

A man with a golden, muscular physique is shown in profile, breaking through a dark, jagged, rocky shell. He is wearing heavy chains on his wrists and arms. The background is dark and textured, suggesting a prison or a state of being trapped.

THE MIND

# STRESS HACKED

How To Get Stronger In A  
Civilization Designed To Break You

Alex Tarnava

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Civilization Designed to Break You**

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This book isn't short. It's not supposed to be.

Strength is not a hack. It's a system.

And systems can't be learned in soundbites.

*Stress-Hacked*

*How to Get Stronger in a Civilization Designed to Break You*  
*The Mind*

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## **Dedication**

*I'm dedicating this book to my daughter, Adelina Tarnava.*

*May you grow up in a world where strength is fostered  
through deliberate structure, thought is free, and the pursuit  
of happiness, passion, and purpose remain possible.*



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## PREFACE:

### **The War on Discomfort**

For a long time, I had something of a system going. I'd drop into a gym, spar two or three guys I knew I could outclass, and then walk out sweaty, victorious, and a little too proud of myself than I'd like to admit. To add to this display, I'd go a round, or maybe two or three if I was feeling great, with someone better than me—but only after I'd had a break, never if I was even slightly fatigued. The important caveat is that I'd go a round with someone I knew wouldn't punish me too hard, either

**Picture 1.** After surgery to correct the many nose breaks



*StressHacked Rule #14: If you can't out-think the discomfort... at least out-bleed it.*

**Picture 2.** Resting after a hard round of sparring



*Victory is sweet. Recovery is swetier.*

because we had a prior relationship or because I knew they had the discipline to dial it down. After the so-called effort of lasting one round with a decent fighter, I'd "recover" and get back to dominating the easier rounds.

What was I doing, exactly? This wasn't me being productive. It wasn't me growing as a person, either. This was all a performance: a carefully calibrated simulation of adversity, nothing more than a ritual designed to pump me up and stroke my ego. This ritual let me come out on top no matter what I did; to "win," at least in the twisted definition I had created in my mind, with little to no risk involved. I learned that this is the kind of strength that is solely ornamental, like a sword mounted on a wall—polished, gleaming, and utterly useless in a real fight. Performance may wow until it's tested under the pressure of reality, before it collapses *under* the pressure, because it's not the real thing.

So I scrapped the system, and developed a new one which led me to who I wanted to become. I started sparring almost exclusively with my trainer. This guy was younger and faster than me. He had better cardio, and he had a ridiculous striking IQ. He was a technician in every sense of the word. The most important consideration was that he didn't care about my feelings, so he didn't hand me easy rounds, and never let me win, not even once; he handed me reality.

I told him I wanted to be pushed, that I wanted to grow and get better, and he listened. Initially, I maintained the delusion that I could win; I just needed to tweak a few of my techniques, knock the rust off, and improve my cardio. I drove to every session determined, with a new strategy—something I'd been thinking about since

the last time we sparred. The challenge was always, and still is, setting up my trap, or attack. He's incredibly cautious and highly intelligent. What strikes me the most about him is his ability to notice when I see something—typically, he doesn't know *what* I saw, but he catches on that I saw *something*. As soon as he notices I detect a pattern or opening, he disengages and immediately changes his style, a habit that frustrates me beyond measure.

Because of this high level of fighter IQ, I don't get many openings with him, so I need to force the opportunity when I want to try to execute. When I resign myself to this, maybe I catch him once—twice, if I'm lucky—but he always adjusts immediately, and the window closes. The worst part of this is that after I catch him with something new, something sneaky, his competitive instincts take over, and I spend the rest of the round on the defensive, trying not to drown. I know exactly when I'm in trouble. Like clockwork, I catch him with something he really isn't happy about, I see his eyes widen, nostrils flare, and he changes gears. In his words it isn't anger, it's frustration. His motto is simply “dominate,” and if I land something big, something that may have changed the momentum in a real fight, a sense of urgency comes over him to “get it back” and finish on top. So, because I can't beat him, not technically, my reward for improvement is more, and immediate, pain.

Over the years I've thrown everything at him. Early on I realized that my preferred style of trying to snipe pot shots from distance is hopeless against him, so I needed to make adjustments. I've tried walking him down, crowding him and applying consistent pressure, but even on the back foot he has better cardio than me. I've tried upping my volume in a deliberate way while pressuring, and still, he barely breaks a sweat by the time I'm gassed. When I commit to patiently waiting to land counter shots he quickly steps back and finesses me from distance, not allowing me a chance. Sometimes I even employ Gaethje-style caveman fighting, where I'd throw at the same time as him, trading damage for damage. This is the only strategy I have ever found success with him, and the problem is that he doesn't willingly enter this scenario. Either I force it, which gasses me, or I try to bait him and play possum, and he almost always knows when I'm baiting him. So, I only ever end up exchanging like this for the last round or two of a session, when I know that I have enough in the gas tank left to up the tempo, or when I'm actually tired and hurt, my back against the wall, and he's hunting a killshot (to my body). The latter scenario is playing with fire, as often he finds that opening before I start unleashing. I've even come in and blitzed from the opening bell, which sees some success, for a time, until I run out of steam and he punishes me for it. No matter what, every single time, the result is the same: brief flashes of success, followed by fatigue, punishment, and clarity. Not just about my skill level, but about my limits.

I've been hit with shots I didn't see coming from this guy. One time, he threw a lead-leg question mark kick from the pocket that landed clean on my temple, more impressive because he threw it while I was mid-lead hook, us being in the middle of

a boxing exchange. My body didn't even register the strike in time to flinch. I stayed standing, but everything dimmed, and I was as wobbly as a newborn deer on ice. That's the closest I've ever been to being knocked out. Not from power—from precision.

Despite knowing I would never win, I kept showing up, and in fact, I keep showing up to this day. Because sparring with someone I can't beat does something most people never experience: it forces honest growth by eliminating illusion. There's no room for maintaining a curated performance when you're in survival mode. You either adapt, or you get exposed. The moment you stop trying to win—really win, with strategy and intention—you find something more important: your edge. You find the outer boundary of your capability, and if you're paying attention, that edge becomes the starting line; it's where progress begins.

