



Dr. David Hanscom

How Getting Things Done can Change Your Life

An interview with David Allen
on Back in Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom

Podcast Date: October 16, 2019
© 2019, David Hanscom, M.D. All rights reserved.

IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER: THIS DOCUMENT DOES NOT PROVIDE MEDICAL ADVICE

Information, including but not limited to, text, graphics, images and other material contained in this document, is for informational purposes only. The purpose of this document is to promote broad consumer understanding and knowledge of various health topics. The information in this document is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, opinion, diagnosis or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health care provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition or treatment and before undertaking a new health care regimen, and never disregard professional medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have read in this document. You should also ask your physician or other healthcare provider to assist you in interpreting any information in this document or in applying the information to your individual case. This document does not recommend or endorse any specific tests, physicians, products, procedures, opinions or other information that may be mentioned herein. Reliance on any information appearing in this document is solely at your own risk.

David Allen – How Getting Things Done can Change Your Life

- Tom Masters: Hello everybody and welcome to another episode of Back In Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom. I'm your host Tom Masters. Today we have a very special guest whose name is familiar to many of our listeners, David Allen, the bestselling author of Getting Things Done, is here.
- David Hanscom: Thank you, Tom. I'd like to welcome David Allen to the show. Our audience is going to be extremely interested in his topic. He's the author of a book called **Getting Things Done, The Art of Stress Free Productivity**, and he's a world renowned speaker. He is in 73 countries so far, and he's going to tell us how he got started.
- His approach is different and he's been remarkably approachable. He has been very committed to helping people get things done and he's on a mission. And actually, he changed my entire trajectory of my practice, and I'll explain that as we go along in this show. But I'd like to welcome David to the program and David, appreciate you taking the time to talk to us today.
- David Allen: Oh, thanks David. Thanks for the invitation. I am delighted to hang out with you and Tom.
- David Hanscom: Yeah. So your approach is different and I'm just curious, in what year did you actually start getting things done?
- David Allen: I began doing the learning and applying some of the core principles and techniques 1982 and 1983.
- David Hanscom: Okay. And I'm curious because it really is a different book, so I'd like to just work backwards a little bit and I had always thought that being organized was just an inherent trait. And when I came into residency, it's a very structured world. You don't have to actually be that organized, you're just trying to survive the day. But also realize that there's good patient services, returning phone calls, making sure test results weren't missed and just getting organized.
- David Hanscom: And I read one organizational book, that was good for a couple of years, helped me out a lot. I don't remember exactly how I ran across your book, but it's really distinctly different process and allowed me to run a career well, did not miss the test results, was able to talk to patients really quickly and easily. But I'd like to just, if you give us three or four things that are different about your approach compared to other organizational systems.
- David Allen: Well, there are many ways to spin that one David, one way I say it is that, my methodology starts with where you are and not with where you should be.
- David Hanscom: Right.
- David Allen: So, most everyone's got enough **"should's"** in their life. And everybody's already filled to the brim with too much to do, too many opportunities. The stress of

David Allen – How Getting Things Done can Change Your Life

opportunity and other stresses as well. And so, what my methodology is about is working with current reality—**and getting current reality under control.**

There are a lot of people, "You should have a vision, you should have a mission, you should have your purpose and your values clear." I agree. However, trying to do that when your day-to-day is out of control is going to create nothing but guilt and frustration. So you need to get whatever the day-to-day means.

And day-to-day means very different things for different people. It means different things for a 10 year old than it does for a CEO, that it does for a stay at home dad, that it does for a clergyman or whatever. But the day-to-day is still the day-to-day and if that is out of control and you're not stable and balanced and have enough bandwidth left in your head to focus creatively or strategically or whatever, then that doesn't work very well.

I'll admit to your listening audience right now, I have never had a formal traditional course in time management, psychology, or business. Everything that I came up with was street smarts. It was done because I needed it for myself, as my life was getting more complex in my small little consulting practice that I started with back in the early 1980s. I was looking for tools and techniques that helped me stay clear.

Because I had a background in meditation and martial arts and so I had learned the value of clear space in your head. To be able to then tackle tough things to be able to deal with pain, to be able to deal with a lot of stuff. You know, it's just being present. Well, the mindfulness people, they've made that quite popular these days, but I learned at 35 years ago.

