



Dr. David Hanscom

## The Art of Getting Things Done

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

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## David Allen – The Art of Getting Things Done

Tom Masters: Hello everybody and welcome to Back in Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom. We have with us in the studio today, our special guest, David Allen, *Bestselling Author of **Getting Things Done**.*

David Hanscom: Thank you Tom. David, welcome to our show. We had David on last week discussing some of the overall concepts of his process, and his book, called **Getting Things Done**. He is a renowned speaker. He's in 73 countries. He's published multiple books, but the core book is called **Getting Things Done**, revised edition in 2015. It's a remarkably concise organizational system focused on **getting the things that are in front of you done**, and then creating your vision to move forward.

And as you know, with chronic pain it is really critical to move away from the pain—not to actually stay focused on the problem. In this episode of the podcast, we discuss some of the actual techniques you can use to start moving forward. Welcome back to the show, David.

David Allen: Thanks David. Delighted to be here.

David Hanscom: We discussed how your philosophy and process emerged from your own needs. *The essence of the process is to actually see and connect with what is right in front of you.* And we know that the “eyes” of people in chronic pain are already trying to focus through the pure chaos and disruption of unexplained symptoms and people not believing you. People are pretty frustrated.

Your idea is to take your life and start to get it organized, and then to start moving forward. I want to talk to you today about how to get started, what actual steps to take to “connect” with what is right in front of you, and then what steps to take so this becomes an effective, long-term way to be in control again, and stay there. How do we get started?

David Allen: Sure. Well actually most of the techniques are quite simple. Most people actually do these techniques themselves anyway in various ways at various times. Most people have a serious improvement opportunity however, in doing these techniques on a more consistent basis and in the right times and places. Because you're not born doing them. Let me give you a very simple view of the five stages that I recognize we go through to get any situation more under control, clearer and more focused—more stable.

The first thing you need to do is identify what's not on **cruise control**. What's got your attention? What's bothering you? What's worrying you? What's excites you? What's on your mind, in other words. And capturing it is a first step. And capture doesn't mean just think about it or remember that you need cat food or you need to change this or you need to do that. It means write it down. That is get it out of your head in some sort of external bucket at least temporarily. Write it down on paper. Record it somewhere. Get it out of your head into some place, but not a random place. You need to have a structured place to be able to

toss that stuff, to write the stuff and to grab the stuff that you can't finish the moment you think of it. That you still need to do or think about or make some decision about.

So capture is the first step. Everybody's written things down in their life, I'm sure. Sure most people have listened to this and made lists at some point. So that's not an unfamiliar thing for people to do. What's unfamiliar is to do it for everything that has your attention. And little, big, personal, professional, doesn't matter. Because your head was not designed to remember remind. It did not evolve to do that very well.

And it's a terrible office. And so most people are leaving a lot of stuff in their head of their woulds, coulds, shoulds, need tos, don't forgets, I got tos, I ought tos, I thinks, whatever... Getting that stuff out of your head doesn't solve it, but it makes it possible to start to get engaged with it more appropriately—as opposed to being the victim of your own thinking. **Step One is to write it down, get it out of your head. So if somebody just said, okay, how do I start? I say pen, paper.**

David Hanscom: Pen and paper.

David Allen: Right. That's it. And just whatever's on your mind, write it down. I need cat food, bank, sister owes me money, printer dead, I don't know. Whatever, whatever. Anything. Okay. And that can take a while if you really want to do it, but that's the first step. Even if you just write the top 10 things down, it's going to help.

David Hanscom: Right.

David Allen: You'll automatically feel better.

David Hanscom: You still do that with pen and paper?

David Allen: Absolutely. Sure.

David Hanscom: And just a notepad or do you have a journal you keep it in or what do you-

David Allen: No. I've got a little pad on my desk, it's about half of a letter size and a pen right there all the time. I carry a little note taker wallet with me that has a little pen stuck in it. So wherever I am that my wallet and all my credit cards goes that has a little piece of paper in it. And so, yeah. So I-

David Hanscom: Okay.

David Allen: It is ubiquitous. It is always with me because God knows when the ideas are going to strike and things are going to pop into my head.

David Hanscom: Right.

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David Allen: So capture right away. Now I don't leave it there. It doesn't stay on those pieces of paper. Those pieces of paper go into my physical In-Tray and then I empty that In-Tray by doing the second step. Actually steps two and three work closely together: **Step Two is clarify; Step Three is organized.** So once I've written down something, if you made a list or you've written something on a piece of paper, then I need to clarify what exactly does that mean to you?

