

**STOP  
LIVING**

**ON**

Take Responsibility  
for Your Life  
and Rediscover a  
Bolder, Happier You

**AUTO  
PILOT**

ANTONIO NEVES

# STOP LIVING ON AUTOPILOT

Take Responsibility for Your Life  
and Rediscover a Bolder, Happier You

ANTONIO NEVES



RODALE BOOKS  
NEW YORK



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Published in the United States by Rodale Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

[rodalebooks.com](http://rodalebooks.com)

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Neves, António, author.

Title: Stop living on autopilot : take responsibility for your life and rediscover a bolder, happier you / Antonio Neves.

Description: New York : Rodale Books, 2021. | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020019565 | ISBN 9780593136836 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593136850 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780593136843 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Self-actualization (Psychology) | Happiness.

Classification: LCC BF637.S4 N467 2021 | DDC 158--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020019565>

ISBN 9780593136836

Ebook ISBN 9780593136843

*Cover design by Pete Garceau*

*Cover photograph by Mark Leibowitz*

ep\_prh\_5.6.1\_c0\_r0

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### *did I end up here?*

This is the question you might ask yourself when you look in a mirror and attempt to evaluate where you are (or aren't) in life. If you're honest with yourself, you can acknowledge that things haven't felt right for quite some time. Kind of like a shoe that fits but is half a size too small. It's very possible that you've been in a funk far longer than you care to admit.

Maybe you've found yourself at the metaphorical fork in the road of life and when you evaluate your options of going left or right, you're strongly starting to consider plowing straight ahead instead.

At times like these you might ask yourself:

"Why am I so unhappy?"

"How did I gain all of this weight?"

"Why didn't I ever move to another city?"

"How did I end up in a marriage where all we do is argue?"

"Why am I still at this job that I hate?"

"Why are my kids behaving like jerks?"

"How did I end up living check to check?"

"How did I end up divorced and a single parent?"

"Why did I buy that time-share?"

"When did I start collecting fast-food condiments in my glove compartment?"

Or if you're anything like me in 2016—when things were allegedly going *great* in my life—the question could look more like this:

## *How did I end up “successful”...and yet I’m still miserable?*

If you Googled my name back in 2016, the results would’ve made it seem like I was living my best life ever and that I had it all figured out. According to the Internet I was:

- A leadership speaker who delivered keynotes across the globe at top companies like Google.
- An award-winning broadcast journalist who spent more than ten years working with major television networks, including NBC, Nickelodeon, and BET.
- An Ivy League graduate.
- An executive coach to business leaders.
- An author of three successful self-published books.
- A former kids’ television show host.
- A social media-verified public figure with that little blue check mark on Facebook and Twitter.
- A contributor to major online business outlets, including *Inc.com* and *Entrepreneur.com*.
- A former Division I NCAA student-athlete.
- A husband and father of healthy boy and girl twins.

All of those things were true. It may have seemed like I had a storybook life and career. But here’s the thing: Google and social media only tell part of our story. The Internet can never tell the *whole* story.

The *real* story, the one I didn’t talk about or publicly share, was that I was at a low point in my life. I was regularly experiencing more failures and setbacks than I cared to count.

What Google wouldn’t have told you in 2016 was that:

- After just a year of marriage, my wife and I were knee-deep in marriage counseling.
- Our twins arrived at thirty-two weeks and spent a month in the neonatal intensive care unit.

