident but that *confidence itself fended off anxiety and moments of overwhelm.*

There is a biological parallel here. The sympathetic nervous system (which ignites fear and aggression when the brain perceives threat) and the parasympathetic nervous system (which returns the mind and body to calm and homeostasis) work in this seesaw way.

The breakthrough idea we had is this: instead of trying to lower people's worry or anxiousness (as many practitioners now do with pills and therapies), we attack it from the other end. We encourage a confidence that can actually *help keep stress away.* And we do it by figuring out what empowers people, what gives people greater capacity to cope and adapt, and nurturing that. Our theory was that the resulting confidence would neutralize—or at least keep at bay—the negative emotions that so often drag people down."

That's from the Introduction.

Want to feel more in control of life? There are obviously a number of ways we can approach it. I love the idea of primarily focusing on BUILDING AGENCY rather than trying to reduce anxiety per se. Let the stronger sense of power/confidence/agency put the stressors in proper perspective rather than primarily try to alleviate the symptoms of stress.

Reminds me of spiritual teacher Vernon Howard's wisdom. In [The Power of Your Supermind](#), he tells us: "*People ask, 'But how do I get out of this mess?' Mysticism replies, 'If you were on a higher level of consciousness, you would not be in it in the first place.'*"

Same thing here. One could ask: "How do I deal with anxiety?" And we could answer: "If you had higher levels of agency you wouldn't be feeling so much anxiety."

Helping us build our agency (and, as a by-product reduce our sense of overwhelm/anxiety/etc.) is, of course, what the book is all about. We'll take a quick look at the 7 principles next.

But first: A quick word about the parasympathetic nervous system.

You know how I often share the word that's used most often in a book? Well, I was surprised how often I underlined the word "calm." I'm not sure if it was THE most repeated theme (beyond agency itself) but it was definitely up there.

Stressed/low-agency people tend to be in a near-CONSTANT state of fight-or-flight. Their sympathetic nervous system is always on high alert. As a result, they're anything but calm and/or confident. We need to practice flipping the switch from fight or flight to calm and confident—from sympathetic to parasympathetic. (When? All the time. :)

Paul and Anthony tell us that STEP 1 in achieving this is to reduce inputs (they call it "Control Stimuli"). Later in the book, in the chapter on being "Stable and Grounded" they tell us:

"We've known about the connection between actions and emotions for over one hundred years. Still, most of us don't fully recognize the connection between our feelings (which are nearly impossible to control) and our actions (which are almost always in our conscious control).

"Where we choose to put our attention is a momentous decision. Our attention is a precious commodity that defines our ability to be effective agents for ourselves."

~ Paul Napper and Anthony Rao

" Spending time with empathetic, optimistic, open-minded people and weeding out those who have the opposite qualities will boost your mood, elevate your motivation, and improve your health."

~ Paul Napper and Anthony Rao

This is reflected in the wise words of [William James](#), referred to as the father of American psychology: 'Action seems to follow feeling, but really action and feeling go together; and by regulating the action, which is under the more direct control of the will, we can indirectly regulate the feeling, which is not.'

Here's to a nice, deep breath. Relax your body. Exhale. Smile. Flip the switch and be the most calm and confident version of you. All day. Every day. Energized tranquility for the win!

THE 7 PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING AGENCY

"The erosion of agency is a serious, widespread problem. Fortunately, we all have powerful adaptive abilities at our disposal. We have developed seven targeted principles for you to follow to increase your level of agency and keep it a healthy level. You will find a range of simple, effective practices embedded in each principle:

- **Control Stimuli.** Cutting back the number of distractions in your immediate environment increases your ability to choose where your attention goes, improves your concentration, bolsters creative thinking, and makes you less susceptible to both impulsive acts and poorly thought-out decisions.
- **Associate Selectively.** Surrounding yourself with healthy, empathetic, open-minded, candid, and supportive people will boost your mood, elevate your motivation, and improve your overall health and well-being.
- **Move.** Focusing on movement, and on the nutrition and rest necessary to keep you active and in balance, increases mental and physical strength and stamina—essential building blocks to all body and mind functions.
- **Position Yourself as a Learner.** Actively questioning, listening, and learning as part of your daily routine gives you a deeper understanding of the world around you, enabling you to continuously expand your knowledge and capabilities.
- **Manage Your Emotions and Beliefs.** Cultivating greater self-awareness helps you to identify and bring order to strong feelings and beliefs that could misguide you, allowing you to navigate life with greater confidence.
- **Check Your Intuition.** Learning to access your intuition, and ensuring that you use it wisely rather than impulsively, provides valuable guidance as you make your way through challenges.
- **Deliberate, Then Act.** Using a defined deliberation process allows you to identify and weigh options in a contemplative, inclusive, rational way before making important decisions and positions you to take positive, clear, decisive actions."

" Commit to moving—even if not vigorously, at least every thirty minutes. Set an alarm as a reminder. At the very least, roll your shoulders and do a quick stretch."