The first question to answer to clarify is, is it an actionable item? Are you committed to change this or do something about this? There are two answers, yes and no. Right? Maybe is a no. Right? Then if it's a no there's three things it could be in. Either trash, you didn't need it to begin where or now that you've seen it, you don't need it. Or it could be something you don't need to move on but you want to keep, because it's an email you need to refer to maybe later on. So you need to keep that as reference. And the third thing would be it's something that you're not sure you want to do now, but you might need to tackle it later. That's on hold or incubate.

David Hanscom: Okay.

David Allen: So those are the three non-actionable things. You need to clarify which ones of those are those.

David Hanscom: Okay.

David Allen: Right. And if it is actionable, Oh yeah, I do need to get cat food. I do need to look into getting a new printer. I do need to see if I want to get my tooth fixed. Whatever. Then the question is okay, if you had nothing else to do but that right now, what's the very next physical, visible action you would need to take to move forward on that? What's the next action?

David Hanscom: Okay.

David Allen: So that's also a very important clarification exercise. What's the very next step you would need to do about buying cat food, hiring a vice president or getting your tooth fixed? Is it a phone call to make, an email to send, a website to surf, a conversation to have with your partner? What's next? What would you, if you had nothing to do but that, what would you do? That takes a little discipline in your mind.

David Hanscom: Right.

David Allen: To actually hold yourself down to answer that question. And then the second thing you need to ask about an actionable thing is will one action complete this commitment?

David Hanscom: Okay.

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- David Allen: If it's fix the tooth that's hurting you, probably not.
- David Hanscom: Right.
- David Allen: So maybe the next action is make the appointment with a dentist and then you need to find out what's going on and so forth. So if that were me, I'd have on a list of mine called projects, I'd have the outcome written down called handle tooth.
- David Hanscom: Okay.
- David Allen: Finalize tooth situation.
- David Hanscom: Okay.
- David Allen: So outcome and action. So again, I just said a lot, but it's step two is clarify. What is this stuff? What does it mean to me?
- David Hanscom: Okay.
- David Allen: That email, that piece of paper, that thing that came in the mail, the note that I just wrote down. What is that?
- David Hanscom: Okay.
- David Allen: Then once you make that decision, step three is how do I organize reminders of any of that, that I can't finish the moment I think of it? Some things, when you think about what's the next action, you're saying oh, that's just something I need to do. I can do it in two minutes. Then they should just do it right then. That's the magic two minute rule that we uncovered. If you can actually finish something in two minutes, you should do it when you think of it because it would take you longer to organize it and look at it again then to finish it the moment it's in your face.
- David Hanscom: Right. I think the term you used, that if it's more than two minutes, by definition, it's a project. Correct?
- David Allen: No. If you can't finish it with more than one action. You might have a single action that'll finish something. It just might take you an hour to finish it.
- David Hanscom: Right.
- David Allen: Maybe you just need to sit down and write and publish a blog and you're going to do that in one sitting. That's just a next action.
- David Hanscom: Right. I see.

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- David Allen: That's not a project. Project just means hey, I need to create a series of six blogs that are going to do X, Y, and Z. That's-
- David Hanscom: I see.
- David Allen: Okay. So that's the clarification step. What is it? Then organize. If I can't finish whatever the action step is, and certainly if I have a project, I need to keep track of what those things are. So I need to have some sort of this personal system that I can keep track of the errands I need to run, emails I need to write, stuff to do at your computer, stuff I need to talk to key people about. And also the things you're waiting on to come back from somebody else.
- David Hanscom: Right.
- David Allen: Right. Believe me, if my doctor says, "I'm going to send you this prescription" that's going to be on a list of mine for "calls".
- David Hanscom: Right.
- David Allen: That's his job, but I care. Right? So I need to keep track of that someplace. So all of these things then go into some sort of a personal system. For the most part lists. Any kind of a list manager. Anything that makes lists, whether that's a paper based list, a little planner or whether that's a computer program that has lists in it. Any of those work, as long as you work them.
- David Hanscom: Can I ask what you use personally for that? As far as your organization?
- David Allen: I use a computerized list.
- David Hanscom: Okay.
- David Allen: For that. We use IBM notes in our company, which has a task management function to it. And I've just configured that as a way to keep track of my lists. So when I clean up all these notes on pieces of paper that I've captured over the day or whatever, then if it's an errand it goes on my errands list, if it's something to talk to my wife about it goes on my talk to Catherine list and if it's a project that goes in my project list.
- So pretty simple. It's not just one list. I've got several because most people actually have, in a typical day to day professional life, most people have somewhere between 30 and a hundred projects—and 150 to 200 *next actions* just on their current realities.
- David Hanscom: Is there a time of day when you do this? You do it once a day, twice a day, a particular time of day or just throughout the day?

