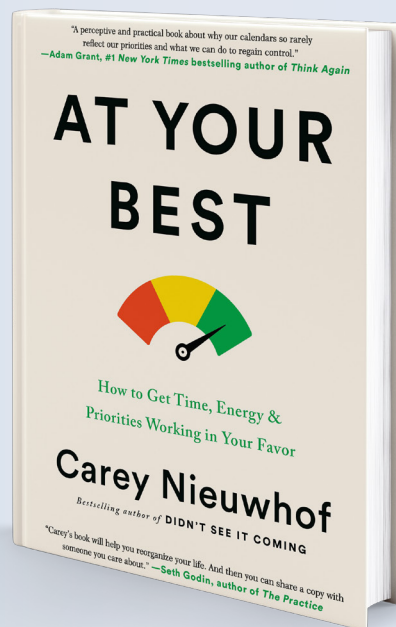


# BOOK SNAPS™

Zooming In On Your Next Read



## At Your Best By Carey Nieuwhof

Carey Nieuwhof is a bestselling author, speaker, former attorney, and he hosts one of today's most influential leadership podcasts. His podcast, blog, and online content for leaders are accessed over 1.5 million times each month. He speaks to leaders around the world about leadership, change, and personal growth. Carey and his wife, Toni, live north of Toronto.

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## A Cure to the Modern Pressure Problem

The modern world places demands on us that our family members just a few rungs up the tree could not have comprehended. When people from days gone by performed work, it was mostly manual in nature. Yes, it came with its share of pressures and stressors but the level of stress they lived under pales in comparison to that of present day “knowledge workers.” Professionals of every stripe from accounting to teaching to litigating live under a near constant feeling of stress and worst of all, they can't quite put their finger on the source.

Renowned leadership blogger and podcaster Carey Nieuwhof believes that “you deserve to stop living at an unsustainable pace.” In his latest, *At Your Best: How to Get Time, Energy, and Priorities Working in Your Favor*, he asks readers to imagine what it would be like to move away from the time pressures of modern life and instead, “learned how to live at your best, personally and professionally?” He wrote this book in an effort to help you find “a reasonable diagnosis” and “some welcome relief.” He assumes that you are feeling guilty, too, for not being able to keep all of the balls in the air. He believes that “your problems stem from having too much, not too little. Too many demands. Too many opportunities. Too much information. Too many distractions. Too many choices. Too many people vying for attention. And way too much stuff on the calendar.” This book offers you a cure to the modern pressure problem. Instead of offering ways to get out of stress or full on burnout, this book offers a way to avoid getting into it.

### Part 1: This Much Stress is Not Okay

Far too many of us are “overwhelmed and overcommitted and overworked” doing precisely what they set out to do. It's not that they didn't want this life they so carefully created. It's just that they didn't expect to feel so tired, lethargic, and dispassionate as a result. Stress leads to burnout and both have disastrous implications for your health and well being. The list of chronic ailments directly tied to stress is long. The list of diseases, equally as lengthy. As if that weren't enough, if your body undergoes chronic stress for too long without relief, you can drop dead of a heart attack or stroke. Game over. It's not okay in any way to live under this much stress.



Nieuwhof points out the irony in modern humans, who are by every measure the most prosperous people the world has ever known, are living to survive instead of surviving to live. Think about some of the things that we hear regularly from people of all ages. “I just need to make it to summer vacation.” “Let me survive final exams.” “Really, my goal is to get to July, and then all will be good...I hope.” Sound familiar?

We are all so overbooked and overextended that we are desperately seeking escape. Sometimes we kid ourselves into believing this stressful time of busyness is just a season. Nieuwhof explains, “If your busy season has no ending, it’s not a season—it’s your life.” The good news is that it doesn’t have to be this way. Nieuwhof changed what he was doing with his days and how he was doing it. The result was transformational for himself, his family, and his life.

## Part 2: Focus Your Time

Nieuwhof says that we have three primary assets that we can manage each day. Those are our time, energy, and priorities. The next part of the book focuses on how you can make time work for you instead of against you. The common advice for avoiding burnout is to get enough sleep, exercise regularly, and maintain your important relationships. Nieuwhof admits this is sound enough advice but many of us follow it and still feel “perpetually overwhelmed.” One reason is due to how we use our time.

Nieuwhof says, “Time off won’t heal you when the problem is how you spend your time on.” We take a few days off here or there or even a long sabbatical once a decade and magically expect our return to real life to be changed. That makes very little sense. “It’s about as strategic as telling an alcoholic that he should stop drinking on Thursdays.” If you want to experience a meaningful and lasting change in how you feel, you have to change the way you spend all of your time.

In order to focus your time, you have to make two critical mental shifts in how you view time all together. The first is that you must “tell the truth about time.” Every person on this planet has the same 24 hours a day. Whether you are the most productive person or you sleep the entire time, it’s the same allotment for us all. The excuse “I don’t have time for that” is just that. An excuse. You have the time. You just need to take it. Instead, you have to start telling the truth about how you use your time.

Don’t say you didn’t have the time. Say you had it, but didn’t take it. You could have done it, but you chose not to. You could have attended the meeting, but you opted to stay out of it. A key to making this benefit you without alienating everyone you know is to keep this dialogue internal. Slowly over time, you can start using time truth language at work, once you are well practiced and have experienced the shift in how you use time that comes along.

The second mental shift has to do with shifting your goals in relation to time. You have to “embrace passion and abandon balance.” Nieuwhof asks you to completely let go of the idea of balance as a goal. This is liberating on a deep level. Most people who view themselves as successful in finding balance are

in retreat mode. They are pulling back from their real goals and getting less and less.