- Due to emotional eating, I had gained nearly thirty pounds and grew a big beard to hide my weight gain (which didn't disguise it one bit).
- After one too many visits to the hospital emergency room, I was wearing a heart monitor and undergoing cardiac MRIs and stress tests.
- My evenings were spent wallowing in self-misery, drinking tequila, whiskey, and wine (thankfully not at the same time).
- I started buying and carrying pocketknives for absolutely no good reason at all.
- I had a ridiculous amount of graduate school debt.
- I started avoiding family and friends, not returning their calls, texts, or e-mails.
- When I delivered keynotes, I was going through the motions on stages in front of hundreds and sometimes thousands of people.
- At times, I found myself behaving like a child, based on the whims of my emotions, instead of like an adult, based on standards and values.
- My father's dementia was quickly advancing and we could no longer have those father-and-son conversations that I previously took for granted.
- To top it off, I regularly smoked Camel Crush Menthol cigarettes (yep, the ones where you click a crushable capsule to activate the menthol) in street alleys while wearing a bright green gardening glove so my wife wouldn't smell the stench on my hand.

Yeah, the Internet didn't tell the whole story. Not even close. At the time, I was living two lives—one of outward success and the other of inward turmoil, anxiety, and fear.

The truth is that I felt lost, stuck, and horribly out of place in my own life, even after achieving most of the things I thought I wanted to accomplish. Even more, I felt burnt out, broken down, and washed up at a time when I needed to maintain my A game for my family.

Like most Americans (according to a Gallup<sup>1</sup> poll), I felt more depressed, personally and professionally, and dissatisfied with my life than

ever before. Even though I knew I had a lot of life to live, I felt like I was past my prime. Like I had missed my chance to do something great.

Although I once greeted each day with a smile and a spirit of optimism, my go-getter attitude had been replaced with a constant frown of pessimism. I guess you could say I was losing my spirit. My immediate solution for this internal crisis was to take a hands-off approach and accept almost zero responsibility for where life had led me. I had transitioned to autopilot instead of living life with intention and purpose. Slowly but surely, I was morphing into what one day could become a bitter old man.

Of course, this wasn't the first time that I'd struggled in my life—far from it. In my twenties and thirties, while working for major television networks in New York City as a host, correspondent, and producer, I was tested in ways I'd never imagined. Still, 2016 felt different. Previously, when things didn't go my way, I believed that I had time and youth on my side. But now that I was in my forties, things didn't seem as simple. I was older—and even had a few gray hairs on my chin to show for it. I had a wife, kids, a minivan, and a growing list of responsibilities.

The irony was that what I was experiencing couldn't have been more removed from what my family, friends, and social media followers believed about me. To them, my life was a clear-cut success. How would they know any differently? In a world where we curate our lives to fit a specific narrative for everyone to see, it's harder than ever to admit when we're struggling. My offline life, my *real* life, felt like a game of tug-of-war—and I was the rope.

The former optimist in me was now convinced that the best thing to ever happen to me was over and in my past. It felt like my glory days were behind me. I started to tell myself that moving forward, my life wasn't going to be the fairy tale that I had once envisioned. What I didn't know at the time was that sometimes when you're lost, you actually get the opportunity to find yourself.

**“YOU GOTTA FIGURE THAT SHIT OUT”**

There were days in 2016 when I was right. I hadn't "lived up to my potential." I wasn't the man I thought I'd be. One day, when I was smoking one of those Camel Crush Menthol cigarettes in a Santa Monica street alley, a homeless man asked me if he could bum a cigarette. It was obvious that he'd seen better days, so I gave him a few.

After he lit his cigarette, he asked me about the bright green gardening glove I was wearing. When I explained to him that I wore it to hide the smoke smell from my unsuspecting wife, he looked at me as if he felt sorry for me.

He took a slow drag and matter-of-factly said, "Hey man. You gotta figure that shit out." Then, he walked away. That moment crushed me more than the Camels.

That brief encounter, simple as it was, set me on a mission to course-correct my life. The pendulum had swung to both extremes: following a path of conformity, or almost falling off the edge. It was time to stop running away from life, and face what I was experiencing head-on. It was time to come back to the middle.

The journey started with a series of difficult questions, all of which I'll share with you in this book. Along the way, I came to realize that my dreams had an expiration date. If I didn't act on them, they would be lost forever.