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- David Allen: Well this is the nature of how you clean up your in-basket, whether it's your email or whether it's things you've collected. And I do that at least once a day I'll get all my accumulated new stuff just zeroed out by clarifying and organizing it. But usually once a day. Sometimes if I'm on a roll I may let it pile up for a day and a half or two days. But that's rare. Because I like to keep my backlog absolutely as lean as possible, because there's this surprise coming toward me I can't see.
- David Hanscom: Right.
- David Allen: When that surprise comes that could be good, bad, or indifferent, it might be some sort of a cool thing that shows up I didn't expect. Or some unexpected negative thing that shows up. *I don't want a backlog of unclarified, unprocessed, unorganized stuff sitting around, because that's going to make any input feel terrible.* It is going to make me really feel overwhelmed.
- So that's why when I'm not doing anything else, I'm cleaning up all of my backlog and in-baskets and collected notes and stuff to zero. So I'm ready for anything. My second book was called **Ready for Anything**. So it's really about getting yourself as clean and staying as clean as possible to do that.
- David Hanscom: Can we take a quick break here for a second? So just the book you have is called **Getting Things Done**, revised version published in 2015, and you've written two more books since then. What are the other two books?
- David Allen: **Ready For Anything** was the second book. It was a collection of essays that I'd been writing over the years. It's more of a snack at more subtle levels of this stuff. Book three was a book called **Making It All Work: Winning at the Game of Work in the Business of Life**, which basically just took these basic ideas and expanded them a good bit more, and talked a good bit more about the different horizons of commitments that we have.
- And then we've just completed two books, **Getting Things Done for Teenagers** and we **Getting Things Done Workbook**, which, by the way, is designed for people who don't know what this is and just want to get started very easily. It was designed for that. To help people kind of do what I'm talking about right now.
- David Hanscom: This is a great conversation because I've used your process for years, but of course you've evolved with it. But now I'm going to go back and actually go through this. Sounds like the **Getting Things Done Workbook** might be a great place to restart my process since I know a lot about it already.
- David Allen: It could be. It will just remind you about the stuff that really works. It'll just hold your hand.
- David Hanscom: Right.

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David Allen: It is 10 moves. Get yourself an in-basket and do the *mind sweep*. Then basically, make these decisions about what this stuff is. Get some sort of a list manager.

And so it's the basic stuff again. But again, people have read my book 12 and 15 times, and say it's a different book every time they read it because they're ready.

David Hanscom: Right. Exactly.

David Allen: They're ready for different cut and implementation.

David Hanscom: **So, step one was capture. Step two was clarification. Step three was getting it on a list.**

David Allen: Yep.

David Hanscom: ...doable deal. And step four is?

David Allen: **Step four is to make sure you look at your stuff.** Review and reflect on the contents. A lot of people make lists and then don't even look at them and go out and go banging around and saying, excuse me. Why don't you pull out your stuff again and make a look?

Because if you don't do that, you won't trust that you're making good choices. And you need to make sure, that's your objective here, is to make good choices. And so that's a reflect and review of your content. And content can operate at many different levels but certainly on the basic level of what are all the actions you've told yourself to do you haven't finished? What's on your calendar you need that you've got to do? What are the projects you need to keep track of? And the review and reflection process just means to sort of keep your system current, keep you abreast of sort of a larger view. It's really more forest management instead of tree hugging.

You need to lift up and get a little altitude, take a look around. Anybody who's ever looked at their calendar did a small version of that.

David Hanscom: Right.

David Allen: Kind of locate yourself in space and time, feeling "here's where I need to be" and go, "okay," And if you look ahead for the next two or three or four days, you really get kind of a *review process* going.