That's why I kept showing up, and that's why I still do; not because I think I'll beat him, I won't. Time isn't on my side, and neither is age, nor recovery, nor priorities, but none of that matters, because the goal isn't dominance, it's *depth*. It's to sharpen the mind by enduring what the body wants to escape, and to leave the mat knowing I faced something real and didn't flinch, didn't lie to myself, didn't coast. Except on some days... I *do*. Some days I show up already trying to disengage. As soon as I lace up my gloves and put my mouth guard in, I know I am not mentally there. So I slow the pace, do everything in my power to coast. I do everything I can to hide the fact that I'm just trying to survive without suffering. Unless something is really wrong, for instance I'm physically off and it's obvious, my trainer doesn't let me. He waits, watches, and eventually finds the gaps. When he sees that opening, he drowns me. I know this is going to happen, and that's the point: the structure is designed to catch me when I coast. It's a system that doesn't allow me to get away with half-effort.

We're all human and, given the chance, we'll take the easy road. We'll rationalize why we need to take it easy, we'll wrap it in clever language and delude ourselves into thinking we have made the right decision. That's why the structure matters. That's why discipline has to be built into the environment and fully incorporated into your routine, not just your mindset. That way when your willpower fades, the system keeps the pressure on, and you learn to push through. After enough time, you no longer need to learn, you simply move forward, because you have to, because there's nowhere else to go, it's all your mind and body know. This kind of practice, this honest confrontation with your limits, is exactly what I see disappearing from the broader culture.



For at least a decade, I've been hearing warnings about what "safe spaces" and emotional coddling are doing to Western youth. I remember reading *The Coddling of the American Mind* by Jonathan Haidt (co-authored with Greg Lukianof [2019]) after hearing him interviewed by Sam Harris and thinking, *if even half of this is true*,

*we're in serious trouble.* The core message was clear: we are raising a generation to be fragile by teaching them that discomfort is harm. The problem is, discomfort isn't harm, it's experience, and experience leads to new information, new data, and expanded understanding. Discomfort is something to interpret, and not to fear or flee from. Indeed, discomfort is not only an opportunity to gather information consciously: about yourself, your environment, and your limits, but an opportunity for your body and mind to understand these limits at a subconscious level, as well.

This year, I enrolled in university, but not to chase a credential, rather, because I've been offered a pathway towards a Ph.D., and I need to complete a B.Sc. to formally qualify. I've already done most of what a Ph.D. demands: I've published peer-reviewed research, built domain-level expertise, and developed a deep, working understanding of the scientific process. The only thing I lack is the formal title. Ironically, in a world addicted to appearances and credentials, earning that title is the most efficient way to silence appeals to authority fallacies, and force people to engage with my ideas directly.

If I'm being honest, I also wanted to see, firsthand, what students are actually being taught. In an online course titled *The Science of Mental Health*, I encountered messaging that would've seemed like parody a decade ago. Students were explicitly advised not to revisit past conversations or mistakes, as doing so might lead to anxiety. We were also told to avoid projecting ourselves into future stressful situations, because mentally rehearsing those scenarios might impair our actual performance. Most bizarrely, we were told that abstract thought itself can be harmful, it being a cognitive hazard, rather than a tool for personal development.

**In other words: Don't look back. Don't look forward. Don't think too hard. Just float through life, and hope for the best.** This isn't mental health, it's institutional learned helplessness. When discomfort is treated as pathology, and reflection as a threat, you don't get resilience, you get psychological paralysis, you get people trained to fear their own minds, and in the end you get emotional fragility disguised as care and avoidance disguised as wisdom. This book is my response.

What follows is a blueprint for reclaiming discomfort as a tool for adaptation. It's a counter strike against the hollowing-out of human strength: mental, physical, and emotional. It's a defense of challenge, of friction, of intentional pressure as the driver of growth. Discomfort isn't damage, it's data, and strength is what happens when you stop avoiding it.

I've been posting this edited Nietzsche quote off and on for over a decade now. It's lifted from *On the Genealogy of Morals*—the beginning and the end of a longer passage, with the middle trimmed out to expose the real blade underneath. Every year it feels more relevant, not less. Western society is in the middle of a civil war: not between races, not between classes, but between those who adapt and those who deteriorate.



The weak in mind, body, and spirit are no longer just coddled. They're curated, amplified, and weaponized. It's not done by people who want to help them become strong, but by people who benefit from institutionalized weakness. Dysfunction isn't treated anymore, it's monetized, and worse, it's glorified.

Here's the tragic irony: Nietzsche originally aimed this critique at his contemporary Christians, and he wasn't wrong. There *was* a pathological glorification of suffering, of meekness, of the "blessed afflicted." Yet look around today, and who's actually pushing back against the gospel of fragility? More often than not, it's modern Christians—at least in name, if not always in practice—who seem willing to stand up and say, *enough*.

This book is a response to the world Nietzsche warned us about: a world where the strong are made to feel guilty for being strong, where illness isn't just accommodated, it's enthroned. Where resilience is mistaken for cruelty, and self-mastery is rebranded as oppression: a world where the sick don't just want your compassion, they want your compliance, your silence, and your surrender.

If you don't give it to them, you're labeled the problem, but strength is not the problem. Weakness masquerading as virtue is.

They have taken a lease of virtue absolutely for themselves, have these weaklings and wretched invalids, there is no doubt of it; "We alone are the good, the righteous", so do they speak, "We alone are the men of good will." They stalk about in our midst as living reproaches, as warning to us—as though health, fitness, strength, pride, the sensation of power, were really vicious things in themselves, for which one would have some day to do penance, bitter penance. Oh, how they themselves are ready in their hearts to exact penance, how they thirst after being hangmen!...

*At that time, doubtless, when they succeed in pushing their own misery, in fact, all misery, into the consciousness of the happy; so that the latter begin one day to be ashamed of their happiness, and perchance say to themselves when they meet "it is a shame to be happy, there is too much misery"...*

*But there could not possibly be a greater and more fatal misunderstanding than that of the happy, the fit, the strong in body and soul, beginning in this way to doubt their right to happiness. Away with this "perverse world"! Away with this shameful soddenness of sentiment! Preventing the sick making the healthy sick, this ought to be our supreme object in the world.*

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

**Picture 3.** Me mimicking a famous Fedor pose



*I didn't realize I was channeling Fedor until after the photo. I just thought I was a man holding an ice cream cone... and the respect of my fiancée. One bite after hot pot and I knew: I'd already won the heavyweight title of relationships.*

Philosophy has always claimed to seek truth, but most of it was written before science gave us answers. We now know what Friedrich Nietzsche only intuited: every human action is emotionally driven. This means that cognition follows emotion, not the other way around. What we call “meaning” is a byproduct of our internal state, and what we call “purpose” is the direction we give our energy. At least, when I started to write this section I believed that this was inarguable.