## **LIFE ISN'T SHORT**

There's nothing extraordinary about the struggle that I experienced. No one was going to feel sorry for me, nor should they. People have experienced far worse. I ended up where I was based on the decisions I did (and didn't) make.

Millions of people have stories like mine. Exhibiting outward success while hiding private angst. Over the years, many of these people would come up to me after my talks at conferences. Somehow, despite there being an abundance of life coaches out there, these people would find and hire me

—and share their stories with me. They’d often bare their souls to me via e-mail, looking for a way to reverse their own downslide.

Like many coaches, I have a gift for helping people solve the same problems and navigate the same challenges that I’m personally encountering. That’s when I learned that my own experiences, as challenging as they were, had served a valuable purpose: they were my University of Life. They gave me a gift as a speaker, coach, and trainer that could help others transition during challenging periods in their lives. This realization gave me a new lease on life.

People like to say, “Life is short.” But as the comedian Chris Rock brilliantly said in a comedy special, “Some people say life is short, and that you could get hit by a bus at any moment, and that you have to live each day like it’s your last. Bullshit. Life is long. You’re probably not gonna get hit by a bus. And you’re gonna have to live with the choices you make for the next fifty years.”

Amen. Life can be long. And one day, we’ll want to look back on our life and marvel at everything we experienced instead of wondering in a daze, *What happened?*

In fact, the question “What happened?” is one of my greatest fears. When I’m at my worst, I envision bumping into someone I knew from years ago. After a short conversation, they’d look me directly in the eyes and notice that the zest for life they’d once seen in me had disappeared and was now replaced with indifference. They would walk away saying, “What happened to that guy?”

Of course, what they’re really asking is, “Why did he give up?”

But this book isn’t about giving into our worst fears. It’s about learning how to embrace them and to recommit to our dreams and reimagine our future. To remember that we have a say in our lives.

If your life is a constant battle between two narratives—one of outwardly meeting (maybe even exceeding) expectations and another of inwardly battling turmoil—this book is for you.

This book wasn't written in a cabin, in the middle of the woods, at a writer's retreat while my life, family, and responsibilities were put on hold (though, believe me, I would've loved that). No, I wrote it in the midst of real life, happening in real time with all the ups, downs, hurdles, and complications that come with it. This, I've found, is where the truth lives.

Over the years, I've come to learn that we all have the answers to our most pressing problems and challenges. It's just that we haven't been asked the right questions. That's what this book will provide: targeted and perhaps uncomfortable questions for you to consider at the moment you most need them. Your answers might surprise you and will allow you to shift your life in the direction of your choosing.

There will be questions that can make you uneasy.

Questions that could make you laugh.

Questions that might make you cry.

Questions that will provide answers to serve as a road map on your journey forward to help you reimagine not just today, but also your future.

To be very clear, this book isn't about quitting your job or taking a sabbatical to Bali to discover your passion, meaning, and purpose. It's not about getting a raise or promotion. And it's not about moving into a bigger house on the other side of town. All of those are cop-outs. A new job, more money, or fancier zip code can't save you. Only you can.

This book is instead about committing and recommitting to what's most important in your everyday life. It's about creating purpose and meaning in your life as opposed to looking for it. It's about being real, honest, and accountable so you can live boldly and courageously as you once did before the roadblocks of life got in your way. All while keeping your sense of wonder, humor, and curiosity.

Part One of this book will help you unpack the choices you made and identify how you got where you are today.

Part Two will start you on the path of building accountability and a strong foundation to begin the transition to the life you desire. It will

provide you with steps to take to ignite lasting change.

On the following pages, you'll find exercises and activities that I've designed and used on stages, in workshops, with private-coaching clients, and with myself. They work. But for you to see actual results, you must do the work. I've come to learn that most transformations and spiritual journeys aren't always enjoyable, even if they're necessary.

The great news is that everything you've experienced in your life up to this point—all your wins, losses, successes, and failures—has shaped you into the brilliant and resilient human being you are today. All of this has prepared you for what you're about to do next. I'm genuinely excited for you.

