

Just Do Nothing

A PARADOXICAL GUIDE TO
GETTING OUT OF YOUR WAY

Joanna Hardis



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PRAISE FOR JUST DO NOTHING

“Practical. Friendly. Funny. As usual, Joanna knocks it out of the park with sound advice that you can actually use!”

—*Drew Linsalata, author of The Anxious Truth and Seven Percent Slower*

“Life has its ways of stressing us all out. In *Just Do Nothing*, Joanna Hardis helps us change our agenda from one of fruitlessly *fighting* the discomfort to one of *leaning into it* and relating to it better. Her amazing book takes scientifically proven cognitive-behavioral therapy strategies and blends them with her own wit, humor, illustrative case examples, and useful experiential exercises (and even a few f-bombs). You will definitely enjoy her entertaining and creative writing—but more importantly, you will benefit from Joanna’s knowledge and expertise.”

—*Jon Abramowitz, PhD Professor of Psychology at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*

“I get annoyed reading books that I wish I had written, so I am really annoyed writing this blurb, because this is the book I would have written had I

followed the advice in the book. This book will now be assigned to all of my new patients as they embark on their therapy journey, and it will provide them the intellectual basis they need along with the exercises required to make the desired changes in their lives. I will just tell them that I was the muse for the book and work on accepting that lie until I believe it. A MUST READ for anyone getting started on working themselves through their stress and anxiety.”

—*Patrick B. McGrath, PhD, Chief Clinical Officer,
NOCD*

To Izzy, Luke, and Josie; I really hit the karmic jackpot with the three of you. You will always be my number one.

And to the many patients I have treated; you have taught me so much. Thank you for allowing me to travel alongside you.

Disclaimer

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CHAPTER I

How Did We Get Here?

By “here,” I’m referring to two things: the writing of this book and whatever caused you to purchase it.

First, let me tell you a bit about why I wrote this book for you.

The truth is, I never intended to write a book. People have suggested the idea in passing (like, “You should put that in a book!” or “When are you going to write that book?”), and I’ve always blown it off because I never thought I had anything useful to say. But then I found myself ghosted at Canyon Ranch Spa in Tucson, Arizona, on my fifty-first birthday, and suddenly, I had something to say.

Allow me to give you a bit of history so you can appreciate why this ghosting experience stung so much. After all, I’m a licensed therapist; being ghosted should be a “relatively easy” thing to deal with, right?

I'd been divorced for over ten years when this happened. To say that the end of my marriage was messy and painful would be an understatement. I recently learned that the euphemistic word for what I experienced is "relationship betrayal" (which sounds about as nice as it is). Without getting into the details, which are irrelevant at this point, I have never known pain like I did when I found out my husband had fallen for another woman. I didn't know I was capable of feeling emotions as intensely and frequently (and often unpredictably) as I did for the two years after I found out. Beyond the nightmares, flashbacks, sleepless nights, sleepy days, a brain that felt like Swiss cheese, and a lack of appetite that swiftly turned to a voracious appetite, it physically hurt to be in so much emotional pain. The grief hurt. My muscles were so tight, as I remained constantly vigilant, waiting for the other shoe to drop, that I felt like a tweaked-out squirrel (not that I know what one of those looks like) every waking moment.

Taking care of my three kids, who were with me eighty percent of the time, was my primary concern. Then work. Then getting divorced. My needs, including dating, were not a high priority. Even once I started feeling better, I didn't want to get near anything that could risk my precarious stability. I wanted a guarantee I'd never have to feel that kind of pain again. For a long time, it seemed too hard and not worth the risk.

Also, it was easier to avoid the idea of dating

again when the kids were younger. I was busy with their stuff, and weekends were filled with sports-related activities. It didn't even matter that I wasn't terribly interested in their sports; what mattered was, I had things to do! I was busy! There were always people around with whom I could have dinner and kibitz.

Things changed, however, as my kids got older. Suddenly I had time on my hands. That "free time" provided me with some freedom, which I loved, but also loneliness. Yes, I had friends, but, in my town at least, coupled friends typically don't hang with single friends on the weekends. If their husbands were away, I'd get an invitation. But generally, between Thursday and Sunday, they were booked. I was lonely. And suddenly, the scales shifted, and the side that held and the potential upside of dating became heavier.