~ Paul Napper and Anthony Rao

As you'd expect, each of these "7 Principles to Conquer Obstacles, Make Effective Decisions, and Create a Life on Your Own Terms" gets its own chapter.

The first three are what Paul and Anthony refer to as "Behavioral Principles." They're the easiest to learn and give us a strong foundation from which we can master the more complex and challenging to learn and develop "Cognitive Principles."

Obviously, get the book for the deep dive on each. For now, let's have fun exploring a few Ideas we can apply to our lives TODAY!!!

We'll start with the first (and arguably most important) principle: "Control Stimuli."

STEP 1: CONTROL STIMULI TO CREATE A CLEAR HEAD

"Cigarettes, alcohol, and commonly prescribed pharmaceuticals like Adderall and Prozac all

"To have full agency, you need to adjust and update your beliefs periodically, and that requires a willingness to differentiate what's real and what's not real. John Maynard Keynes, one of the most influential economists of all time, said it quite plainly: 'I change my mind when the facts change. What do you do?'"

~ Paul Napper and Anthony Rao

come with warning labels. Has the time come for warnings to accompany the use of media, particularly social media? Is there unhealthy or unsafe exposure or dangerous doses so to speak? On the surface, this may sound preposterous, but as you read these research findings below, ask yourself if you might rethink your exposure to media and start controlling it for yourself.

- A study in the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* found that the closer you are to your (turned off) smart phone, the more it acts like mental kryptonite. Simply keeping it anywhere near you distracts you and can lessen your capacity to think.
- The more time people spent on Facebook, the worse they felt and the less satisfied they were with their lives, according to University of Michigan researchers in a 2013 article for *PLOS ONE*.
- People watching news coverage of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing reported higher acute stress two to four weeks after the tragedy than people who had direct exposure to the events at or near the bombings, according to researchers in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of United States of America (PNAS)* journal."

Welcome to Principle #1: Control Stimuli—which is basically a new take on the core themes from [Digital Minimalism](#) and [Lead Yourself First](#) (see both Notes and 101s!) along with [Conquering Digital Addiction 101](#).

Want agency?

It ALL (!!!) starts with reclaiming control of your attention and flipping the switch from hyper-stimulated Inputville to a calmer, more focused zone of attentional management.

As Paul and Anthony put it: "Agency begins with what you let into your mind."

I'm reminded of Jim Collins's brilliant Foreword to *Lead Yourself First* where he tells us: "We live in a cacophonous age, swarming insects of noise and interruption buzzing about—emails, text messages, cable news, advertisements, cell phones, meetings, wireless Web connections, social media posts, and all the new intrusions invented by the time you are reading this. If leadership begins not with what you do but with who you are, then when and how do you escape the noise and find your purpose and summon the strength to pursue it? This book illustrates how leaders can—indeed must—be disciplined people who create the quiet space for disciplined thought and summon the strength for disciplined action. It is a message needed now more than ever, else we run the risk of waking up at the end of the year having accomplished little of significance, each year slipping by in a flurry of activity pointing nowhere. So take some quiet time, engage with this book, and commit to the hard work of alone time."

"Psychologist Daniel Kahneman describes intuition as being fast, associative, and automatic ('System 1') thinking, contrasted with slow, analytical, and more bound by rules thinking ('System 2'). Intuition exerts a powerful influence, and when developed as a skill, it strengthens our ability to assess situations and make good decisions."

~ Paul Napper and Anthony Rao

That cacophony of inputs? We need to get REALLY good at managing it.

All that incoming data takes a LOT of energy to manage. We're blind to the volume of stimulation we're surrounded by and we'd be wise to exercise more conscious control of what we allow into our consciousness. But only if we want more agency. ;)

Of course, the authors provide tips to Control Stimuli. But you already know at least (!) one thing you could be doing. What is it? Today a good day to start exercising your agency muscles?

P.S. Paul and Anthony tells us that: "The American Psychological Association's 2017 Stress in America survey found a startling 86% of adults report being constantly or often connected to their electronic devices. To detox, the APA recommends finding regular times to completely unplug and stay away from all devices. Doing so, the organization says, will lower stress, maintain better mental health, and help break the chronic compulsive behavior many of us have to constantly check in with their electronic devices—reaching for digital stimulation to fill every free moment of downtime."

"The agency principle Check Your Intuition has a double meaning. It involves both the ability to check in and access your intuition as well as the ability to keep it in check, meaning to use it wisely as opposed to wildly."

~ Paul Napper and Anthony Rao

P.P.S. That Boston Marathon bombing statistic always blows me away. We referenced the same studies in The Upside of Stress where [Kelly McGonigal](#) put it this way: "Stress caused by the news, as opposed to stress caused by your life, is unique in its ability to trigger a sense of hopelessness. Watching TV news after a natural disaster or terrorist attack has consistently been shown to increase the risk of developing depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. One shocking study found that people who watched six or more hours of news about the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing were more likely to develop post-traumatic stress symptoms than people who were actually at the bombing and personally affected by it. It's not just traditional news programs that instill fear and hopelessness; stories of tragedy, trauma, and threats dominate many forms of media. In fact, a 2014 study of U.S. adults found that the single best predictor of people's fear and anxiety was how much time they spent watching TV talk shows."