Another argument, one which emerged after a long-form editorial debate with two of my editors, is that there is a feedback loop: emotions drive behavior, which reshapes the emotional landscape, which in turn reshapes how we behave. Over

time, emotion and action become indistinguishable (Neta & Haas, 2019; Lerner et al., 2015). At least, this is how my editors chose to clarify my statement. One of my editors, Ljubomir, held to the statement that emotion and cognition is a two-way street, each capable of driving the other, although, his conviction to that concept was not firm, and more a curious potential inconsistency of the one way framing I presented.

As mentioned, originally the editorial decision, based on a long discussion between myself, Ljubomir and Vadim, was to go with the feedback loop. This debate, however, abruptly resurfaced months later when Vadim prompted me to comment on shame and guilt, asking my position on their usefulness, given Nietzsche's skepticism on both. While I dive into this topic in detail in *Chapter 7*, in short, when I was younger, I initially dismissed them as tools of control, or manipulative levers deployed by moral systems to suppress individual will. However, as I attempted to purge shame from my own life, I discovered its tenacity. I eventually concluded that shame and guilt can be wielded constructively, as acute stressors, not chronic burdens, if directed toward internal standards rather than externally imposed norms. As stated, Ljubomir challenged my dichotomy between cognition and emotion, pointing out the bidirectional nature of their influence. Though I held that cognition emerges from emotion (and thus remains ultimately emotionally driven), I conceded that his model of a feedback loop, namely emotion shaping thought, and thought reshaping emotion, was more descriptively accurate. This passage is a crystallization of that reconciliation. The debate itself was never fully resolved, but it did sharpen this chapter and, more importantly, my own position. In short, this side of the book doesn't ask the old questions; they've been answered (mostly). This side asks: what now?

If the mind is not a rational compass but a layered, emotional system, then strength comes not from control, but from clarity. It comes from learning to navigate yourself with honesty, structure, and precision—not to dominate, nor to perform, but to build a life that aligns with who you actually are, and importantly, who you want to become. You won't find open-ended speculation here, you'll find something more useful: a mirror, a map, and a method. Because the will to power is not a theory: it is your biology.

The will to power is your biology because cognition doesn't steer the ship, it serves it (Killeen & Glenberg, 2010; Engel, 2010). Cognition's primary function is to forecast: to make predictions that might smooth or optimize future emotional outcomes. It reaches backward into memory for guidance, but even memory is colored by feeling, namely the emotional tone present when an occurring event imprints on the memory with weight and flavor. What we call "recall" is less objective retrieval and more a selective, emotionally inflected reconstruction.

Meaning itself emerges not as abstract logic, but as something embodied and felt. It arises downstream of mood, arousal, and neurotransmitter tone: the physiological milieu we inhabit before we can name what's happening (Kronrod & Ackerman; Heintzelman & King, 2013; Frenkel, 2008). Even our sense of purpose, the illusion of a self-directed path, is often a retrospective gloss on momentum that was already building. The direction our energy has started flowing, whether because of habit, environment, or subtle conditioning, gets retrofitted with a narrative of intentional striving (Bronk, 2018; Froese, 2016).

From a systems view, emotion is *central*. It determines what we notice, what we value, what we remember, and what we deem good or worth protecting. It doesn't merely accompany ideology, it often precedes it. For example, research shows that people with higher sensitivity to disgust, even from unrelated stimuli like bad smells, tend to hold more socially conservative views (Inbar et al., 2009). That's not abstract reasoning at work; it's *affect*.

This is the deeper, often hidden, truth: the brain does not simply process reality, it feels its way through it. What we think of as reason may in fact be highly refined instinct. Meanwhile, what we believe to be purpose might be nothing more than well-argued emotion dressed in logic's clothing.

Once you understand this, there's only one question left: will you direct the will to power—or be directed by it?

**Picture 4.** Me at Fedor's retirement fight



*Some men wear capes. Some wear gloves. Legends retire under the lights—  
and remind the rest of us what toughness looks like.*

## INTRODUCTION:

### **Mental Hormesis**

Most of the time, I have no issue with confrontation. I've done door-to-door sales, I've trained others to do it, and I've made tough business calls without hesitation, even when I knew they'd be tense or combative. Conflict doesn't rattle me, but once in a while, without warning, something short-circuits.

It usually starts with a simple ask: something I need from someone, or even something I just want to say. Without fail, the stakes aren't high, and the task will take seconds, or less. I might be 99% sure the answer will be yes, but for reasons I can't fully explain, I freeze, I avoid, and I circle the task for hours, sometimes days, fully aware of how irrational it is, and still unable to pull the trigger. This is not fear of confrontation, it's fear of rejection, or maybe, more precisely, fear of *exposure*, of being vulnerable in a way I can't control or defuse with logic.

When these moments hit, no amount of confidence or experience seems to matter. The task stalls until something changes, something imperceptible to me, and my emotions reconcile with my logic. I've learned not to judge these moments too harshly, opting to study them instead. The reality is that these moments are revealing: they don't expose weakness in a general sense; instead, they expose the specific, targeted vulnerabilities most people spend their lives avoiding, and that's exactly why they're useful. That's hormesis: not just surviving stress, but *using* it at the right dose, in the right context, to come out sharper. It's true for the body, and it's just as true for the mind. Whether it's stepping into a ring, making an impossible decision, or just asking a question you're scared to ask, exposure is the prerequisite to growth.

Stress, applied correctly, is the path to clarity. Stress is inevitable, like death and taxes, and it comes for everyone; whether through high-stakes decisions, emotional turbulence, or socially-loaded moments that feel impossible to navigate, and yet, we've been conditioned to treat discomfort like a malfunction, as something to avoid, as something unnatural. The problem is that avoidance comes at a cost. The more you dodge discomfort, the more it robs you of your ability to think clearly, connect authentically, and act decisively when it truly matters. We've been taught, explicitly in some cases, that discomfort is trauma, that effort is abuse, and that strain is somehow unjust. That mindset, purportedly suggested to protect our mental health, instead serves to *dismantle it*.

Despite its inevitability, we've been conditioned to avoid discomfort and seek ease, yet this avoidance weakens our capacity to think clearly, connect authentically, and act decisively. Hormesis, the phenomenon in which the application of a tolerable amount of a stressor leads to positive adaptations rather than harm, applies just as powerfully to the mind as to the body. Strategic exposure to cognitive and social

stress through difficult conversations, public speaking, mental adversity, or learning complex skills, doesn't just help you cope, it builds your fundamental capacity for clarity under pressure.