Acknowledging that the possible rewards of dating might outweigh the potential risks, I decided I had to take some action. In my ideal world, I would be set up by trusted friends. The person would be well vetted, their history scoured for sketchiness and red (and yellow) flags, delivered ready-to-date. In the end, I was set up a few times, but more times than not it was with someone my friends didn't really know, so it didn't get very far.

As much as I resisted it, I eventually put my profile on some dating apps. It was profoundly disturbing to think that my clients or prospective clients could see my dating profile, but this is (apparently) what

modern dating looks like. As an introvert, I've determined that the way one has to date these days to successfully find love online may be an undocumented stage of purgatory. All the funneling necessary to find a few good men is exhausting. But I digress. (And, for the record, I've dated some amazing men I've met online.)

I had been dating for several years when I met "the ghoster." At the time, things *seemed* different. We had an easy vibe, what seemed like similar interests, and a commitment to open communication (which now seems laughable). It appeared that we were aligned in seeing where this could go. For the first time in a while, I allowed myself to have hope. Oh how intoxicating a drug that can be.

We had been dating for a few months when I invited him to meet me in Tucson for my birthday weekend. I would be going out for the full week, and he would meet me for the tail end. But three days before I left, without explanation, he ceased all contact.

When I left for Tucson on Tuesday, I was pretty sure I was being ghosted, although I had the tiniest sliver of hope he might still show up. Up until my departure, I was a wreck as I rode the emotional roller coaster, wondering if he was going to call or not. Without warning, that familiar pain I had when my marriage fell apart came back: tightness in my chest, my stomach clenching, the lump in my throat, and trouble getting a deep enough breath. HOW DID THIS

HAPPEN? HOW DID I MISS THE SIGNS? HOW COULD I BE SO STUPID? I CANNOT DO THIS AGAIN. THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING. *WHAT THE FUCK!*

The noise in my head was deafening. My head throbbed. My body clenched as if I had just been punched in the gut. Every muscle was tense, bracing for impact as I tortured myself with unanswerable questions and self-blame. Well-intentioned people would later try to cheer me up, hoping to ease the pain with platitudes like “Wow, you’re so lucky to have dodged a real bullet” and “It’s not about you, it’s about him.” While I understood that I wasn’t the emotionally immature one who bailed, it sure *seemed* to be about me as I crawled out of my skin with confusion.

I knew, even as the plane began its journey toward Tucson, that there would be lots of moments when I would feel like shit. I wish I could write that, while on vacation, I met the sweetest, funniest, totally jacked empath who loved me more than his daily Pan-gram game. But I didn’t. I also wish that I could write that that’s the week I learned to love myself unconditionally. But it wasn’t. The week was hard AF. I referred to it as a “working vacation” since I was working hard not to torpedo the entire seven days by living in my head. I’ve done that way too many times.

The question was: did I want to guarantee a terrible time by staying in bed ruminating while feeling like shit (which was all I wanted to do), or would I go

do the things I loved and see how I felt (which would likely be shitty, but I wouldn't know for sure unless I tried)?

I knew it was pointless to try to *force* myself to be happy by “looking on the bright side” or “finding the silver lining.” I knew there would be silver linings to this experience, but it was too early and I was still in too much pain to see them. I will confess that the low point of the week, hands down, was when the front desk called on my birthday to ask if he would be coming. With Beyonce's “Lemonade” playing in the background, I replied, “That MOFO ghosted me a week ago, so I'm betting not.”

To this day, I've never heard from him. And no, he's not dead. I checked.

I had enough lived experience by that point to know that it didn't matter if I liked what was happening to me or why it was happening. None of that could change the reality that it *was* happening. In fact, the more I fought that reality, the worse I felt.

There wasn't some magical moment in the desert when everything suddenly made sense. The universe didn't speak to me. No one said anything “that resonated to my core.” I didn't have an epiphany at an ayahuasca ceremony or get wisdom from a shaman. Those would make for cooler stories, but as my luck would have it, nothing dramatic enough to make for a great story transpired. But, while on a run, the briefest moment of clarity did strike (maybe that was the

universe, after all).

