

Three Steps for Thriving in Chaos, Intensity, and Change

By Mara Bishop, MS, ThM, CSC

When life feels chaotic and intense, and when circumstances change in ways that seem out of our control, we experience stress or even anxiety. Negative consequences of stress and anxiety include depression, headaches, stomachaches, sleep disorders, and substance abuse. Many people are dealing with complex life situations that feel overwhelming. The situations may involve change that is dramatic and seemingly non-stop, or they may feel unbearably stagnant. Both scenarios are painful. Sometimes we reach a threshold of crisis, but don't know what to do next.

If we knew what kind of personal "weather" patterns were coming our way, we could be ready with our disaster preparation plan. We'd either brace ourselves for a quick, violent storm or settle in to withstand a slow, brutal heat wave. But that wouldn't develop our ability to deal with the unexpected. Preparing for the possibilities of what may (or should) happen next, particularly in these intense and chaotic times of dissolution and reassembly, can be a significant source of stress in and of itself.

In order to create mental, physical, and emotional health, we need to stay connected to what is happening both internally and externally in our lives. In doing so, we can react appropriately, staying balanced and healthy in the face of challenging circumstances.

The following three steps help us thrive in chaos, intensity and change:

FOCUSED OBSERVATION: Pay close attention to the circumstances of your life and what is happening around you. Watch your internal reactions to external circumstances and events. Look for patterns and themes that can help you understand what needs your attention and why.

CONSCIOUS STILLNESS: Make room for silence. Creating space for stillness with the absence of external stimuli allows your subtle senses and instincts to be heard and felt. When life gets chaotic it's often energetically "loud." Valuable insights about how to create a healthy life can be drowned out if you do not intentionally set aside space and time to receive them.

DELIBERATE ACTION: When the dust of the storm settles, or the lingering fog lifts, and you see

a path ahead of you, step out decisively. When you sense it is time to act, do it bravely and definitively. You will never know all possible paths. You can become paralyzed by myriad reasons, including fear, perfectionism, or too many options. Don't worry that your action is the perfect step, just that it is the next step.

Watching the mystery of our lives unfold serves us well in situations where we are unsure about what to do next, or even whether action is the right course. By blending focused observation, conscious stillness, and deliberate action we do our part to become who we wish to be while honoring who we already are.

WHAT IS WU WEI?

Wu wei is a Taoist concept that relates to the balance between action and inaction. Often translated as "non-doing" or "non-action," it is not simply being still. It's engaging the spiritual and natural world around us in an attuned state so that our actions feel graceful and unforced. By developing wu wei we cultivate an understanding of our place within all that exists. By working in alignment with the larger systems, we move with them rather than against them. We are thereby able to react effectively as new situations evolve.

Think of surfers engaging the tremendous power of the ocean as they gauge the waves coming in. If their entry is timed improperly, they are pushed under the force of the waves and rolled painfully onto shore gasping for air, or worse. Timed well, they enjoy the excitement of riding the crest of the wave smoothly to its completion, and gliding easily onto shore.

They wind up in the same place, as the waves roll inevitably toward land, but the two rides feel mentally and physically quite different. If we learn to ride out the large undercurrents of change and transformation that well up for us individually and collectively, we fare better than if we fight against them.

To use the concept of wu wei as a guide that parallels our three steps for thriving in chaos: we observe our environment, we gauge our relationship to it and we act when the time is right. By staying present and focused on what is happening now we are able to utilize the three steps to align our actions with what we need to be healthy, whole and balanced. h&h



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