Let's be absolutely clear: despite the explosion of mindfulness apps and "mental hacks," there is no one-size-fits-all solution to resilience. Psychological toughness isn't born, it's built, just like VO<sub>2</sub> max or grip strength. It requires consistent, progressive exposure to difficulty, not avoidance disguised as self-care. Stress without structure doesn't strengthen, it breaks. Real damage can happen when exposure is chaotic, not calibrated. Those of us strengthened by the fire of chaos are lucky, as more often than not, that early immersion in chaos causes us to crumble.

Forget politics and pop psychology, mental resilience is too important to be left to ideology, trends, or chance. Hormetic tools, when properly applied, create a foundation of psychological strength that no affirmation or comfort strategy ever could. Misapplied, they reinforce weakness and entrench avoidance patterns that limit human potential.

In this volume, I'll explore the cutting-edge science of mental stress as a catalyst for psychological resilience and cognitive performance. Grounded in hard science, philosophy, and hard-won experience, I'll navigate the mechanisms underlying mental adaptation and expose where popular claims exceed the evidence. You'll learn precisely when to challenge your mind and when to allow recovery: a distinction that makes the difference between growth and psychological deterioration.

This volume focuses on cognitive, emotional, and social hormesis: the stressors that challenge your identity, beliefs, and composure. Its companion volume addresses physical stressors. Neither side is optional; both are essential.

Just as insufficient mental challenge leads to psychological fragility, too much can cause emotional damage. The line between beneficial stress and harmful strain can be dangerously thin with mental stressors. We'll delve into strategies for optimal psychological recovery, emphasizing that adaptation happens during integration, not during stress itself.

I start with social anxiety because, for me, it shaped everything that came after: the way I moved, the way I spoke, and the way I braced for every interaction. It wasn't shyness I was dealing with, it was *circuitry*. For most of my life, social anxiety ran the show... until it didn't.

## CHAPTER 1:

# Courage and Character: My Journey Through Social Anxiety

*You don't develop courage by being happy in your relationships every day.*

*You develop it by surviving difficult times and challenging adversity.*

- EPICURUS (probably falsely attributed)

When most people think about fear, they picture panic: racing thoughts, sweaty palms, and adrenaline-fueled action. That wasn't my version; instead, mine looked more like stillness, like sitting on a park bench or a curb, staring at nothing, being completely paralyzed and unable to act on what was a routine task: the entirety of the job I did every day.

I worked in door-to-door sales for years. I was good at it, relatively speaking, and I understood what worked better than most. Due to my understanding of the art, I was better suited as a trainer and manager than I ever was as an actual salesman. Once upper management realized this, I was quickly promoted to these tasks. First, I trained others on how to sell within existing teams, and then managed my own.

**Picture 5.** Me, my fiancée, and the cast of the *Skinny Confidential*



*Showed up to the podcast with a hangover and a mission—turns out you can sweat out social anxiety... on air.*



When I say that I was a relatively good salesman, it needs to be qualified that this is only true when considering my averages and peaks. At times, I was unrecognizable, and lacked any ability to sell, sometimes any ability to even approach a door. In short, when I broke, I broke hard. It wasn't that I was scared to knock or ring the bell, not in the sense we understand fear, I physically *couldn't*.

When my mind went to this place, the entire routine of approaching doors felt pointless. Sometimes this would last a day or two, other times weeks and in rare cases even months. My mind would shift between different thoughts; I'd consider that with my attitude, I was unlikely to sell anything, so forcing myself to go to the doors would only negatively impact my state of mind. I'd then consider that even if I did go to the doors and managed to sell some deals, the thought of it all felt empty. I liked and appreciated money, but the idea of earning it in this method, during these occurrences, left me feeling uneasy. Paradoxically, I did not seek out other employment during these times, as every career and job prospect available to me in my late teens felt equally pointless, and I'll add, substantially less lucrative. So, I'd exist in limbo until some random change to my environment shifted my motivation and perspective back to performing at this job and task.

During these periods, which were perhaps sparked by a particularly unlucky sales conversation, or, perhaps, by nothing I could pinpoint, my confidence collapsed in on itself. I kept showing up to my territory, but couldn't bring myself to move towards the doors, so I'd wander, I'd sit out of sight. When this happened while I was a team leader or manager, I'd go home if I was alone, or wait in my vehicle or a restaurant if others were depending on me. Nothing helped, not logic, not willpower, and not pep talks. I was just stuck. The first time this happened was in my first year on the job, in my final year of high school. The slump lasted for 2 months, until I eventually left town to take a job and spend a summer in the city where I grew up, which I had left just a few short years before to move in with my dad. I graduated from high school, spent some time back home where my mom still lived, and regrouped. A couple of months later, I came back and decided to give it another try: same doors, same script, but whatever had been haunting me was gone. There was no buildup and no grand transformation, the crushing nihilism had simply evaporated.

The same pattern hit me years later as a manager: when things were going well, I was unstoppable; I was making calls, hiring, and building momentum, but when I got down on myself, I'd flatline. I couldn't pick up the phone to save my life, and it would stay that way until something small, a lucky break, a former rep reaching out, a new deal from the newspaper; basically, opportunities that materialized externally rather than internally, shook me out of it. One tiny win would flip the switch, and suddenly I was back: energized, driven, firing on all cylinders. That's where I got the idea of "small victories": the topic of a later chapter in this book.

Because that's how success actually works: it's like a massive boulder. At first, it takes everything you've got to get it moving. It feels impossible, but if you manage even

one inch of progress—just enough to feel it roll—you gain leverage, and more importantly, you gain belief. Eventually, that momentum takes on a life of its own. Your job becomes simpler: keep pace, give it a nudge now and then, and at times, do your best to sprint alongside the momentum you’ve built. Once you build something that takes on its own force, the work becomes easier; that is, until it crashes. If you let your momentum be lost, then it’s back to square one. No shortcuts and no hacks: just the same process again; *re-engage*, *re-expose*, and *recover*.

That’s the quiet truth no one likes to admit: momentum matters. When it’s moving, you feel unstoppable, but when it stalls, even the smallest task can feel unbearable. That’s why small victories aren’t unsubstantiated optimism, or surface-level soft philosophy, but a structural practice that drives real growth and change. Pursuing small victories isn’t just intelligent, it’s essential to recovery. They re-engage the system, and they put your hands back on the boulder. Yet, what if the thing you need to push isn’t a task or a sales call, but *yourself*?