In that brief moment, I realized I knew how to get through this. I didn't need to research ghosting, schedule a session with an astrologer, call my therapist, go to a talk, or exercise the toxins out. I didn't need to figure anything out, I didn't need to understand anything, and I didn't need to know how the story would end. I didn't need to *do* anything. This problem was not going to be fixed by doing. I was going to get through this by *allowing*. Namely, allowing reality to unfold as it would, and, toward that end, feeling a lot of feelings.

Because I'd been speaking on these sorts of painful experiences and how to navigate them for years, I knew that the less time I spent fighting my thoughts and feelings, the faster they would pass. I thought of myself like a snow globe that had been shaken up and simply needed to settle. The snow represented distress and discomfort, emotions I know well, both personally and professionally. My entire career has been predicated on helping people shift their relationship with some form of distress or discomfort. And that moment of awareness while jogging through the dry desert gave me the foothold I needed to pull myself out. Happy birthday to me.

From that moment on, I engaged in activities *while* I felt sad, mad, rejected, alone, pathetic, frustrated, happy, ambivalent, and uncertain. You name it, I felt it. But instead of avoiding life because I felt like

shit, I brought those feelings with me as I engaged. There were of course times when I would have had more fun on my couch binging “Succession,” but more often than not, it felt better to be out of my house and out of my head. The goal wasn’t to be happy, per se (although I would have loved it had that been the immediate outcome). The goal was to do the process of discomfort differently since that’s all I could control.

As I write this, that particular experience is many months behind me. Some days have been easier than others. If I’m tired, hungry, lonely, stressed, or feeling overwhelmed, thoughts of him and what happened are likely to be stickier. I might get bogged down with thoughts like *How could someone be so duplicitous? Is he a sociopath? or How could I have been so stupid?* I’m much better at pulling myself out of these spirals than I used to be, but my healing has not been linear. No one’s is. At times, he’s had more mental real estate than he deserves, but I’ve also been quicker to evict thoughts of him than I was previously. Additionally, knowing the risks of avoiding the discomfort allowed me to start dating again more quickly than I might have otherwise.

As I look back more generally on my post-divorce life over the past decade, the game changer was learning that I didn’t have to be ready or motivated in order to do new things. I only had to be willing. “I’m not ready” was the lie I told myself to avoid all sorts of things. There have been many excuses I’ve used to talk

myself out of taking action:

The criteria were not exactly how I envisioned them.

For example, I didn't leave a job I hated for years to start my own practice because I couldn't find the perfect office space. Or, I didn't date guys who were under six feet tall (I'm only five feet tall, so this made no logical sense). Once, I was offered to teach a graduate-level class, but I turned it down because it was virtual and I felt it was too confusing (this was pre-Covid).

I had to do "just a little more research" in order to change. I can recall two houses I missed out on because I had to do more "research" to make the best bid. I have agonized over so many decisions that, looking back, didn't really matter, including, but not limited to, wedding planning, how long to breastfeed (and whether to breastfeed), giving a newborn a pacifier, and on and on (I won't bore you with any more of them!).

I didn't think I could handle it. (Not that I had any idea of what the "it" was; I just knew I couldn't handle it.)

I didn't think it was "in me" to do hard things; I wasn't brave or strong. Somewhere along the way, I developed a story that I was a worrier, and that worriers are not brave or strong.

The belief that you can do hard things is called self-efficacy, and mine, post-divorce, was less than

zero. In some cases through necessity and in others through choice, I learned what's actually possible, whether in the area of dating, powerlifting, starting my own business, leaving a field I had been in for thirteen years, raising three kids as a single parent, vacationing alone with my kids, doing college drop off and pick up alone, making hard decisions alone, vacationing alone, or writing this book, to name but a few. Slowly, I started seeing myself as someone who could handle things. I don't think I would have ever realized how much I'm truly capable of handling had I not decided to take a lot of chances. Again, some by choice, some because there was no other option.

Also, I don't think I fully realized how much ground I covered and how much more successful I became in the area of handling uncomfortable situations *until* I was ghosted, and, while not the most pleasant experience on the planet, it didn't take me down nearly as hard or for nearly as long as it would have a decade ago. There is no better teacher than experience. Experience taught me that I can do hard things. They may suck, but I can do them. And if I can do them, so can you.

So that's why I wrote this book. As for why you picked up this book, I'm guessing that you're feeling like there's a space between where you are now and where you want to be.