Now that we got that out of the way, let's get a few things straight:

*In real life, there are no movie montages where everything is magically fixed in sixty seconds. Change happens in real time.*

*No one owes you anything. You owe yourself everything.*

*No matter where you stand today, your story isn't over yet. A new chapter begins right now.*

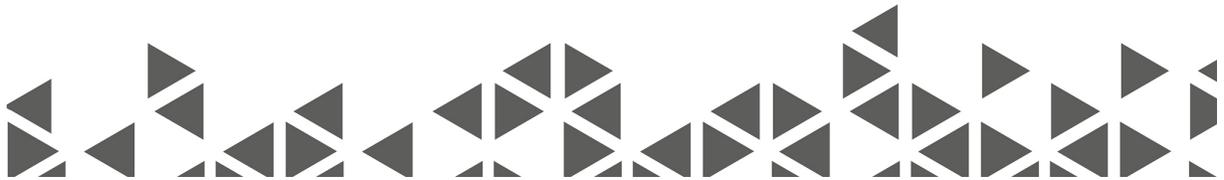
*No one can, or will, care more about your life than you do. So, it's time to start acting like it.*

*The best thing to happen to you hasn't happened yet.*

Now let's get to work. Your time isn't coming. It's here.

# PART ONE

## THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF



## THE BEST THING

*“Keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable.”*

—MARY OLIVER, PULITZER PRIZE–WINNING POET

**IT’S IN THE** quiet moments that our voice can speak to us the loudest. Although rarely is it what we want to hear.

These are the moments when we awake before the sun rises and we’re alone with our thoughts. It’s when someone who knows us well asks a deep question, so deep that we can’t immediately answer. And, it’s when we see ourselves in the mirror for what seems like the very first time.

It’s then that we tell ourselves a version of the same story.

*One day, I found myself in a completely different situation than I had imagined for myself...*

*Out of the blue, my relationship was in shambles...*

*Suddenly, I realized that I hated my job...*

Telling ourselves stories like these is far easier than accepting a painful and sobering truth.

“One day” is actually a large collection of days.

“Out of the blue” is seldom a surprise.

And, “Suddenly” is rarely sudden.

The hard-to-accept truth is that the life you find yourself in today wasn't created overnight. Your journey has been a *process*—a string of decisions you've made, rather than one single defining moment. All of this is compounded by silenced doubts and ignored intuitions.

As author, researcher, and all-around awesome thinker Brené Brown once wrote, “The universe is not short on wake-up calls. We're just quick to hit the snooze button.”

These days, when sports teams use the mantra “Trust the process” or career politicians use the phrase “Stay the course,” I have to take a deep breath. Both mottos nod to staying committed to the decisions that we've made, which is innocent enough. However, I always want to add, “Before you trust the process and stay the course, make sure it's the *right* process and the *right* course.”

If you're at a place in life where things are no longer making sense the way they once did, don't worry. You're at the right place. Consider this book your wake-up call.

## **PLAYING BY THE RULES HAS LET YOU DOWN**

So, let's answer the question: how did you get here? The irony is that for all intents and purposes, you've likely done *everything* that society, your parents, teachers, and elders told you to do to be successful and happy.

You played by the rules. You chased challenges, checking off boxes year after year. You got your education. You got a good job. You didn't get arrested (or at least you've had that misdemeanor expunged by now). You practiced safe sex (except that one time). You donate every now and then to charitable organizations (even if it's just for tax purposes). Maybe you are even married or in a good relationship—or at least have experienced one. Hell, you may even have a full-on family, house, garage, dog, and yard. What's true is that your friends, family, colleagues, and strangers on social media probably consider your life to be a screaming success. It looks like you have it all figured out.