One of the most transformative ways to build mental resilience is by deliberately confronting the parts of life that feel unbearable. This shouldn’t be done all at once, nor recklessly, but by incrementally pushing into the corners of your experience that you’ve spent years avoiding. That’s how capacity is built, and that’s how your sphere of competence expands: not through inspiration, but through exposure.

For me, that meant confronting something far more difficult than rejection: *connection*. From as early as I can remember, social interaction caused me intense anxiety. I wasn’t just shy, I was neurologically wired to find the entire process disorienting and overwhelming. My parents sat at opposite ends of the social spectrum, which only amplified the contrast. My mother is an extreme introvert, likely somewhere on the autism spectrum, and she has struggled with social anxiety for most of her life. At one point, it became full-blown agoraphobia; even stepping outside was an ordeal.

Until I was fifteen, she raised me largely on her own. My world was quiet, insulated, and narrow. Conversations and interactions with non-family members or close friends were awkward and forced. Even visits with my father often felt disorienting, him being an unabashed extrovert. While there was comfort in that silence, it came at a cost: the entire landscape of social nuance, such as nonverbal cues, tone shifts, and spontaneous engagement, all felt like a foreign language I was never taught.

Then I moved in with my father. Effortlessly social and completely immune to embarrassment, my dad’s idea of parenting was immersion therapy, or more likely, he was just living as he pleased, not realizing how alienating and painful this was for me. He put me in situations that made me uncomfortable, until they didn’t. There were constant gatherings, spontaneous introductions, bold-faced lies, and exaggerations to strangers. These were initiated for reasons that aren’t logical or straightforward, as they did not involve tangible personal gain. In general,

conversations that felt ten steps ahead of where I was ready to be. It wasn't just overwhelming, it was borderline paralyzing, but it was also the beginning of exposure, which was the beginning of change.

By the time I was seventeen, I'd built a thin layer of social confidence, enough to function, but not enough to see how far I still had to go. That's when a friend invited me to try the sales job. My father loved the idea: maybe he saw it as the final push I needed, though it's hard to say for sure. While he told me I needed to do it, he'd simultaneously mock me, telling me I couldn't succeed. He uses the word 'loser' often, and I remember him saying I was "way too much of a *loser*" to be good at sales. I should clarify, his concept of a "loser" means someone uncool, not someone who is a failure in life. By this time, being told I *couldn't* do something was my strongest motivation to ensure I *needed* to do it. I thought I was ready, my confidence going in was unwavering.

In some ways, I was ready. I even won "Rookie of the Month" in my first month on the job. In others, I wasn't, but you already know that story: the reality hit harder than I expected. Sales success was intoxicating. When things went well, conversations clicked, I read the moment right, and closed the deal, I felt unstoppable, like I'd finally cracked the code. However, on bad days, everything unraveled. A string of rejections would spiral into self-doubt, I'd walk away convinced something was fundamentally broken in me. Failure led me to question more than the job, the offer, and my skillset; it led me to question my fundamental worth as a human being.

I'm not sure where this response originated, but when faced with this crushing self-doubt, my instinct is not to quit, it is to desperately seek improvement so as to rapidly eliminate the negative emotions. So, once I started having poor shifts, I went to work becoming a student in how to improve. I started practicing my pitch, even engaging in imaginary conversations in my head, including rebuttals to common rejections, in front of a mirror, drilling my delivery like a fighter practicing combinations. I studied the top salespeople around me, each with wildly different styles, and tried to reverse-engineer what made each of them effective. I experimented and I mimicked, slowly altering my approach each day. With each iteration, my performance and confidence improved.

My foray into door-to-door commission sales was only the training ground. As my skills grew, I began to notice the cracks: my improvements in sales didn't fully translate to my broader social life. I could close deals, sure, but navigating group conversations, casual social events, or any other unstructured situation still felt foreign. That's when I realized I wasn't just lacking practice—I was lacking *range*. I'd learned to play one role really well, but I hadn't developed the internal flexibility to shift between roles. My personality was still siloed, so I made a decision: I'd build new characters.

I say this in the literal sense, I decided at this time that the only way to grow was to behave like an actor, perfecting a performance and personality for each social situation. I began designing versions of myself, each tailored to a different kind of interaction: one for high-pressure meetings, one for casual banter, one for mentorship, one for interviews, one to talk to girls, the list goes on. I rehearsed each like a script, and obsessively practiced and refined. With each new interaction, each unexpected response, reaction, or failure, my dataset grew, and I understood what was needed with greater clarity. It felt artificial at first, because it was all an act, but over time, those characters stopped feeling separate, and they began to merge. The fragments fused into something real, something integrated and whole. What began as pure compensation, an effort to overcorrect for what I lacked, evolved into authentic confidence. In time, these were no longer characters, they no longer took thought or refinement, they were simply who I was, and who I am today.

Today, my ability to navigate social dynamics has evolved profoundly. I regularly speak on stage in front of thousands, participate in podcasts reaching tens or even hundreds of thousands of listeners, and frequently thrive in situations that once seemed impossible. I'm not always the most charismatic guy in the room, at least until the ice is broken and I have someone's undivided attention, and I may not be the most naturally confident or engaging speaker, but none of this matters. The resilience I've cultivated enables me not only to function effectively but often to excel. This strength emerged directly from the intentional mental stress and adversity I chose to confront when younger, demonstrating a critical lesson: strategically confronting discomfort is not merely a path to growth, it is the foundation of lasting strength.

That's the lesson most people miss: resilience doesn't arrive. It's not something you acquire by waiting or reading or meditating your way into it. You *earn* it through confrontation, integration, and repetition. You don't become stronger by accident; you become stronger by *design*.

**Picture 6.** My fiancée and I in St. Petersburg



*Sometimes I muse about how great life would be as a royal in centuries past—then I remember they lacked air conditioning.*

## CHAPTER 2:

# Language Learning as Hormesis: My Russian Journey

## The Struggle of Language Acquisition

Russian wasn't some exotic language I picked up on a whim. It was more like a slow accumulation. My paternal side is a mixed Slavic lineage; Ukrainian by community, but with Slovak, Polish, and Rusyn roots, so I picked up a lot of phrases and vocabulary from my dad, especially after I moved in with him as a teenager. He had a Polish business partner at the time, and as he started recalling old words and expressions, he passed them along to me. The foundation was patchy, but it stuck.