So again, people do that. And then **Step Five is basically using those first four steps to make trusted choices about how you engage** ~ choices about questions on your mind like: *What do I do? Do I go run errands right now? Do I need to spend quality time with my kid right now? Do I need to take a nap right*

*now? Do I need to sit at the computer and deal with that ugly email I'm trying to respond to?*

That's where you're just making choices about what to do. Now David, I have to stop for a second and tell people if you think this is odd and weird stuff, let me ask anybody who's listening to this, have you ever had in your kitchen or cooking area that looks like a tornado has hit it or somebody's attacked it.

And yet you have friends coming over in an hour for dinner or something.

What do you think you'd do? In what order? The first thing you do is you notice what's off in the kitchen.

David Hanscom: Okay.

David Allen: ***You identify what's not on cruise control. That's capture.***

Then what do you do? Well, you decide what that stuff is that's off, that's not where it is the way it needs to be. Oh, that's a dirty dish. Oh, that's a clean dish. Oh, that's good food. Oh, that's crappy food. Oh, that's a spice. Oh, that's a whatever. Right? You're clarifying the exact nature of what's off or what's got your attention.

Then what do you do? What do you do with the dirty dish? Put in the dishwasher. What do you do with the good food? Put it back in the fridge. What do you do with the spice? Put where spices go. You organize based upon your clarification.

Then what do you do? You looked around at the whole scene of the kitchen. You looked at your watch to see what time it was, how much time you had until they showed up. Then you pulled out butter and you melted it. Step five. So this is how you get your kitchen under control. This is how you get your consciousness under control. I didn't make this up. I recognized it.

But those are very different behaviors with different tools and different techniques for each one. It's not just get organized.

David Hanscom: Right.

David Allen: It's not just *set priorities*. It's the combination of all of those capturing, clarifying, organizing, and reflecting so that you engage from a trusted place.

David Hanscom: That's a wonderful metaphor. That's really actually, that's something I'll take with me going forward. Because I'm one of those people who actually likes a clean kitchen. I go through exactly what I do. That's excellent, a really excellent metaphor. I also want to say, I want to go back to the review and reflect phase, step four. I have one little website post you wrote, is basically when you're

angry and frustrated you're reacting. And when you're reacting you're not really moving forward in a very thoughtful way. You're not really living life on your terms. You're simply reacting.

If you take the letter C in the word **reactive** and move it to the beginning of the word, you have **creative**. If you can see first, you can actually make some choices. When you're reacting, you don't have lot of choices. Simply trying to react that next thing in front of you without really thinking about it. You also made another point about creating a bit of a space.

Neuro-plasticity's sequence is awareness, separation, reprogramming. With awareness being, *here's the problem*. You step back. Create a little bit of space between the situation and the solution. And then you move forward to a different step. It actually changes, as you pointed out earlier, it actually changes the physical structure of your brain.

We do know when chronic pain has been documented that the people's brains actually physically shrink. When you treat chronic pain, people's brains actually physically re-expand. And so by creating some space and letting the creativity come back, you're really taking charge of your life. This is a pretty big deal as far as solving chronic pain.

David Allen:  
Yeah. Very cool. *I like to use the word respond because you can't ignore.* I mean back to back to current reality again, ***you can't ignore pain, but you can respond to it as opposed to just react to it.*** So I like the difference between the two meanings, because what you just talked about is creating an appropriate response to (this thing). That's why I say, you don't have to like it.

You don't have to think it's pleasurable, though there are some people that actually get a lot of pleasure out of the pain. *It is in response to whatever the input is.*

So many times *I'm just responding all day.* Often times I'm responding to things I put into motion. *It's not like I'm sitting here and creating all kinds of new stuff all the time.*

David Hanscom: Right.

David Allen: Many times I've already created it, and I am now appropriately responding to what I put into motion—what I've allowed to be in motion.

David Hanscom: The name of my book is **Back In Control**. I've seen many renditions of that moving forward, but in some chronic pain, there are three parts to the solution. One is becoming aware of the problem. The second part is dealing with every aspect at the same time, which takes some type of thoughtful system to do it. The third part, and far and away the most critical is—you have to take control.

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Your set of solutions is completely different than my set of solutions. Whether it's your life, your family or your pain, medical care, you're the one that has to take charge. And the problem in the medical system with people in chronic pain is that they're bounced and bounced and bounced. They're depending on people to tell them what to do. But as I'm talking to you it strikes me that people also get bounced around their own lives. They're behind on things, the inbox is too full, their kids aren't in control and their life is chaotic.

