

Book Review

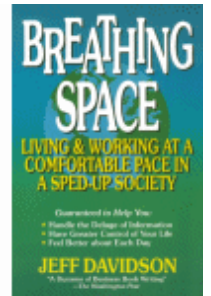
Breathing Space:
Living and Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped-Up Society
Jeff Davidson

Paperback 209 pages (February, 2000) Breathing Space Institute

Reviewed by Mary Case

Jeff Davidson tells us why you're breathless already in the twenty-first century and provides tools to inhale deeply, stand strong and assess your situation in life and at work.

Five factors combine to cause the pressure you feel, according to Davidson:



1. **Population Growth:** The world is crowded and becoming more so. Think gridlock. One stalled motorist can cause 15,000 people to sit and wait, and wait, and wait. And have you had trouble getting a doctor's appointment? An appointment with your haircutter? A cashier to check you out in a department store?
2. **An Expanding Volume of Knowledge:** Within three years, half of your technical knowledge will be obsolete. Even a quick review of topics requiring thought may cause breathlessness, cause you to feel uninformed, overwhelmed, and under-served: AIDS, chemical dependency, diet, electronic funds transfer, obstetrics, sonar, viruses, wellness.
3. **Media Growth and Electronic Addiction:** I have satellite TV at home, over 2000 vinyl records, a record washer(!), 400 CDs, two computers, four independent radios, and six electronic remotes, two phone lines, two cell phones, two internet access lines. AM, FM, and XM radio and a CD player coexist in my car (which speaks to me in a human voice when it needs oil or water). According to national statistics, I'm under-equipped for my demographic. Need I say more?
4. **The Paper Trail Culture:** I copy, therefore I am. If you are a white collar worker, controlling your paper flow is near the top of your to-do list. Ccing your boss and your co-workers has become a job protection mandate. Our litigiousness causes us to ensure we can document, account, prove, and defend, even insignificant audit factors.
5. **Over-abundance of Choice:** Hallmark Cards reports 105 familial relationships! Currently, more than 2000 skincare products are readily available in America! There are more than 86 types of dimmer switches! Just deciding among the many low-level choices will render you breathless.

These five elements lead us—through **multi-tasking**—to rarely fully experience anything we do and to perceive that the time has passed more quickly. Reading while eating. Talking on the phone while answering your email. Driving while listening to a book on tape. You can do these things simultaneously, though nothing will be fully appreciated. Davidson introduces the concept of **low-quality leisure**—leisure force-fitted between frenzied activities, the concept of a **human doing**, rather than a human being.

The fix. Davidson offers lots of tips and tools for reclaiming your breathing space. I found the following most useful.

- **Look beyond routine, ritual, and victimization:** take responsibility for what is occurring in your life. Change something small. For example, how important is it that you read "Dear Abby" every day? How many magazines do you subscribe to? Do they pile up and make you feel guilty? Ritual is routine, often outmoded, comfortable

behavior. Victimization is believing that circumstances or others cause your lack of breathing space. You choose powerlessness rather than taking responsibility. Here are the symptoms:

- Constantly shortchanging the most important tasks.
 - Attempting to do everything yourself.
 - Feeling closed in, cramped for space.
 - Having piles stack up.
 - Having too many interruptions to concentrate.
 - Always being late.
 - Outmoded ritual behavior is among the greatest obstacles to achieving goals and to heightening your sense of breathing space.
- **Consider your priorities.** If you are like most of us, you will have to drop some. Face it. The more items of momentary interest you can drop or ignore, the greater the chance of alignment, and the breathing space.
 - **Get organized now and for the future.** The key to getting and staying organized is making the effort. To condition your environment in accordance with what you face today is to accommodate inefficiency; you are merely managing the aftermath of intake glut. So, manage the beforehand. Integrate your priorities and goals with your personal systems: desk, office, closets, car, and other spaces. Do it all at once, or set aside a half day per week to tackle the organizing job little by little. In short order, you'll have a grasp of what you have, and what you have to keep in order. Remember, clutter is a sign of postponed decision-making and it contributes to the stress in your life.
 - **Condition your work environment.** Clearing your work space every evening allows you to choose how you'll begin the next day. When it saves you time, buy and install it.
 - **Conditioning your other environments:** Anything temporarily housed in the wrong location adds to clutter and consumes your time. Anything you need at various checkpoints in your life is best stored there. Develop the habit of clearing space in all the compartments of your life.
 - **Control intake overglut:** Eliminate junk mail <http://www.dmaconsumers.org> Decide which newspapers, magazines, and professional journals you should continue to read, or decide to read every third issue. Keep a trash can right by the front door and toss unsolicited mail directly into it. Declare your freedom from the clutter syndrome. Eliminate files older than three years.
 - **Work to completion.** One after another. Develop the habit of beginning a project and staying with it until completed. Acknowledge every day—as you are cleaning up your desk - what you have completed. It's the surest way of leaving the day's work feeling uplifted.
 - **Plan transitions in.** Avoid post-trip stress by including a recovery day. If it takes you (as it does most of us) forty-five minutes to finalize meeting notes and decisions, schedule it. Don't plan it for the weekend. Reclaim the Sabbath, even if you don't attend worship services.

Choosing breathing space, in the end, is the most important suggestion in the book. Since reading it, I've begun to consciously look for ways to give myself time, rest, opportunities for rejuvenation. It's working but I'm worried that I'm working too hard at resting. Sigh. Such is life and work in the 21st Century.