Later, through friendships, exposure to both Ukrainian and Russian friends, and a long-term relationship with a woman who is now my fiancée, I slowly added to my patchy vocabulary. Russian and Ukrainian overlap enough that my ear adapted quickly, and ironically this is likely the reason I have all but forgotten the words and phrases I once knew in Ukrainian. When I met my fiancée, I knew a few hundred words in Russian, 500 tops, a few more than my Ukrainian by that point. After we started dating, my Russian slowly started growing, while my Ukrainian evaporated more and more each day. By the time I started collaborating on research papers with Russian scientists, I had a basic foundation of around a thousand words, but my grammar was poor, and I struggled to speak or understand. Still, it gave me a head start. The mountain didn't seem quite as tall, I felt I could "speak a bit already," so I started learning Russian properly, which means I began official lessons.

That's where the real cognitive pain set in. There was a stretch when I kept mixing up three words; *grustny*, *grazny*, and *grozny*, and the confusion wasn't exactly academic. These words sound similar, especially to an English speaker, but they mean completely different things:

- *Grustny* = sad
- *Grazny* = dirty
- *Grozny* = stern or serious

One day, while speaking with a language partner, she asked me why I seemed *grozny*, meaning stern. However, I misheard it. I thought she asked why I was *grazny*, which is dirty. I froze, confused. In that moment, I wasn't translating, I was glitching. I didn't know if I should be confused, offended, or apologize. I probably said something awkward and defensive. She was puzzled, and I was embarrassed. The conversation derailed, and we had to reset and figure out where the miscommunication was. I never forgot that distinction again. If I'd properly understood at the time, my response would have been, "that's my default face"—sort of a resting asshole face, if you will.

In the beginning, I had grand aspirations to master Russian, but this has proven to be an exceptionally daunting task. Languages represent perhaps my greatest intellectual weakness. I often don't think in language at all, but rather in patterns and connections between concepts; this being a mental process that's particularly difficult to articulate precisely because I struggle with linguistic expression. Transforming my thoughts into coherent language frequently requires considerable time and effort. Even deciphering my own writing and notes in English, if I am not carefully writing with intent, is a daunting task.

Learning Russian, a language notorious for its illogical and inconsistent structures, triggers significant anxiety and frustration. The process is rarely enjoyable for me, and always exhausting. The six cases, unpredictable stress patterns, and seemingly arbitrary gender assignments create a perfect storm of cognitive challenge. Then, like English, the common use of idioms, which are incomprehensible when directly translated, is a further barrier. Yet I persist, not because I find it pleasant, but because I recognize the value of the hormetic stress it creates.

That's how cognitive hormesis works: you push yourself into new terrain, fail in a way that stings just enough to lock in the lesson, and adapt, not instantly or smoothly, but permanently. Language learning is brutal like that. You can't fake your way through it. There's nowhere to hide: every word you mangle, every pause you fill with silence, and every awkward laugh that covers your confusion are all part of the training. It doesn't just teach you grammar. It teaches you how to sit inside discomfort and keep moving forward. Like everything else in this book, that's the point.

My motivation extends beyond mere self-improvement. As I explained, I already possessed a rudimentary understanding of Russian when I began this more intensive effort, and my soon-to-be wife is Russian. We both want our daughter and future children to be fluent in both Russian and English. This familial responsibility drives me to spend multiple hours each week practicing, taking lessons, and engaging with native speakers despite the discomfort. Your motivations will differ, but the important task is finding them so you can push yourself through the stress and into growth.

## **Finding Your Cognitive Hormetic Window**

Language learning exemplifies cognitive hormesis precisely because the process is inherently challenging and often uncomfortable. The stress and frustration experienced when grappling with a complex language like Russian forces your brain to adapt and grow. However, achieving meaningful cognitive and neurological adaptations demands careful calibration. Just as physical stressors such as cold exposure, fasting, or intense exercise require precise dosing, cognitive stressors like language learning must also be managed carefully to avoid overload and ensure productive adaptation.

The optimal hormetic dose for cognitive stress will vary significantly between individuals. For some, a daily fifteen-minute practice session might be ideal, whereas others may comfortably handle longer or more intense periods of study. Key indicators of appropriate dosing include manageable frustration levels, steady incremental progress, and consistent engagement with the learning process.

When you notice signs that you've exceeded your cognitive hormetic threshold, such as mental fatigue, persistent frustration, declining performance, or a strong impulse to avoid the task altogether, don't wait for a pattern to establish itself across multiple sessions. Respond immediately by shifting to less demanding activities. This principle applies not just to language learning but to any cognitively demanding task. Personally, when I feel overloaded during Russian practice, or any intellectually challenging work, I cycle through it by switching to easier work or reading for a period before returning with renewed focus. This immediate response to overload signals prevents the accumulation of mental fatigue while maintaining productive engagement.

### **The Neurological Benefits of Language Learning**

When you expose your brain to entirely new linguistic structures, unfamiliar phonetics, and novel grammatical rules, you create a controlled form of mental stress that forces neuroplastic adaptation. Research has shown that this adaptive pressure doesn't just make you better at the language itself, it spills over into other domains of cognition. Bilingual and multilingual individuals often display stronger executive function and improved cognitive control (Baumgart & Billick, 2017). They're better at switching attention between tasks (Wiseheart, Viswanathan, & Bialystok, 2016; Kakvan, You, & Adler, 2015), holding and manipulating information in working memory (Cockcroft, Wigdorowitz, & Liversage, 2019), and, perhaps most strikingly, they show increased resilience against age-related cognitive decline (Bialystok, Craik, & Freedman, 2007). These benefits likely emerge as a direct outcome of the mental effort involved. Language learning requires sustained focus, a tolerance for ambiguity, and the persistence to move through frequent failure: all hallmarks of an effective hormetic stressor.

### **Practical Implementation for Maximal Adaptation**

For those seeking to leverage language learning as a hormetic practice, consider these implementation strategies: Create daily consistency with brief, focused sessions (15-30 minutes) rather than sporadic marathon sessions. This maintains steady adaptive pressure without overwhelming your cognitive resources (Kaipa et al., 2020).

Deliberately seek out challenging interactions with native speakers rather than remaining in your comfort zone with programmed learning applications. The social stress combined with linguistic challenges creates a powerful hormetic effect. Expose



yourself to authentic content slightly beyond your current comprehension level. This controlled difficulty stimulates adaptive stress while remaining within your capacity for recovery (Jumabekovna, 2024; Robertson, 2009).

Track your progress objectively using standardized assessments to ensure you're experiencing productive stress rather than harmful frustration. Ideally, ensure you have someone who is a native speaker who can give you honest feedback. Your teacher may provide feedback that is too positive, to make you feel like you are progressing faster than you are, and you need someone who will be honest with you and challenge those assertions.