Maybe you want to be a badass, listen to your inner warrior, be more hardcore, and do some things

differently, but something keeps getting in your way. Maybe you spend too much time in your head. Maybe you panic when things start to feel “too much.” Maybe your solutions end up becoming your problems. Maybe you feel like you’ve been this way so long that you can’t ever change. Maybe you bail whenever things begin to feel too uncomfortable. I get it. (Maybe not the inner warrior stuff, but all the rest.)

I know where you are. You’ve read the self-help books, listened to the podcasts, made endless pro and con lists, maybe even gone to some weekend workshops, but it still seems like you struggle to execute on all those go-get-’em-tiger messages on your Lu-lulemon bag or recently purchased motivational coffee mug. You know the sayings I’m talking about: “Get comfortable being uncomfortable,” “Do one thing a day that scares you,” “Be a badass,” “Live fearlessly.”

Maybe now is as good a time as any to interject that I have many pet peeves, two of which are particularly relevant to this book: word art and vapid inspirational quotes—*especially* when paired. Do we really need a wall hanging that says, “It’s Wine O’Clock Somewhere?” (Yes, it is the title of chapter 7, but using it ironically is fun.) Do we need a front doormat that reminds us to “Live Laugh Love”? Pet Peeve number three: toxic positivity. Sadly, we frequently see vapid, “toxically positive” messages written with word art, and I have a visceral reaction to the threefold combination every single time. *Good Vibes Only! Don’t*

Worry, Be Happy! Choose Happiness! Positivity Only! Vibrate High! Let me be clear—I am not anti-happiness and good vibes. What I find problematic is the message that we *shouldn't* feel the full range of feelings and that some are bad, not to be felt. Just because you think it, doesn't mean it's true. Similarly, just because your mug or wall art says it, doesn't mean it's true or, if it is, that you understand how to truly embody it!

Therefore, I decided to have a bit of fun and title each chapter of this book based on a common inspirational quote that is often spouted with good intentions, but either isn't backed by science or doesn't teach a human being to actually take the next best steps toward their goals (or both).

Further, none of the changes you are hoping for will show up and become commonplace simply by reading about them or reciting a mantra here and there. You want to listen to your inner badass self, so you purchase a book (or six) on how to do so. But how many times do you finish the book on how to do what you want to do or be who you want to be, but then two weeks later you find yourself back in the same place you started? Or, you got hyped up by the workshop you attended, but then had no clue *how* to get started and implement the shifts necessary to unhook from your old stories and (finally) get out of your own way? The steps often make so much sense in your head, but when you attempt to actually *do* them, you

realize that you don't actually know what to do. And, if you're like me, you likely beat yourself up for not being able to do it. It feels like you should know how, or your friends seem to know how, or someone directly alluded to the idea that there's something wrong with you because you *don't* know how.

Through the course of this book, I'm going to help you navigate two core principles that are backed by science to help you get unstuck and out of your own way so you can do the hard stuff you want to do. When it comes to the "stuff" in our heads (and by that, I mean our thoughts, feelings, and sensations), we need to *do the opposite of what's intuitive*.

This is precisely why this book's title is *Just Do Nothing*. When we encounter distress or discomfort, it's intuitive to try to *do* something to either avoid it or eradicate it in some way. As you'll learn, however, that only makes it stronger and more persistent. To make it pass, we want to face the situation and give the thoughts and feelings as little attention as possible. To do that, we're going to need to learn how to interact differently with our internal experience. That's what this book will teach you how to do: learn how to tolerate distress.

We may know *what* to do when things get hard, but we don't know *how* to do it. Therefore, all of our attempts to get rid of our distress and discomfort are actually making things worse and getting in the way of change. To tolerate distress, we must learn how to

relax into it.

By the end of this book, you'll have an understanding of how to turn "I can't" into "I can't...yet" so you can make the changes you want to make and finally feel like the badass you absolutely are.

ACTION STEP

Identify one of your primary "can'ts" and rewrite it as "I can't _____ yet."

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Having a lot of Virgo placements in my birth chart means I tend to be detail-oriented and thorough, generally to an annoying degree. Toward this end, I have tried to convey the information in this book in as clear, concise, and useful a way as possible.

How you choose to consume the book is up to you. You might choose to read it all the way through, read a chapter, and then work on the exercises before proceeding, or do only the exercises. (I don't recommend the latter, because the exercises won't make as much sense without the content from the associated chapter.)