All of this may seem cool, but the truth is that you don't feel nearly as happy as you look on Instagram or as successful as you present yourself to be on LinkedIn. The simple yet challenging thing to admit is that you don't have it all figured out. Not even close. To top it all off, odds are that more is expected of you than ever before. From your home to your office, people—your family, friends, and colleagues—count on you.

The stress and anxiety you feel these days is real. Not only do you feel unfulfilled, but you're also starting to question every decision you've ever made. The college you attended. The city you live in. The job you accepted. The relationship you're in. The name of your child. The money you loaned to your cousin that you know you'll never see again. That horrible time-share in Hawaii you invested in after drinking too many Mai Tais that you can't sell to save your life. That damn tattoo (and wow, do I have a tattoo story for you later).

When you dig deeper, what you're really questioning are the times you played it safe. The moments when you ignored your gut. The instances when you ran away from what was most important to you and didn't shoot your shot.

What it boils down to is that you're starting to feel out of place in your own life. It's been like this for a while and it's starting to scare you.

On most days, you do a relatively good job playing the role of "adult." You pay your bills on time. You do the work that's asked of you at your job. You handle your household duties. You listen to your significant other talk about their day. You get the next round of drinks for your friends. You eat relatively well, except when no one is watching. You get your oil changed before the light comes on. You even do a courtesy flush.

However, your once-rosy outlook on life is slowly being replaced by incoming clouds of pessimism. You've become more focused on "What if it doesn't work out?" as opposed to "What if it does work out?"

Your new normal is feeling like a can of soda that's been shaken for too long and is on the verge of exploding (of course, while you're wearing all white). You don't know if you'll explode today, tomorrow, next week, or next month. But whoever will be on the receiving end of that magnificent explosion—whether it's your spouse, kids, colleague, roommate, random

guy seated next to you on an airplane, or grocery store clerk—they probably don't deserve your ire.

I know exactly what it feels like to be on the verge of exploding. Hell, I even know what it feels like to explode at the absolute worst possible times (more on that later). Been there, done that. Bought the T-shirt. The good news is that I also know what it's like to chart a new path and positively transform my life for the better. So have countless others who I've coached, worked with, and interviewed over the years.

Does this mean that my life today is always filled with sunshine and healthy organic food, and that everything is “amazing”? Hell, no. This isn't an Instagram story. What it does mean is that I live life on purpose instead of by accident.

So, what's the secret? I'm glad you asked. Let me tell you a short story.

## **THE BEST THING**

Back in 2006, there was a big college football game. It was the BCS National Championship Game between the University of Southern California Trojans and the University of Texas Longhorns.

USC entered the game with a thirty-four-game winning streak, and they had two of the best players in the country. Almost no one picked Texas to win the game. They were the underdog. The media billed it as David versus Goliath.

But that night, in front of nearly 94,000 people at the Rose Bowl and with 35 million people watching on televisions across the country, something amazing happened in Pasadena, California. You probably already figured this out, but the University of Texas won the football game and proved the naysayers wrong.

Like most, I love a great underdog story. However, this story goes much deeper. In the locker room after the game, as the University of Texas players were celebrating, their head coach, Mack Brown, arrived to give his post-game speech.

In keeping with tradition, Brown congratulated the players for winning the national championship. Then, he said something that the people in the locker room probably will never forget:

“I don’t want this to be the best thing that’s ever happened to you,” he said. “When you’re fifty-four, I don’t want you to say, ‘Winning a football game was the best thing that ever happened in my life.’ You’ll have it. And you’ll be a champion for the rest of your life. You make sure that’s one of the best *sports* things in your life.”

Wow. These young men were fresh from winning a national championship and their coach tells them to make sure that something *better* happens in their lives. Damn right. This story is an important reminder not to focus so much on what we did in the past that we lose sight of what’s possible today and in the future.

So, what does this football story have to do with you? Well, call me silly, but I believe that the best thing to ever happen to you is *ahead* of you—not behind you. The secret: when you start to believe this, everything begins to change.