MIRROR MIRROR IN MY BRAIN (AND IN YOURS!)

"The human brain has evolved over many thousands of years to pick up any and all potential threats and negative feelings expressed by those nearby. Neurobiologist Dr. Charles Stevens, a nationally recognized expert at the Salk Institute's Molecular Neurobiology Laboratory in California, told us, "There's a neural basis for how we share emotions. Cells in our brain will fire in the same way as the nervous system that we are watching. Our nervous systems respond similarly—are linked—they mirror each other—to whomever we are observing and close to.' As if tethered by invisible cords, we are wired to replicate the moods of others—including worry, anxiety, and sadness—just by being in the same room. The positive emotions of others are just as easily replicated.

Other research shows that moods can spread among networks of people like a social contagion. Sociologist Nicholas Christakis of Harvard Medical School and political scientist James Fowler of UC-San Diego looked at data from a twenty year study that included information on the social networks of 4,739 people. Called the Framingham Heart Study, the research followed people from 1983 to 2003. The results were startling: On average, they found that for every happy friend in your social network, your own chance of being happy rises by 9%. For every unhappy friend, your chance of being happy decreases by 7%. Happiness—as well as unhappiness—was essentially spread and shared."

"The bottom line of associating selectively is to surround yourself at every stage of life with supportive, open-minded, optimistic people and minimize involvement with people who are not. Being aware of this and acting on it will have an enormous positive impact on your state of mind and your physical health, two critical building blocks of personal agency."

~ Paul Napper and Anthony Rao

[Tony Robbins](#) likes to quote his mentor [Jim Rohn](#) who liked to say that we are the average of the five people with whom we spend the most time.

Although the precision of that anecdotal calculation is up for discussion, the scientific data establishing the underlying wisdom of the statement is pretty remarkable.

"On average, they found that for every happy friend in your social network, your own chance of being happy rises by 9%. For every unhappy friend, your chance of being happy decreases by 7%. Happiness—as well as unhappiness—was essentially spread and shared."

<- Isn't that NUTS?! Wow.

Enter: The Second Principle: Associate Selectively.

In short: Want higher levels of agency? Hang out with people with high agency.

Practically speaking, how about a quick look into the mirror neurons in our brain as we reflect on what high-agency people we can spend a little more time with today.

And... Who we might want to spend a little less time with as we Optimize our well-being? (Although not an easy subject to discuss and/or wisely Optimize, let's remember just how important it is!)

btw: The Buddha had this to say on the subject 2,500 years ago: "Avoid the company of the immature if you want joy." And: "If you find no one to support you on the spiritual path, walk

alone. There is no companionship with the immature.”

“Engage in some brief, healthy movement throughout your day. Feeling stuck on a task? Overwhelmed? Then literally get yourself up and move—any amount, no matter how small, is beneficial.”

~ Paul Napper and Anthony Rao

ENERGIZE TO AGENCY-IZE!

“We all know what it feels like to sit around like a slug all day, not getting outdoors and moving about. But when we get some real movement in, it is a kind of agency in itself. It primes our minds and our senses to fully engage in the world.

When we say *Move*, we really mean this: Pay attention to your body so that you can provide it with what it requires to be healthy and in balance, because when your body is out of balance, your mind is out of balance. To achieve this, engage in physical movements in multiple ways, rest adequately, and eat nutritious food. Your agency depends on it. Without physical health and balance in your life, everything else will wobble and decline. Flexibility, strength, and stamina are the most obvious things that begin to deteriorate when you’re physically out of balance. But likewise, your motivation, your ability to pay attention, and your ability to delay gratification are adversely affected. Most important to realize, with unhealthy amounts of movement, rest, nutrition, your psychological state—you’re thinking skills and ability to manage your emotions—deteriorates, and along with it your personal agency.”

Welcome to the third behavioral principle: Move.

I actually think it could be (perhaps more accurately) labeled “Energize” to account for all the facets of Optimizing our fundies to make sure we’re Optimized.

But the point remains: Your agency is driven by your Energy.

WHICH IS WHY WE SO INCESSANTLY COME BACK TO IT AGAIN AND AGAIN!!! (Ahem.)

So, how’s your movement? And your sleep? And your nutrition?

What’s one little thing you can do TODAY to +1 your agency, my beloved Optimizing friend?

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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About the Author of “The Power of Agency”

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Paul Napper leads a management psychology and executive coaching consultancy in Boston. His client list includes Fortune 500 companies, universities, and start-ups. He held an academic appointment and advanced fellowship position at Harvard Medical School.



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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at optimize.me.