And it's the same metaphor for taking control of your internal life as your external life. As you start taking control over external life, things start to calm down internally, and I think vice versa. I think it's a really solid, solid process.

Well this is fantastic—any other just overall concepts? I still want to emphasize that getting organized is not inherent. It's a learned skill. You have to make a thoughtful decision actually to learn the skill. It's one of the projects. Right?

David Allen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

David Hanscom: And it's really doable. It's very doable. And David Allen's book **Getting Things Done** is excellent. And if you can remind me of the other book you just wrote that would be a great starting place I think, for most of the audience?

David Allen: **Getting Things Done Workbook.**

David Hanscom: The workbook. Okay.

David Allen: Yep.

David Hanscom: I'm going to actually pick it up myself. I honestly, have drifted a ways away from this and I would say I've lost it. I retired in December to pursue this pain project full time. And for me, I lost a lot of structure. And so for me, I need to really honestly, put that structure back in place. I'm getting things done, but there's more chaos than I've had before. And so it's good. I think the idea of, for me personally the takeaway is, creating that space to actually make thoughtful decisions. Things don't have to be happy all the time. But in that space there is a chance to actually be creative and move forward in a very powerful way. So, I'm so excited about this conversation.

David Allen: Sure. Well you don't have to go very far. Anybody listening to this, nor you, nor Tom, or anybody doesn't have to go very far. **All you have to do is start to pay attention to what has your attention.**

And ask yourself why is that on my mind? Anything pops into your head twice, that means you're not appropriately engaged with it. There's something about that, that interests you. If I need cat food pops into your head more than once, you're inappropriately engaged with your cat.

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- David Hanscom: I love my cat.
- David Allen: Because the only, yeah, the only reason stuff pops into your head in that way... Now if you just like thinking about things, that's fine.
- David Hanscom: Right.
- David Allen: You can think about them many times.
- David Hanscom: Right.
- David Allen: But if it keeps popping into your head, it just means there's some decision about it you haven't made or you haven't parked the results in some trusted place that you or the right person's going to see at the right time.
- David Hanscom: Great. The thing is so critical about this, creating space is that we do know, from the neuroscience research, is a mental threat creates the same chemical reaction in the body as a physical threat. And of course we can't escape our thoughts. So this is not a benign situation where the thoughts keep racing around in your head. Because we know that people under chronic stress, which again comes from thoughts, I mean obviously there's physical stress, but that's not the norm for humans, it's repetitive ruminating thoughts. That there's a higher incidence, autoimmune disorders, colitis, rheumatoid arthritis, all sorts of autoimmune disorders.
- People die in the average, seven years earlier under chronic stress. There's double incidence of obesity, heart disease, cancer. I mean the results when you're biasing a sustained chemical state, a hypervigilant state, people get sick. Now a psychological issue it translates into physical changes. So the situation we're talking about here about getting organized and creating the space to help calm yourself down, it is actually more than just a academic exercise. It's actually a life changing process.
- David Allen: It certainly can be. I've got legions of testimonials about that for sure.
- David Hanscom: Right. One final thing. I know I'm supposedly retired, but I'm not retiring very well and David is supposedly retired, but he's not retiring really well.
- David Allen: I'm 74, but I can't stop doing what I'm doing. Why should I? Why could I? I'd never do that.
- David Hanscom: But the conversation we had last week, which was fun, is that I feel a little guilty about not retiring better. But both of us really like seeing people thrive. It's hard to not help people thrive. Right? That's what drives us.
- David Allen: Yeah. Hard to do.

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David Hanscom: David sees concrete results with what he does. I see very concrete results with what we're doing. And that's fun, it's enjoyable and it does keep us going.

David Allen: Well, it's certainly fulfilling.

David Hanscom: Right.

David Allen: For sure.

David Hanscom: Anyway, thank you again very much. Really enjoyed this. I get a lot out of this personally. I'm sure my audience did too and this was fantastic. Thank you.

David Allen: My pleasure, David. Thanks guys.

Tom Masters: Well, thank you both for a fascinating look at the techniques we can use to get ourselves organized. I felt like I was actually attending a mini seminar and gathered a lot of insights that I'll find useful too. And I want to remind our listeners to return next week for another episode of **Back in Control Radio** with Dr. David Hanscom. For more information, you can visit the website at [www.backincontrol.com](http://www.backincontrol.com).

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