David Hanscom: What was your martial arts background? I had forgotten about that.

David Allen: Karate. Yeah, I got a black belt in karate in my 20s.

David Hanscom: You did? Okay.

David Allen: Yeah I did.

David Hanscom: Because I know that in the last few years, philosophy seems to be more apparent, but I forgotten that you actually had started with that. So I agree that **most real changes come from outside the box.** I'm sure you've noticed that, that major changes really occurred not necessarily within think tanks, but people that need a problem solved and they simply solve it. **And I think I like the street smart concept a lot.**

Compare this situation with chronic pain. People are trapped. They're trapped by their pain, they're trapped by their disability and the physicians aren't telling them what to do. So you might know from looking at my work a little bit, stress isn't the problem as much as the chemical reaction to it. When your body's full

David Allen – How Getting Things Done can Change Your Life

of adrenaline, cortisol and histamines, the anxiety you feel is the expression of your body's stressed chemical state. You are lying on the beach in the sun, you're full of oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin, you feel relaxed—your body chemistry really determines state of mind.

So there is stress and then there's the response to stress. Part of the process is identifying and actually organizing the chaos in your life which not surprisingly **does** reduce stress. And that's where in the process I introduce learning about chronic pain. We learned about anger and forgiveness and letting it go. For the third stage, your book is the core part of the process of taking what you learn to calm down the nervous system and actually start executing. We find out that the solution for chronic pain isn't actually solving the pain.

David Allen:

Well, you know, another thing that's sort of, I guess unique about my approach or this methodology itself—and by the way, I didn't so much make it up as I recognized what it is we **do** when we get ourselves in control and stable. And so each one of the techniques, and we can talk about that in more detail later on, but each one of the techniques is the technique everybody's already familiar with. It's how you get your kitchen under control. How you get a meeting under control, how you get all kinds of things under control.

And you actually don't have to like your life to get it under control. So I'm not a happy purveyor. ***I mean happiness is fine, but happiness goes up and down. What my methodology does is it puts you in the driver's seat.*** So you would describe people who are feeling victims and being reactive and you don't have to like the pain, but you can get in the driver's seat about it as you know. So all it is as a signal to you and the signal oftentimes, people will then collapse based upon that signal.

But sometimes people say, "Wait a minute, that's a message. What do I need to do? How would I like to feel? What would I need to do to get there?" So I'm not Mr. Pollyanna, in fact, one of my favorite new books that I read, I recommend to anybody, it's called *The Antidote*. You know, I think I may have mentioned that in a phone call to you by Oliver Burkeman. The subtitle is happiness for people who can't stand positive thinking.

And you know, back to the point is that, this deals a lot with, what are you dealing with. And outcome and action then become the core elements of this. What are you after? How would you like to feel? What do you think you might need to do that you can control and do that might move you toward that end? And it puts people back in the driver's seat.

And being in the driver's seat, interestingly enough David, you know, **Csikszentmihalyi**—the guy who wrote *Flow* and all about that, was totally surprised and his early research, he thought people would move into the flow state in their relaxed recreational personal time. And wrong answer, it turned out that people actually move more into flow at work, when they're engaged, when they're involved, when they're active.

David Allen – How Getting Things Done can Change Your Life

Not necessarily of stuff they would consider the most fun things in their life, but the things that actually triggered them to get in the driver's seat and take control. Like driving or car or riding a bike or doing something like that, as opposed to just being passive. So I think that's a lot of, you know, yes, my stuff has a key organizational component. But it's not just rearranging piles of stuff. Part of the organization is how do I organize my thinking in an appropriate way?

David Hanscom: Well, I have a little mantra I say to myself –***you have to dig deeper to reach higher***. And I think from my perspective, which you've taught me through your lectures and books, is to really just dig down and just get stable and just put a deep foundation in for moving forward. And so we'll talk about the details a little bit later, but I really want to talk about the whole bottom up approach. One thing I'd like for you to discuss is about the hard drive versus the RAM metaphor, as far as what you're doing with your ***to do*** list.

David Allen: Yeah. Well most people are using their head as their office and your head is just a really crappy office. You know, cognitive science now has come up with what I had discovered just on the street 30 years ago, which is your head is not designed to remember, remind, prioritize, manage relationships between more than four things. That's it, that's this new cognitive science research and data. Your brain did not evolve to do any of that.

