

# Thickening Time

How to Stop Your Life from Disappearing

## The Practices

by Andrew Mayfield

You can't slow time down. But you can make it thicker.

Thick time isn't slow time. It's dense time. Time where the ratio of conscious experience to minutes elapsed is high. Where your brain is processing, encoding, feeling, and storing at full capacity. The minutes might fly by. But the memories they leave behind are substantial.

Three systems determine whether your time is thick or thin. They operate independently, but they compound. Get one working and things improve. Get all three working and the effect is transformative.

**The Body** sets the tempo of your temporal experience through your nervous system. Your heartbeat is a literal timekeeper, with each beat creating a "wrinkle" in subjective duration. Your heart rate variability determines how stable and accurate your temporal perception is. Your circadian rhythm dictates when you're capable of deep engagement and when you're running on fumes.

**The Mind** determines how much gets recorded and how richly through your brain's encoding system.

When you encounter something new, your brain pays attention. When you pay attention, your brain encodes deeply. When encoding is deep, the experience leaves a substantial footprint in memory.

**The Architecture** is the structure of your life that determines how much bandwidth you have for the first two levers. It doesn't matter how well you understand the body and mind levers if your life is structured in a way that leaves you no bandwidth to use them.

The practices that follow work these three levers systematically. They're simple to understand, straightforward to implement, and based on solid research. But they're not quick fixes. They're structural adjustments that compound over weeks and months.

## **The Body Practices**

**The Heartbeat Reset** is the foundation of everything else. It's resonant frequency breathing: breathing at 5.5 breaths per minute, roughly a 5-second inhale and 5.5-second exhale. At this frequency, your cardiovascular system enters a state of coherence

where blood pressure waves, heart rate changes, and breathing all lock into the same rhythm.

The effect on heart rate variability is immediate and measurable. Within a single session, HRV increases. With consistent practice, baseline HRV shifts upward over weeks. This isn't meditation in the traditional sense. You don't need to clear your mind. You breathe at a specific pace for ten minutes daily. You can do it on a bus, in a queue, during a meeting that's going nowhere. The mechanism is physiological, not psychological.

**The Temperature Lever** uses cold exposure to slow temporal processing and trigger a parasympathetic rebound. End your morning shower with 30 to 60 seconds of cold water. During the cold exposure, time stretches. After the exposure, as the parasympathetic rebound kicks in, there's a period of heightened calm and alertness that many people describe as feeling unusually present.

It will be unpleasant for the first week. After that, something shifts. The discomfort doesn't disappear, but your relationship to it changes. Each cold exposure

is a micro-event that your brain encodes distinctly because it deviates sharply from the comfort it expects.

**The Circadian Redesign** aligns your work to your body's natural rhythm. For most people, the peak is roughly 9am to noon. During this window, do the thinking that requires concentration, analysis, and creativity. Protect it from meetings, email, and interruptions. Accept the trough in the early afternoon and use it for administrative tasks. Use the recovery period in late afternoon and evening for insight and creative work.

Combine this with bright light during your peak hours. Brighter environments lengthen perceived duration through a low-level visual mechanism. Position yourself near natural light during your most important work. The cognitive benefit of circadian alignment combined with the temporal benefit of bright light is a compound effect that costs nothing except a rearranged desk.

## The Mind Practices

**The Chapter Maker** creates distinct periods in your life so memory has retrieval points. At the end of each week, spend ten minutes writing down what was distinctive about it. Not what you accomplished. What was different. A conversation that mattered. A place you went. Something you learned. Something that surprised you.

At the end of each month, look at your weekly notes and identify the month's theme. Give the month a name. "The month I started walking to work." "The month the camper finally sold." The naming isn't frivolous. It's memory architecture. A named chapter is a retrievable chapter.

Quarterly, introduce something genuinely new. Not necessarily dramatic. A new kind of food, a place in your city you've never been, a skill you've never attempted. The point is to give your brain one fresh encoding opportunity every three months that's vivid enough to serve as a chapter marker.

**The Novelty Diet** feeds your brain the stimulus it needs without overwhelming your schedule. Think of it as a 70/30 framework. Seventy percent of your life stays stable. The remaining thirty percent is where you inject targeted novelty.

