

# **wise effort**

**How to Focus  
Your Genius Energy  
on What Matters Most**

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# introduction

## what is wise effort?

**M**y family lives in the foothills of coastal California, where we often leave our kitchen door open to welcome the breeze. Every so often, we get unexpected visitors—hummingbirds, blue jays, chickadees, and even a few blue-bellied lizards make their way in. The moment a bird flies in, their instinct guides them straight for the large kitchen window, mistaking it for the way out. And then, bam! They collide with the glass and tumble to the floor.

What happens next feels almost painfully human. Dazed but determined, they gather themselves and try again, this time with more force, more urgency. Bam! Again, they crash. It's a heartbreaking cycle—a mix of determination and misdirection, effort without clarity.

It's so relatable, isn't it? We are going about our lives, doing our thing, and then find ourselves stuck—maybe in a relationship, an unhealthy habit, a work problem, or our creative pursuits. And we do the exact same thing those birds do. We think if we just fly harder, go faster, or push ourselves more, we will get out. We put our immense energy into overdrive, persisting even if it hurts us. Or we freeze, paralyzed by the fear of failing or getting hurt again. Dazed and confused, we hesitate, overthink it, doubt ourselves, hide, hold back, and eventually we stop flying altogether. We find ourselves sitting on the kitchen floor of our life, feeling trapped, defeated, and exhausted, wondering, *How did I get here? And how do I get free?*

This book is about just that—how the way you use your energy shapes your life. When your energy is overused, underused, or directed toward the wrong things, it keeps you stuck, burns you out, and leaves

you spinning your wheels. But when your energy is channeled with wisdom, it can take you to extraordinary places. How you spend your energy is everything. It fuels your ability to get things done, brings vitality and vibrancy to your life, and draws others toward you. Yet it's also the force that, if unmanaged, can leave you overwhelmed, depleted, and going nowhere.

If you picked up this book, you probably yearn to turn your energy around. You're likely tired of overextending yourself beyond what is sustainable, or you may feel an urgency to make a shift in your career, relationships, leadership roles, or physical pursuits. You are a striver—a flyer—you care a lot and have big goals, but sometimes you struggle to get started or keep your momentum going, and at other times you find yourself working relentlessly at things even if it means neglecting your health, loved ones, and personal needs and values. You might feel discouraged or baffled by the fact that you keep ending up at square one no matter how hard you try. No matter how good your life looks on the outside, you don't feel quite satisfied. Perhaps you can relate to one of my clients who said, "I have a constant feeling of not doing enough and doing too much at the same time. I am simultaneously overcommitted and underinvolved."

Wise effort is the answer to this dilemma. It's how you can find the open door that is waiting for you and fly toward the open sky of your life.

## **Using Your Energy Wisely**

I first encountered the concept of wise effort over twenty years ago while studying with Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. During a retreat at his monastery in Plum Village, France, a soldier stood up and asked whether he should leave his job. After learning about the peaceful practices of mindfulness and compassion, this man was questioning his vocation. To paraphrase Thich Nhat Hanh's response, "It is people like you we need behind the gun." His words conveyed a powerful truth: wise effort isn't about avoiding difficulty; it's about

bringing your genius energy to bear in ways that are aligned with your values, no matter the circumstance.

Decades after hearing Thich Nhat Hanh's lesson for the soldier, I was on a retreat with meditation teacher Jack Kornfield. I asked for his counsel on the framework for this book.

"What is your intention?" he asked.

"I want to help people live their fullest expression without losing themselves," I replied.

With a smile, he said, "That sounds like wise effort."

Wise effort is a concept described in the Buddhist Eightfold Path. In the traditional teaching, wise effort is preventing and letting go of harmful ways of being while cultivating and maintaining wholesome ways of being.<sup>1</sup> In this book, we'll take a consilient approach, integrating insights from many fields of study, including contemplative practice, modern psychology, neuroscience, ancestral wisdom, and your personal embodied experience.<sup>2</sup> The goal is to discover what wise effort looks like uniquely for you so that you can apply it to your daily life.

In my career as a psychologist, I have focused on working with high achievers and strivers who feel stagnant or as if they're spiraling in the wrong direction. These are creative entrepreneurs, parents, executives, health-care workers, thought leaders, young professionals, and good-hearted people who are going about their efforts in ways that are depleting them and causing them to wonder if it's all worth it. Sometimes they are putting big energy into what they value, but it is burning them out because they are not being wise about it. Other times they are playing small, holding back, and not doing the thing that they really want to do. In my search to help these clients and myself, I became curious about how modern psychological approaches like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT, pronounced as one word) intersect with ancient teachings on wise use of energy.