Your brain evolved to do brilliant stuff. Everybody listening to this, you're doing it right now. That is, you're using long-term history and pattern recognition to say, "Oh, that's a radio or that's a phone. Oh, that's a person, that's a thing." As opposed to, "That's just vibrations of light and sound that have no meaning to me." So your brain evolved to survive, to recognize tigers and thunderstorms and berries in a bush and your baby crying and things like that.

But that's all from the limbic part of your brain, which is totally present, has no sense of past or future. It's totally present right now. You know, the forebrain that evolved later on, is the one that plans, that thinks, that has a sense of past or future, has a sense of here's what I want to do I can't do yet. And does all that good stuff that the cognitive brain does.

But it still was not designed to remember, remind. So the whole idea is building the external brain so that your brain is freed up from trying to do something it doesn't do very well at all. And your mind actually has no sense of past or future. So if stuff is banging around in your head, and that's the only place that the would could, should need to resolve to, that's the only place you've got it. If you can't finish the moment you think of it, there's a part of you that thinks you should be doing that all the time.

David Hanscom: I see.

David Allen: And of course you can't do more than one thing at a time. So it's automatically stressful to keep stuff in your head that you know you should do, you can't do in

David Allen – How Getting Things Done can Change Your Life

the moment. So, and this, it's just mechanical. It's, it's subtle, but it's just a mechanical process. Everybody listening to this at some point felt overwhelmed and confused and sat down and made a list and felt better.

David Hanscom: Right.

David Allen: Right. And if they reverse engineered how that happened, they'd never keep anything in their head the rest of their life and I don't.

David Hanscom: Can you explain that?

David Allen: Well, if getting stuff out of your head makes you **feel more in control, more focused, more clear**, why the hell would you keep anything in your head? Duh.

David Hanscom: Good point.

David Allen: You know?

David Hanscom: Well, you used the analogy of the computer hard drive that you're essentially taking your to-do-list or your life and putting it on hard drive. Then each week, then each day, you decide what you want in the RAM or the working memory.

David Allen: Yeah, well you bring up the, actually, what you want to do. See, here's a big key and don't tell anybody you know, listening to this, this major secret about getting things done. It's not so much about getting things done, so much as it's about being appropriately engaged with all of your commitments in life, so you're totally present with whatever you're doing. Happens to be the most productive state and the healthiest state to operate from when you're just present.

You know, the yogis teach themselves to be present by focusing on breathing and doing all kinds of things. That's why they stick needles in the cells and not feel the pain or not at least experience... They then experience pain and sensation not as pain. And pain comes from the ego because the ego is based on past and future. If you get totally present, you can experience pain as sensation. I'm not saying that's easy, but it is something you can actually train yourself to do.

David Hanscom: And I'm just curious, with your martial arts background, have you had some success in training yourself to do that?

David Allen: Yeah. You get kicked in the wrong place really hard, I guarantee you, you learn to focus on your breathing really fast.

David Hanscom: I like to go back to the positive thinking because I've said this for a long time. What got me in deep, deep trouble personally was positive thinking. When I was a fearless spine surgeon and my goal in life was... The way my positive thinking

David Allen – How Getting Things Done can Change Your Life

came to form was, bring it on; I can take on any stress anytime, anyplace. And I was a master in suppressing everything. And so I was a positive thinker, "I can do this. I can do this, I can do this."

Now all of a sudden at age 39 I went from a fearless surgeon to crippling anxiety in one day, I had a panic attack. And for the next 15 years it was just sort of a nightmare trying to put that back into the bottle. And so the positive thinking, as you know, humans, I call the curse of consciousness, humans can't escape through thoughts. There's lots of research done on obsessive thought patterns, unpleasant repetitive thoughts, which is called your URTs in the research.

So whether you suffer, suppress or mask these thoughts, they continually torture you. So positive thinking is way suppressing all of that and it's a bit of a problem. The other thing that positive thinking does, there's a little book out called Rethinking Positive Thinking. Is that when you have this big vision, positive thinking, that positive vision actually substitutes for reality, you actually don't do it.

David Allen: You know, I understand all that. But that's the whole point—the way out is through. So you don't get rid of that stuff by trying to ignore it or suppress it. You actually jump into it and then get out the other side of it, you know? And he talks a lot about the stoics, which I wasn't that familiar with.