Daily micro-novelty: a different route for your morning walk, new music instead of the usual playlist, a conversation with someone you don't normally talk to. One micro-novelty per day won't transform your life. Thirty of them per month will give your brain significantly more raw material for memory formation.

Weekly engagement: once a week, do something that requires genuine engagement with the unfamiliar. An hour learning something you're bad at. A long walk in a part of the city you've never explored. A workshop, a class, a deep conversation with someone whose world is different from yours.

Monthly firsts: once a month, create a genuine first experience. The first time you try something has a unique encoding signature in the brain. Firsts don't have to be dramatic. What matters is that your brain

encounters it as genuinely new, not as a variation on something familiar.

**The Awe Practice** accesses the time-slowing power of wonder. Twice a week, deliberately seek an experience that exceeds your expectations. Nature is the most accessible source. The sky does something different every day. Music works too: put on headphones, pick something that demands your attention, give it five minutes of real focus.

Skill and mastery produce awe reliably. Watching someone who is genuinely excellent at what they do triggers the recognition that human capacity exceeds what you casually assumed. Ideas can produce awe: a paragraph that reorganises your understanding, a concept you've never encountered.

When you find it, stay with it. Don't move on immediately. Let it land. The temporal expansion of awe requires a few beats of processing time.

**The Attention Reclamation** reclaims your attention from the forces designed to fragment it. No phone for the first hour of your day. Not checked, not glanced at,

not nearby. Use a dedicated alarm clock. The first hour is yours. Spend it on something that requires sustained attention.

Batch your communication. Check email at 9am, 12pm, and 4pm. Check messages at similar intervals. Outside those windows, the channels are closed.

Protect deep work blocks: periods of 60 to 90 minutes where you work on a single task without interruption. No email, no phone, no open chat windows, no "quick questions."

Put your phone in another room during any activity you want to be present for. Dinner with your family. An evening with a book. The phone doesn't need to be off. It needs to be physically distant enough that checking it requires getting up, walking to another room, making a conscious choice.

## **The Architecture Practice**

**The Quiet Architecture** removes the structural drains that consume your bandwidth. Make a list of everything that's been nagging at you for more than a

month. The unfinished project. The phone call you've been avoiding. The subscription you keep meaning to cancel. The possession that needs repair or removal. The commitment you said yes to that you'd say no to now.

Work through the list, not all at once, but steadily. One item per week. Each one you close frees a small amount of bandwidth. Over a few months, the cumulative effect is significant. The background noise drops. The cognitive space opens.

Use money to buy time where possible. If you're spending three hours a week on something that drains you, and you could pay someone else to do it, the economics aren't measured in dollars per hour. They're measured in bandwidth reclaimed.

Strategic underachievement: the deliberate decision to do less than you're capable of, not out of laziness but out of clarity about what actually matters. The alternative is spreading your bandwidth so thin that nothing gets the depth of attention it deserves.

## The Reality Check

Here's the tension I need to acknowledge. I've just given you a list of practices. Lists are seductive. They feel actionable. They promise that if you just follow the steps, you'll get the outcome.

But here's what I've learned from trying to optimise my way to a better life: practices without understanding don't stick. They become another thing on the to-do list. They work for a few weeks, then fade. Then you feel guilty about not maintaining them.

The practices in this summary work. But they work because they're grounded in an understanding of why time compresses in the first place. Your brain templates routine days and stops recording them. Your nervous system sets the temporal resolution. Fragmented attention produces thin memories. Scarcity thinking narrows perception. Novelty is essential, but pursuing it carelessly creates guilt rather than engagement.

Without that foundation, these practices risk becoming exactly what they're meant to replace:

another source of pressure, another efficiency hack, another way to optimise yourself into exhaustion.

The goal isn't to follow these practices perfectly. It's to understand the mechanisms well enough that when they fade, as they will, you can diagnose why and recalibrate. Not because you read it somewhere, but because you understand how the system works.

That's what the full book is for. The stories that make the science memorable. The research that explains why your brain does what it does. The reframes that shift how you think about the problem in the first place.

Because the real insight isn't in the practices. It's in seeing that you can't slow time down, but you can make it thicker. And once you see that, everything else becomes obvious.

These are the tools. But tools without context tend to become another list of things you tried and forgot. The book gives each practice a reason to stick.

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