Nieuwhof believes that most people who accomplish meaningful things do not seek balance. They seek passion. You have to choose passions carefully and then take the time to engage in them. “Balanced people don’t change the world. Passionate people do.” Whatever you decide to do, do it with fervor and a full embrace. No guilt, no remorse. “The key to living passionately is to focus your time on what is truly most important to you and to choose to do things wholeheartedly, with enthusiasm.”

## Part 3: Leverage Your Energy

Too many of us are investing our energy in unintentional ways. It is true that we are all given 24 hours in a single day, we do not have equal energy spanning over that duration. In reality, most of us have between three and five hours of high productivity every day. That’s it. We have to get intentional and thoughtful about the activities we organize during peak, medium, and low energy times of the day.

When we look at leveraging our energy, we have to identify the things that we are uniquely good at doing. These are gifts that we do easily and naturally. Couple those gifts with passion and you have the perfect recipe for making a big impact. The key to leveraging your energy is to identify those things you are good at and do those activities when you are at your peak energy level for the day.

You will get far more done in far less time when you leverage your energy in this way. How you organize your day becomes intentional, not accidental. “Most people let days happen to them, which results in disappointment, tension, unmet expectations, and important things left undone.” Leverage your energy with your gifts and passion and you will make a much larger impact.

If your gifting-related activities are the highest priority and thus, performed when you are at your peak energy, you must determine your middle range and low range priorities. Meetings, schedule management, administrative work, and other noncritical, noncreative, lighter activities are typically best suited for these lower energy times of day. Your overall performance in these non critical capacities will be maintained but you won’t squander the chance to do what you are best at doing when you are at your best by doing more menial tasks at peak energy times of the day.

## Part 4: Realize Your Priorities

You can set the best of intentions when your day begins but there are times, quite frequently for many of us, when your best intentions get blown up and your day gets totally hijacked. Team members need to pick your ear about a project. Emails keep pouring in and you can’t seem to ignore them. Friends text you and you find yourself in long text conversation instead of doing the work you intended to do. It’s an all too familiar scenario. In the real world, our priorities get hijacked by others who are trying to accomplish their own priorities. “Before you get mad at the



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world for this, just realize that’s exactly what you do too.”

A big part of this problem is that people have unparalleled access to us thanks to our phones. No matter where you go or what you are doing, that device can ping a notification with an associated request to get someone else’s priority on your own agenda. When we react to these requests over and over again, we find ourselves wondering where our day went and why we didn’t get anything done.

To get around this, you have to put a strategy in place. Make it a goal to “spend 80 percent of your time on 20 percent of activities and tasks that produce 80 percent of your results.” Start by making a list of the top activities and tasks that are most important and yield the highest results in your day. Once those top activities are identified, they become a filter you can “use to sift through all the requests that come your way.” If the request does not fit into one of your top activities, it should not make it into your calendar. It may not be “fancy or flashy” to spend 80 percent of your time on these things that move the needle the most, “but goodness, it’s rewarding.”

There is one major hurdle that stands in your way. So many of us are people pleasers and we find it incredibly difficult to say no. But here’s the problem. “Without a strategy for saying no, you default to yes, and your life vaporizes with other people’s priorities being realized rather than yours.” Saying no is hard because we are fearful of disappointing others or “coming off as a jerk.” There is a way to soften the blow to yourself and say no in the nicest way possible, taken verbatim from the book:

1. Tell them you’d love to meet them.
2. Express empathy, showing you understand where they are coming from.
3. Be firm when you answer directly and with kindness that you cannot do it.
4. Redirect them to someone who can help.
5. Thank them to show your appreciation.

Be clear and do not leave false open. Don’t say maybe or you will see. Say no, nicely.

### Part 5: Theory, Meet Real Life

In real life, we can succumb to saying yes or get our priorities mixed up or find ourselves stuck in a midenergy task during a high energy time of day. That’s life and theories are sometimes tricky to fit into actual life. Nieuwhof recommends using strict

control over your calendar so that you stop getting controlled by other people and distractions. If you intend to spend the weekend with your family but have not blocked that time out on your calendar, you are setting yourself up for getting sucked into something else that is lower priority.

“Decide how you’ll spend your time before others decide it for you. If you don’t decide ahead of time how to spend your time, others will, which is a ticket both to feeling overwhelmed and to ensuring you accomplish nothing that’s important to you.” If you want to spend time with your family every Saturday, you need to put that in your calendar. If you want to work out every afternoon at 4 pm, that needs to go on your calendar, too. This makes saying no much easier and it places your needs above those of others, right where they should be. You can do this easily and simply by creating repeating tasks in your calendar that will be automatically scheduled out as far in advance as you want.

You can live a life with drastically reduced stress and wildly increased productivity. You can organize your time and effort around your gifts and passions and make time for all of the things that matter to you most. But Nieuwhof has a warning that you should heed. Stress is a sort of modern day siren’s song. We hate it but we actually kind of thrive on it. We are almost addicted to it. If we are not stressed, the assumption is that we are not ambitious or hardworking or achieving up to our potential. In our society, stress is seen as a badge of honor. It doesn’t have to be that way.

When stress and overwhelm start creeping back in, you’ve got to recognize them as a signal to do something different. You do not have to be caught up in the swell. You can adapt, plan, and mitigate your way out of the stress cycle and put yourself back into a position of thriving. When you take control of your time, leverage your energy, and prioritize your activities you will truly be at your best.