My recommendation is to read each chapter and then do the exercise at the end. Each chapter, ideally, builds on the previous one and has a mixture of nerdy science stuff (which I love) and practical application (that all-important explanation of *how* you can

incorporate it into your life).

In case you're a skimmer, here's the TL;DR (Too Long; Didn't Read): Each chapter ends with a mental fitness skill (from my accumulated list of such practices) for doing hard stuff and having quality mental health. **These skills are meant to be practiced as often as you possibly can. We cannot lay new neural pathways, which is what we are trying to do, without a TON of practice and repetition. I cannot stress this enough.** If you want to be a great tennis player, you can read every book on the game of tennis, watch every video on how to serve like Serena, or go to every tennis match the world over, but until you start playing, you are not a tennis *player*. Simply reading this book is a great start, but let's raise the bar for "working on yourself" to a level that gives you a fighting chance of truly feeling better for the long term.

If you want to stop overthinking and letting your feelings control you, it will require *intentional* practice and repetition. Not only will I lay out the skills and instructions on how to practice those skills, but you'll also have an opportunity to plan how/when you'll practice out in the real world. We can't create new learning if we don't do the action and give ourselves every possibility for success. It is metabolically inefficient for our brains to do anything (meaning that it takes a lot of energy for our brains to do what they don't automatically do), which is another reason it's so hard to change. If we want to change, we have to

give our brains lots of reminders and put in a lot of effort to make it happen.

“Change begins at the end of your comfort zone” is all the rage, but what’s missing is the endnote that says, “Also, it will take a bit longer and be a tad more challenging than the effort required simply to read the quote!”

Post-it Notes will be your best friend. My recommendation is to practice each skill for a week until you move on to the next. Practice them at different times of day, in different settings, and while in different moods to get a sense of where you feel more competent and what areas need more targeted practice. And remember, these are life skills. You, like me, will be practicing them for the rest of your life.

Finally, at the end of each chapter is a blank page for you to record your wins. Change is made up of many micro-shifts in behavior, so it’s important to start spotting them and treating them as deposits in your confidence (or change) bank. Big changes are often as exciting as taking an exotic vacation, because they don’t happen all that often. Small changes, however, happen all the time, and we need to be better about noticing and celebrating them. Don’t skip this part! Write down your wins, both big and small. It’ll help to be able to refer back to them on tougher days when you fear you aren’t making much progress.

LET’S CHAT ABOUT MINDSET

Remember how much you fumbled when you first learned how to drive? Are you still driving like that? I hope not.

Any time we're learning something new, we're going to be clumsy and uncomfortable at first. It's not going to be a pretty sight for 99.9% of us. We accept that as part of the process. Any time you've attempted something new, the more you did it (whatever "it" was), the easier it surely got. You didn't assume that the way you drove the first month was the way you'd always drive.

This is no different. It's going to be confusing at first. You're not going to "get it" right away. You're going to tell yourself you should be able to do it better more quickly, or you're going to attempt it and immediately declare, "It didn't work." The principles may seem simple, but they are not easy to implement, especially in moments when you feel distress. It requires patience, compassion, curiosity, and a good sense of humor.

Over the course of my career, I've had the honor of working with many incredible clients who gave me the best education I could ever ask for. From the HIV/AIDS unit at the county hospital to over a decade in an eating disorder treatment center to now running my own practice, I have learned from an incredible bunch. In that time, I've reflected a lot about what most helps someone make lasting change.

8 NECESSARY INGREDIENTS FOR LASTING CHANGE

(and the chapter where I tackle each)

- Celebrating small wins (end of each chapter plus chapter 11)
- Redefining your relationship with failure (chapter 11)
- Treating self-compassion as a skill to be practiced (chapter 12)
- Responding to yourself without judgment (chapters 5 and 6)
- Practicing distress tolerance (chapter 9)
- Practicing allowing (chapter 9)
- Separating facts from meaning-making of your thoughts and feelings (chapters 5 and 6)
- Taking your focus off the outcome (chapters 3, 9, and 11-20)

So, are you ready? First things first, let's talk about what behavior change really is, and why you've struggled with it thus far. (Trust me, this is going to give you a good bit of relief if you're someone who's quick to beat yourself up for not following through on a commitment to change.)