Importantly, it's necessary to balance intensive practice with adequate recovery periods to allow neural consolidation of new language patterns. Finally, always adjust intensity based on feedback signals from your body and mind. These include increased irritability, sleep disturbances, or diminishing returns, which are clear indicators to reduce intensity temporarily.

## **Conclusion: Beyond Linguistic Competence**

The payoff isn't always immediate, and I still struggle with my Russian. I speak it better than I understand it, which makes conversations lopsided and unpredictable. As I mentioned earlier, I don't think in language, which poses a particular challenge. In English, I rely on immediate recall to replay what was just said to me, but in Russian, this recall often fails me. Usually, I'll catch most of the words but fail to reconstruct them; maybe one of the missing words was the crux that determines the purpose of the sentence, or maybe what I missed changes the meaning to the opposite of what I heard. When relying on replay in a language that is not native to you, with many familiar-sounding words, the replay can come through garbled, causing confusion. For me, "Opasni," or danger, often sounds very similar to *Pozdna*, which is "late," especially when the conjugation further confuses; "to be late" is "*Opazdivat*," that critical "O" sound I usually use to remember which is which, betraying me. When learning and remembering new information, it helps to create a road map of reference points that trigger your memory. With the Russian language, it seems many of the memory triggers I create don't last forever, a frustrating reality I have yet to overcome, but one that keeps the learning process challenging.

As is true with English, my command of Russian is vastly superior in reading and writing, as opposed to listening comprehension. This skill, currently, serves me no purpose, as I am not communicating in Russian through any writing. Despite the frustrations, I forge on. Progress is real, but slow, and it's not always rewarding in the moment. There are days I feel like I'm getting worse, but I keep going. I keep going not for the joy of mastering declensions or idioms, but because I want to be a more capable partner and father, one who can better build my children's bilingual foundations. I want to be part of it, not just cheering from the sidelines. That's what

motivates me: the quiet, persistent effort toward becoming the kind of father and partner I aspire to be. Even if others advance faster, I'm still moving forward, and that's what matters.

Beyond the linguistic proficiency gained, the process of language learning builds broader psychological resilience. Consistently navigating and overcoming linguistic confusion, ambiguity, and frustration strengthens your mental fortitude, patience, and adaptability. All of these skills are invaluable for managing complexity and uncertainty across all aspects of life. This mental resilience transfers directly to professional challenges, personal relationships, and complex endeavors requiring sustained effort in the face of uncertainty. The cognitive flexibility developed through language learning enhances your ability to consider multiple perspectives, make decisions with incomplete information, and tolerate discomfort while working toward long-term goals.

While I may never find the process inherently enjoyable, I've come to appreciate the gradual strengthening of both my linguistic abilities and broader mental resilience. My Russian still needs work, and I'm likely advancing slower than many others putting in similar levels of effort, but *I am advancing and that is what matters*. The hormetic stress of language learning represents an investment not just in communication skills, but in comprehensive cognitive and psychological fortitude: a perfect example of how intentional, well-calibrated stress creates lasting adaptation and growth. The goal is to be the best person you are capable of becoming, and in this mission, language-learning is another powerful tool we cannot afford to ignore.

**Picture 7.** Me speaking at The Biohacking Summit in Amsterdam, 2022



CHAPTER 3:

**Public Speaking and Social Exposure:  
Conquering Fear Through Controlled Stress**

**Personal Evolution Through Deliberate Discomfort**

When I first began participating in small podcasts discussing molecular hydrogen research, anxiety gripped me with surprising intensity. My thoughts would race, my mouth would dry, and despite my extensive knowledge, I'd worry about stumbling over words or forgetting critical information. This reaction wasn't unique to podcasts, but any public performance. My initial experiences speaking on stage triggered similar physiological responses: elevated heart rate, shallow breathing, and that unmistakable flutter of nervous energy in my chest and stomach.

Perhaps most intimidating were the professional challenges of defending my positions on hydrogen therapy to scientific advisory boards of my customers or to MDs and Ph.D.s at various conferences and industry events. The prospect of having

**Picture 8.** Me speaking at the 1st International Conference of European Academy for Molecular Hydrogen Research in Biomedicine



*Explaining why rats get all the good doses since 2022.*

my expertise questioned by established academics and medical professionals initially triggered profound anxiety. I knew the research on this subject and many others thoroughly, yet the social pressure of these encounters created genuine psychological stress.

These scenarios trigger similar levels of anxiety in many, and since I had dealt with social anxiety in the past, it should come as no surprise they initially affected me. Over time, and with each subsequent podcast appearance, speaking engagement, and scientific defense, my anxiety gradually subsided. The physiological responses diminished in intensity and duration until eventually, all these scenarios that once triggered significant stress began to feel completely natural. Today, I can usually engage in these activities without experiencing any elevated stress at all.

This transformation didn't occur by random chance, but rather, it was the direct result of hormesis applied to social and performance anxiety. Just as we become accustomed to a workout the more times we experience it, by deliberately and repeatedly exposing myself to these stressful situations in measured doses, I developed psychological adaptability and resilience that fundamentally changed my response to these challenges.

But then, sometimes life throws you a curveball, or more accurately, in my case, sometimes you give up an unforced error. One of the most anxiety-inducing podcast experiences I've had wasn't because I felt unprepared, and it wasn't even at the beginning of my journey on the podcast circuit. Instead, it was because I felt *unworthy*, and it had everything to do with what happened *before* the mics were turned on.

I was invited to appear on *The Skinny Confidential*: a wildly popular show with a massive audience. It was my first time doing a podcast in person, and I knew it would be reaching people far outside the usual molecular hydrogen or biohacking crowd. I wanted to show up sharp, clear, and dialed in. However, I made a tactical error. The episode was set to record on a Monday in Austin. I flew in on the Friday, excited to be back in a city I hadn't visited for over a decade. I'd always loved Austin's live music scene, so I figured I'd kick things off with a concert that night. What I didn't account for was the perfect storm: early morning flight, no real food all day, and a venue with no wine, so I defaulted to vodka waters. Same pace, same amount as usual, but with nothing in my system to buffer it, I kept drinking long after I'd usually cut myself off. By the end of the night, I was blackout drunk.

Saturday, I couldn't get out of bed. I was dizzy, dehydrated, and completely wrecked. On Sunday, I was upright, but I was still deeply hungover. By Monday morning, I was just functional enough to make it to the studio, but inside, I was rattled: not because of the show, but because of the shame. I felt stupid, undisciplined, and unprofessional. The hangover was fading, but the self-judgment was only amplifying.