To understand how our striving gets us stuck, I have interviewed hundreds of thought leaders, spiritual teachers, and researchers on the topic of wise effort. What can psychological science tell us about why humans repeat behaviors that clearly don't work for them? How can

contemplative practice guide us toward something more effective? I have also worked closely with the developers of ACT and trained thousands of mental health professionals in the processes that underlie this method. Psychological flexibility is central to wise energy use. We all fall into unwise effort from time to time, as you will hear in this book. As I often tell my clients, our mess is our message.

As such, the Wise Effort model is woven from psychological science; contemplative teachings; my personal embodied practice; and fifteen years of applying the Wise Effort method in my clinical work as a therapist, trainer, and executive consultant.

Here's what I know: wise effort is about feeling alive; being engaged; asking bigger questions; and making decisions from your body, head, *and* heart. It's about getting to know who you are and contributing what you have to offer the world with passion and generosity. And it will change your life.

Wise effort offers a way for you to use your energy more effectively. It's renewable energy, meaning you get as much out as you put in. It isn't always about slowing down; sometimes it's spreading your wings and going full force at something that's right for you.

## **Wise Effort Is How You Fly**

In every person I work with, I see an inner fortitude and powerful energy that, when directed with wisdom, can carry you through the winds of life and lead you to do great things. It is important to get to know this energy—what I call your genius energy. It's the force behind your strengths, talents, interests, and superpowers. Everyone has their own one-of-a-kind combination of genius energy. It's vast, timeless, and—dare I say it as an evidence-based psychologist—magical.

The word *genius* is not meant to be used to put yourself above others. You aren't "special" or better than others because of it. Rather, it honors your personal spark; indescribable essence; or intangible, fascinating qualities that make you *you*. If the word *genius* is not a fit for you, you may substitute words like *gift*, *personal strengths*, *life force*, or

*je ne sais quoi*. The goal here is to democratize the word *genius* as our unique and true nature—we all have it. And you are going to spend some time figuring yours out.

You will also learn that your genius energy is both a gift and a challenge. Sometimes your genius energy isn't easy to manage and can be co-opted by unwise effort. You might have felt this when you overused your talents to try to prove yourself or ran away from your feelings by staying busy. When it gets off track, your genius can become your problem. In the pages ahead, you will learn to recognize when your energy is out of balance and skillfully redirect it with wise effort. This skill of turning your energy around can become your most powerful resource. Note that we will not tone *down* our genius energy. You might have heard people say things like “Don't be so loud, such a striver, such a perfectionist, such a dreamer.” “You are too much of this or that.” “Stop being so [enter your genius here].” Has anyone ever told you that? It can be frustrating and disheartening to be told to suppress your life force. You won't hear that here.

That's because being asked to tone it down is actually an attack on your genius energy. Those very quirks, traits, and characteristics have helped you survive life up to this point, whether you've experienced a less-than-stellar childhood, awkward tween years, a heavy breakup, or the trials of building families and businesses. My genius energy of persistence and emotional sensitivity are what got me through a nasty eating disorder to a PhD and a place where I could write this book for you. I wouldn't want to give up those qualities. And I bet you don't want to give up yours, either.

Don't stop being who you are. There's nothing wrong with you or your sensitivities, strengths, and differences. You don't have to dampen your light or pretend to care less than you do. Please don't stop flying. The world needs your genius.

Instead, you will learn how to apply wise effort so you can use your genius energy skillfully in any corner of your life, whether you are dealing with a work environment that's crushing your soul, facing a health crisis, deciding how to prioritize competing creative



opportunities, having another fight with your partner/mother-in-law/teenager/sister/neighbor, or doing something as small as debating whether to turn off Netflix and go to sleep.

I've seen firsthand how the Wise Effort method works. Clients reclaim their energy, find their direction, and move more freely, even in the midst of difficult life circumstances. When you put wise effort into practice, you bring into being the person you want to be. It's a remarkable thing to experience.

To be clear, wise effort won't get rid of your problems. That's not the point. The issues you may be having in life often aren't the problem; it's how you relate to them that matters most.

With this book, you'll learn to engage with your energy *wisely* so it works for you—not against you or others. You'll be able to lean on what's already inside you and act on what's truest to live a more fulfilled, connected, and vibrant life.

Wise effort is contagious. Like the clients and thought leaders who eagerly agreed to let me share parts of their stories in these pages (some with identifying elements changed), once you experience it, you'll find yourself wanting to spread it, too.

## **The Three Wise Effort Tasks**

Throughout the book, you will practice three Wise Effort tasks—Get Curious, Open Up, and Focus Your Energy—to ensure that wise effort guides your genius energy. I call them tasks because it takes *work* to be skillful with your energy use. But unlike all the other tasks piling up on your to-do list, these will free you up!