But a lot of stoicism really, it was based... A lot of people think that's a cynicism, but it's not really, really more the acceptance of reality. Acceptance is the first law, anything you know, it's like what you resist, you're stuck with, which is another way of saying what you said. So you know, the way to get through it is to acknowledge it. You need to acknowledge... You don't have to like it, but you need to acknowledge it and then say, "Okay, now what?"

And then it gives you a base of reality where you're operating from a real base as opposed to some fanciable base. And I'm not against positive thinking. I've built my life on affirmations and visualization and ideal scenes. I'd been doing that for 35, 40 years. So I'm not against that, because having a vision is really cool. Everybody's got a vision, everybody's got a vision right now—it's how you get out of a room. You see yourself out of the room and then you go execute on your picture.

David Hanscom: Right.

David Allen: Right. So you're a teleological you can't stop. You can't stop focusing, you can't stop visioning, you actually can't even stop planning. You're doing it all the time. You would just want to do it so it works for you as opposed to works against you, because you can't stop it.

David Hanscom: But going back to the first part of the conversation, if the room is so cluttered you can't move, the vision doesn't really matter?

David Allen – How Getting Things Done can Change Your Life

David Allen: Yeah, that's true. And your vision becomes then a vision of the negative demons that are coming at you. So you can't stop visioning but those are not necessarily positive visions. People think one affirmation is going to change your life. Yeah, but the rest of the day you're doing about 49,999 negative pictures. "Oh, this will never work; oh this is a bunch of hooey. You know, I could never do anything like that." So you've setting yourself up for failure that way unless you keep executing on it and stay engaged, in some sort of a positive focus way.

David Hanscom: Well one of the problems is I wrote a little website post called, Your Personal Brain Scanner. And I've talked to Dr. Fred Luskin who wrote the book called Forgive for Good, who's become a good friend of mine. And he's point out that the human body's first job is to survive. And so if things are good and you're relaxed, your brain's automatically scanning the environment for danger. That's what it's supposed to do is keep you alive.

And once you acknowledge that, and you can try to deal with it and be with it, then you actually start again, moving through the pain, moving through the chaos, is really the solution. Now I kind of believed this for a long time, that the only thing that's real is you and I talking. It's about connected and engaged thinking. And of course people in chronic pain are justifiably upset because they really are victims.

And of course the more legitimate your victim-hood, the harder it is to let it go. Also, the faster your mind spins. And one thing that strikes me about your process was interesting, you're reassurance, you're calming things down, you're taking control of multiple variables. And when your brain's spinning, you can't really focus on one thing. But your process allows people to start picking up things in a granular level to start to slow the whole process down.

David Hanscom: Remember when they enter those things already as control and what you're doing, you're giving people control of their current environment right there in front of them, to help calm things down. And anxiety, from the neuroscience standpoint, is the pain. I mean just says danger; it's just that sensation said, "Okay, there's something to threatening me, either perceived or real, it says danger." It helps you take some action to control the situation and then the anxiety drops.

Again one of the antidotes of anxiety control and what the getting things done process does is it start to give you control of that chaos right there in front of you. I'm also curious over the years, if you look back 35 years to now, what are some of the changes in your thinking compared to when you first started, or it's just more or less evolved to deepen in your concepts?

David Allen: Yeah, the latter, more than anything else. Nothing's really changed, once I learned it helps to get things out of your head. That'll be true 2000 years from now.

David Allen – How Getting Things Done can Change Your Life

David Hanscom: Right.

David Allen: Right. It really helps to decide when something has your attention, what's the action step needed to move, to change it to where you want to go and where is done? I mean, getting things done, what does done mean and what does doing look like and where does it happen? And those are two things that nobody really wants to answer automatically. You have to train yourself; it's a cognitive muscle to train to think about outcome and action.

You think it should be self-evident and it is self-evident when you're in a crisis mode, when you're in survival mode, "Wow, there's a tiger I'm going to run, I want to live. What's the next step? Climb the tree, got it." So it happens, you know you do that anyway. Most people will come up with, but if it's, should I get divorced, should I hire the vice president of marketing. What about this tooth that needs fixing?