For you to believe this, for it to be real, it requires a major shift in perspective. A shift that won’t happen overnight.

It requires a straightforward, direct, and unapologetic approach to life. An approach focused on the right mindset, beliefs, and way of life.

It requires making decisions and taking actions every single day long after the motivation has gone away and even when you don’t feel like it.

It requires remembering that the major moments in our lives are just that—moments that fit into the bigger journey of who we’re striving to become.

It requires our dreams to be bigger than our complaints.

It requires taking ownership to accept that each day is a blank canvas upon which we can create what we choose—from this day forward. You are the artist.

Based on where you are in life right now, I know this might seem a bit naïve. Kind of like something that someone who believes in unicorns might say. However, unless you’re Neil Armstrong and have already walked on the moon, I believe that the odds of your future being brighter than your

past are in your favor—regardless of what you’ve experienced. When you commit to believing that the best is ahead of you, it will light a spark and rekindle that fire that has always been burning deep inside you, leading you to a brighter future.

Call it faith. Call it magic. Call it crazy. Simply put, when you believe and behave as if the best is still ahead of you, your outlook on life and behaviors immediately begin to change, too.

*To achieve what you want to achieve, sometimes you have to believe what others don’t.*

Because you’re reading this book, I know that there’s more life inside of you to live. There are more great days ahead. There’s much more to give. As long as you’re breathing, your tank isn’t empty. Believe me, I know.

## **THE BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS**

If someone told me back in September 2004 that a brighter future was ahead of me, I probably would’ve punched them in the esophagus. Because my life at that time was pure misery.

At the time, I lived on the second floor of an ugly green apartment building at the end of a dead-end street in the Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles. Though Silver Lake was quickly becoming a popular hipster neighborhood, the street I lived on had yet to receive the press release.

The apartment building hallways always smelled like cigarette smoke, mold, and oddly, baked goods. My neighbors were a combination of wannabe actors and people who stayed at home all day doing something (though I didn’t know exactly what).

In my dingy, sparsely furnished apartment, I regularly sat on the floor inside a small utility closet. The door was always closed. The lights were off. I didn’t want to see the world, and I didn’t want the world to see me. In the midst of the darkness, all I saw was the occasional amber glow of the joints I would smoke.

It was always hot. Hot enough to turn on the air-conditioning. But the AC just pumped out lukewarm air, so I always had my shirt off. My former almost-six-pack of abs had morphed into an official six-pack of flab. Not the progress I'd hoped for at that point in my life.

Most days my routine involved taking deep hits of weed and drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon beer—both before 10:00 a.m. It was what I called my “breakfast of champions.” My greatest joy back then? A DVD arriving in the mail from Netflix.

During this spell, I hardly worked. To pay my bills, I collected an unemployment check every couple of weeks. When I did “work,” I participated in off-the-books focus groups in a large corporate building where Santa Monica Boulevard meets the 405 Freeway.

In the focus groups, I quickly learned to say yes to everything. Saying yes could mean the difference between earning twenty dollars and eighty dollars. “Will you purchase a riding lawn mower in the next year?” Absolutely. (Who cares that I live in a second-floor apartment?) “Are you currently ovulating?” Bet your ass I am.

Not far from my apartment was the world-famous HOLLYWOOD sign in the Santa Monica Mountains. The sign provided daily inspiration to even the most untalented actors and writers, helping them believe that they still had a shot. However, I might as well have been in Cleveland because I spent most of my days in my closet or on my bed or couch. I wasn't looking for inspiration. The sign was the last thing I wanted to see because it was a reminder—of what was and what could've been.

## **THIS IS WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE “SOMEBODY”**

Just a few months earlier, I had my dream job. People knew who I was. By “people,” I mean kids between the ages of six and twelve years old (and their mothers).

Every weekday, kids across the country could turn on their TVs and tune into Nickelodeon to watch me on the daily sketch show *U-Pick Live*. It