To support this work, I recommend that you get a new, unlined journal for writing and drawing assignments. Your personal Wise Effort Journal. Don't just skim the exercises in this book—if you want to reclaim and direct your energy in a meaningful way, you need to actually put some effort into this. Do the work. Answer the questions. Practice the experiential exercises. Draw the drawings. Put pen to paper. Research has suggested that writing things by hand can help

you process and remember information more effectively. By engaging in the Wise Effort method, you'll develop the skills to choose moments of aliveness—to make decisions that restore and replenish your energy.

Personally, I choose wise effort, even on my busiest days, when I take my ten-minute break between clients to step outside. Instead of pushing myself to catch up on emails or going to the cupboard for a quick hit of sugar, I put down my laptop, walk down the gravel path, and exhale. I release the energy I'm holding from the client I just saw. I return to my breath, remembering my values of presence and care. I make space to welcome what (and who) comes next. My genius energy flows best when I am clear, steady, and here. Wise effort connects me to something bigger than the million never-ending to-dos that always seem to demand my attention. It's a small, personal example, but choosing wise effort has consequences that ripple throughout my life. That walk outside is a practice for how I want to walk into an important podcast interview. And *that* is a practice for how I want to show up with my kids, friends, family, clients, and community: curious, open, and wise.

It always comes back to these three simple actions: Get Curious, Open Up, and Focus Your Energy. When you combine these three Wise Effort tasks into an ongoing practice, you become the person you want to be. You learn to trust yourself more so you can make wiser decisions, big and small. With wise effort, you will utilize your genius energy in the right amount, at the right time, and in the right place. You will create a life you love and contribute to a world we all want to live in.

Let's begin.

wise effort task #1

# get curious

Have patience with everything  
unresolved in your heart and try to  
love the questions themselves.

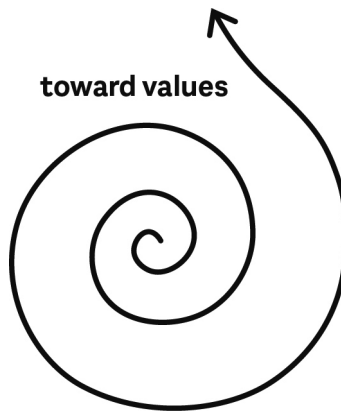
—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

# 1

## what is your genius?

One of the gifts of being a therapist is that, for the most part, people don't put themselves together to come see you. They want to see you the most when things are falling apart. Sometimes clients start crying before they put their keys on the table or before their video feed pops up on my computer screen. They are escaping their hectic lives to figure things out and arrive just as they are.

No matter how someone shows up, I see a genius energy within every person I meet—an array of strengths, talents, and interests that have served them well in life. It might be hidden, misdirected, or used in ways that are unhelpful (more on that later), but it's in there. And so is yours. Your genius energy is not a comparison between you and someone. It's about you and the qualities that make you tick. You have multiple geniuses that make up your genius energy. When channeled with wisdom, this genius energy will help you fly out of whatever kitchen you find yourself stuck in. This is the essence of wise effort—harnessing your genius energy wisely. It's expansive, it's open, and it looks and feels very different from the tangle of your struggle. Picture something like this:



The open, expansive energy of your genius moving toward your values.

Your energy is everything—the basis of all life, including yours. In this chapter, you will get curious about the nature of energy itself. You'll explore what genius energy means to you and how you express its five aspects. Then you will observe genius energy in others and in nature. By the end of this chapter, you will have a clear definition of your unique genius energy and be ready to uncover how you can use it more wisely.

## **What Is Energy Really?**

I've always been sensitive to the energy in a room. As soon as a client sits down, I can feel their nervous energy as they bounce their knees, the dull, sinking energy of depression as they slump into the couch, but also the wave of vitality when they talk about what they love. Then there's that energetic pull to fill an uncomfortable silence or an energetic push to problem-solve. Have you felt that before? Your energy or someone else's?

To make energy more tangible, try or imagine quickly rubbing your hands together and then holding them a few inches in front of your face. Do you feel their heat? Now rub them together again and put them one inch apart, slowly moving them back and forth. Can you feel the electrical charge?

What about the energy in your body? What do you notice? Do you feel heaviness in some areas? Lightness in others? How about the energy of physical sensations? Can you feel the pulsing of blood in your fingers? The sensation of tingling in your toes? Any energy in your chest or belly? What about in your head? Do you feel the buzz of thinking or the dullness of brain fog? Is your mental energy pulled in many directions right now? I don't know about you, but I can feel my energy being pulled to my phone to check a text.

Your energy is constantly being used and regenerated in a dynamic cycle. Whether it's thermal energy, created by the friction between your hands; physical energy, restored by the mitochondria within your cells; emotional energy, replenished through meaningful social connections;