MINDSET & SUCCESS

The Art of Living Consciously

by Nathaniel Branden

Most people run on autopilot. Branden shows how to wake up, see clearly, and steer your own life.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **Consciousness is a light on a dimmer switch, not an on/off switch.**

You are never choosing between perfect awareness and none. You are always choosing more awareness or less - and that choice, moment by moment, is the heart of free will.

02 **Living consciously means being mentally active, not passive - and facing facts, pleasant or unpleasant.**

Branden's definition: seek to be aware of everything that bears on your interests, actions, values, purposes, and goals. Commit to seeing what you see and knowing what you know.

03 **Match your awareness to the context.**

Deliberately relaxing is not evasion, and no one can run at full alert everywhere. The skill is giving each activity the level of consciousness it requires - especially where the stakes are real.

04 **We flee awareness for a reason: to dodge pain.**

Avoidance usually starts young. Children surrounded by confusion, denial, and mixed messages learn to switch off awareness to adapt - and the habit can quietly run an entire adult life.

05 **Even good habits need re-examining now and then.**

Running routines on automatic is necessary for efficiency. But everyone keeps habits that hurt happiness and lacks ones that would help - and habits, by definition, run without reflection until you inspect them.

06 **Ask what 5 percent more consciousness would look like.**

His signature sentence stem: 'If I bring 5 percent more consciousness to...' Five percent is small and non-intimidating - and, he says, most of the time it is plenty.

07 **Finish sentences fast to find out what you actually think.**

Take a stem, write six to ten endings as rapidly as you can, no censoring - any ending is fine, just keep going. Speed bypasses the inner censor, and what surfaces is usually knowledge you already had.

08 **Know what you are doing while you are doing it.**

Before and during any pursuit, think through the consequences your actions imply and ask what knowledge success actually requires. Awareness aimed forward prevents most regret.

09 **Your inner world is part of reality too.**

Be conscious of your body, your needs and wants, your feelings and emotions, your actions and reactions. Denying a feeling does not delete it - and reason and emotion are not natural enemies.

10 **Awareness is uneven: sharp in one area of life, asleep in another.**

Most people bring great consciousness to work and very little to their marriage - or the reverse. Relationships, parenting, work, and even your ideas and where they came from each need the awareness they deserve.

11 **Self-esteem is built on awareness, not affirmations.**

Living consciously is the first of Branden's six pillars - the basis of the rest. Trust in your own mind grows from evidence: watching yourself face facts and act on what you know.

12 **For Branden, spirituality is this-worldly.**

He redefines it as reverence for life on earth - awe, meaning, and 'enlightened selfishness,' taking your own life seriously - against selflessness and mysticism, which ask you to switch your mind off.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

Nathaniel Branden, the psychologist who pioneered the psychology of self-esteem, argues that consciousness is our basic tool of survival - and that how much of it we use is up to us. Like a light that can be turned brighter or dimmer, awareness exists on a continuum. Living consciously means being mentally active rather than passive: seeking to be aware of everything that bears on your interests, actions, values, purposes, and goals, and being willing to confront facts, pleasant or unpleasant.

In the opening chapters he lays out first principles - a respect for reality, reason as the tool that integrates experience, and the claim that reason and emotion need not be enemies - then turns to choice. The fundamental act of free will, he argues, is choosing your level of focus. That choice has an enemy: avoidance. Children surrounded by confusion, denial, and mixed messages often adapt by switching off awareness, and those early strategies of avoidance can run an adult life unexamined. Even healthy habits deserve periodic inspection, because habits operate without reflection.

The middle chapters make the practice concrete. A conscious life means knowing what you are doing while you are doing it: thinking through the consequences of your actions, asking what knowledge a pursuit requires, and managing the impulses that pull you away from focus. It also means bringing each area of life the awareness it requires - relationships, parenting, work - because

awareness is uneven. One of his therapy stories tells of a husband who sincerely believed he loved his wife, yet was so absent that only at her graveside did he see he had never really been there.

His main tool is sentence completion. You take a stem - most famously, 'If I bring 5 percent more consciousness to...' - and write six to ten endings as fast as you can, without censoring. Done daily, the endings pull hidden knowledge, feelings, and intentions into the light where you can act on them; an appendix lays out a full program of the exercises. Branden also turns awareness inward, to the body, needs, feelings, and reactions, and closes by arguing that living consciously is the foundation of self-esteem and that spirituality itself is best understood this-worldly: reverence for life on earth, not escape from it.

DO THIS WEEK

This week, do Branden's exercise each morning for five minutes. Write the stem 'If I bring 5 percent more consciousness to my activities today...' and quickly write six to ten endings without editing or judging them. Then pick one ending and act on it before the day ends. In the evening, finish this stem: 'When I reflect on what happens when I bring 5 percent more consciousness to my activities...'

By Nathaniel Branden, first published 1997 (Simon & Schuster), subtitled The Power of Awareness to Transform Everyday Life. Read it if you feel you are living on autopilot and want a daily practice for clear, honest self-awareness.