You know, those are the things people would then sit and be bothered by as opposed to what's the action, what's the outcome. After, what do you want to have true if you don't like it or you want it different than it is. And understood, that can get pretty challenging when the situation... You know, with the kind of situations that you certainly have found people in, given your job and your work. But it still is the same thing, it doesn't negate the process just because it's hard or challenging or unfamiliar really more than anything else. You can actually train yourself—just make that a habitual thing to do.

David Hanscom: I'm sorry; you train yourself to do what now?

David Allen: You can make it a habitual way to think about stuff. When the surprise happens, when the crap hits the fan, when something happens like that, you can actually train yourself at that point to say, "Okay, wait a minute, take a breath, get present. What do I want to be true? What's the next thing I need to do to move the needle toward that?"

David Hanscom: Right.

David Allen: ***Because it won't happen by itself automatically—you actually have to train yourself to do that, and in a more proactive way.***

David Hanscom: Right. Well, this has been great. I just want to summarize some things that you've said. I mean, your process evolved basically from your own needs and basically it is pretty brilliant. I mean, I can't come close to really portraying the concepts in his book; a lot of them are very hard to put it into words. But it's a great process and the bottom line is that you're taking your **to do** list and putting it out of your brain and on sort of a hard drive. Then you're making a choice of what to do. The idea is you clear the deck so you can move forward.

David Allen – How Getting Things Done can Change Your Life

And we'll talk about this in the second half, some actual practical things to do to actually make these things happen. But ***until you actually learn the tools to actually calm down your nervous system and move forward, nothing's going to happen.*** And one of the most basic tools is actually getting organized. It's a learned skill, and then you can start moving forward away from your pain. Any other thoughts on that David?

David Allen: Let me insert something before we go to the techniques. I think another really important thing—***the real value of this methodology, is you don't need time, you need space.*** It doesn't take time to have a good idea. It doesn't take any time to be creative, it doesn't take any time to be strategic. It doesn't take any time to be present or loving. Like those don't require time, yet most people would say those are kind of the golden goodies of life.

David Hanscom: Right.

David Allen: ***Be strategic, be present, loving, be innovative, all that good stuff.*** It doesn't require time, but it does require something very important that you don't necessarily have, and that's room. So you've been talking around it in that way. It's kind of like I need space to be able to think, be able to stay present with what I'm doing—to focus completely on this thing I need to focus on instead of the 6 billion demons that are running through my head.

What this does is, it... And yes, you can focus on your breathing to get you present, but if you still need cat food, cat food is still going to pop into your head. Put the cat food on your hard drive, and then when you go out on errands, take a look. "Oh yeah, I need cat food," you know, and then it's off of your mind. So I just discovered the algorithm about how do you get stuff off your mind without having to finish it.

David Hanscom: Right, exactly. I mean people are in my life, and it's pretty insane, full time spine surgeon, wrote three books, all sorts of stuff. But what thing your technique absolutely taught me is that when I take a break, I take a break. Even if it's 10 minutes, I've actually stopped and I can actually be in that 10 minutes. And creating that space is a huge point, and I would completely agree with that.

David Allen: Well, as I say, ***you can only feel good about what you're not doing when you know what you're not doing.*** You know, I love taking naps, but there's a power nap and there's the escape nap. The power nap looks at the 642 things I could be doing now. And I go, "No, I'm going to take a nap." That's a power nap or power beer or power, whatever it is you want to do.

As opposed to, "Oh my God, I got so much stuff to do and I'm not sure what it all is. I need to numb myself out or just go unconscious." That's a different nap, not nearly as healthy. So yeah, it's really being aware of the gestalt of your commitments and where you have placed your cognitive energy and

David Allen – How Getting Things Done can Change Your Life

commitments, is just really critical in order to be able to not do them—and to your point, to *really* take a break.

David Hanscom: Right. Well, thank you very, very much for this insight—really remarkable. And we will do another podcast here in a few minutes on the actual techniques that he recommends to *actually* make some of the things happen. I appreciate you talking to us very much.

David Allen: Sure thing.

Tom Masters: Well, I want to thank you, David and David for really an absolutely fascinating insight into how we get things done. I'm sure our listeners are equally fascinated by it and want to learn more about the techniques and the next podcast. I want to remind our listeners to join us again next week for another episode of **Back In Control Radio** with Dr. David Hanscom. For more information, visit the website at www.backincontrol.com.

Note: The original transcript of this episode of Back in Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom has been edited for readability.