As I sat across from Lauryn and Michael, heart pounding, mouth dry, I felt a creeping anxiety I hadn't felt in years: that gut-level fear that I'd blow it, that my brain wouldn't show up when my mouth opened, and that I'd make a fool of myself in front of hundreds of thousands of listeners. When the conversation began, something else happened—something that always seems to happen when I face this kind of stress head-on. I adapted, and my fears and anxiety vanished.

Within a few minutes, the conversation clicked, my thoughts aligned, the science flowed, and I settled into a rhythm. The nerves didn't vanish, but they integrated—*transformed from noise into focus*. By the end of the episode, I wasn't just relieved, I was proud, not because it was perfect, but because I didn't let the anxiety own me. I sat in it, worked through it, and showed up anyway.

Despite the ultimate success of my appearance on *The Skinny Confidential*, when I continued appearing on podcasts, which were often small shows focused on biohacking, I was surprised by how hard the anxiety hit me once in a while. I knew my material better than almost anyone, I'd lived it, published papers, fielded technical questions, debated critics in both public and private settings, and generally obsessed over it for years. None of this matters because once in a while, the moment a mic goes live, everything changes.

It isn't about the size of the audience. Sometimes I'd feel fine speaking to a packed room. Other times, a one-on-one podcast would short-circuit my brain. It was random, unpredictable, and it had nothing to do with my preparation. I could go in confident and still find myself scrambling mid-sentence, mouth dry, thoughts jumbled, second-guessing answers I'd given a hundred times before. The closest comparison I've heard came from MMA fighter Gegard Mousasi after a loss. He said, "*I wasn't in the mood for fighting*" (Martin, 2015). That hit home, even though I had felt it a million times before in different scenarios. Mousasi's words gave clarity to what I had a hard time reconciling within myself.

When you commit to public speaking or a podcast, just like a fighter signing a bout agreement, you don't get to choose your mindset on the day. You don't get to delay because you're mentally taxed, sleep-deprived, or socially drained from everything else on your plate. You show up and you perform. You deal with whatever version of yourself walks into the spotlight. Sometimes, I'm sharp, but other times, I'm fighting through static. Either way, I've had to learn how to keep going, to deliver when the pressure hits, even if the chemistry isn't perfect. That's the real test, and it's where the deepest growth happens.

I even hear my father's voice, clear as day:

*The world doesn't stop just because you're tired.*

He may have only said it once, I can't be sure, but I've remembered it forever. The world doesn't stop just because you're tired, the fight isn't going to be moved to a

day you're "feeling it," and neither will that podcast or interview. True resilience and strength is the ability to face the worst, even when we are at our worst. The perfect situation doesn't exist, and if your strength is predicated upon requiring it, it isn't strength—it's something else entirely, a curated and fragile reality. To succeed when we are at our worst, first, we must possess the skills needed. You need preparation, knowledge, and confidence, but you need to stress test your resilience in a fire. That's the key. You don't build resilience by avoiding pressure, you build it by engaging with pressure skillfully, consistently, and just enough to grow stronger without burning out.

In short, what once left me rattled had become routine. That change wasn't luck, and it wasn't natural talent, either. It was adaptation, hormesis at work, applied not to cold, or heat, or fasting, but to performance anxiety; to the social stress of being seen, heard, and challenged. The more I exposed myself to those environments, on purpose, and in measured doses, the less power they held over me. My nervous system adjusted, my mind calibrated, and I didn't just get better at the task, I got better at being *inside* the stress.

## The Science of Social Stress Adaptation

What most people call "public speaking anxiety" isn't just in your head; it's built into your physiology. The moment you're exposed to social evaluation, whether it's a live audience, a panel of experts, or a blinking red light on a podcast mic, your body flips a switch. The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis kicks in, flooding your system with cortisol and other stress hormones. Your sympathetic nervous system surges, heart rate spikes, and blood pressure climbs, and bloodflow gets rerouted away from digestion and toward the muscles, just in case you need to run (Bosch et al., 2009).

This is not paranoia, it's an evolved and ancient code. This instinctive response emerged in a world where social rejection could mean the end of your existence, namely, immediate death or ostracism. Ostracism lands hard today for this very reason, because when it occurred millennia ago it meant almost certain death or, at least, the end of one's ability to reproduce and extend their bloodline. For this reason, being seen as weak, incompetent, or deceptive wasn't just awkward, it was dangerous, and your biology still treats it that way, even if you're just giving a TEDx talk in front of a friendly audience. That's what makes *intentional exposure* so powerful. You're not trying to eliminate the innate physiological response—that's impossible—you're trying to retrain it and recalibrate the sensitivity, so that in time your mind and body understand the experience is not an existential threat to your survival. The only way to do that is through controlled, repeated exposure to the exact stressor your body overreacts to.

The science supports this process of recalibration through exposure. Repeated, structured practice in high-stakes social evaluation, such as public speaking, leads to

clear physiological and neurological adaptations. Over time, individuals experience lower cortisol spikes in future stress-inducing scenarios (Young et al., 2021), along with quicker recovery to baseline heart rate and blood pressure after the stressor subsides (Bamert & Inuanen, 2022). Neuroimaging studies show reduced amygdala activation during social evaluation, indicating a dampened fear response (Davies et al., 2017), while the prefrontal cortex, which is the brain's center for regulation and decision-making, exerts stronger control over emotional reactions (Yu et al., 2023). Even at the level of the autonomic nervous system, improvements emerge: vagal tone increases, and parasympathetic recovery becomes more efficient, supporting a faster return to calm (Bamert & Inuanen, 2022).

The stress response doesn't disappear entirely but transforms from a debilitating reaction into focused energy that improves performance. That's the power of hormesis; it doesn't numb you, it sharpens you.

Effective social exposure occurs after carefully identifying your *current hormetic window*, the sweet spot where stress is challenging but not overwhelming, and then meticulously and methodically administering the exposure, building slowly over time. If the dose is too low, nothing changes; too high, and you reinforce fear instead of rewiring it. Real growth happens through calibrated, repeatable exposure that your nervous system can adapt to, not avoid, and not be crushed by.

## **Beyond Public Speaking: Broader Applications**

While public speaking is a classic example of social hormesis, the same principle applies across a wide range of social challenges: initiating conversations with strangers, asserting boundaries in relationships, negotiating in professional settings, asking for help or information, voicing dissenting opinions, and performing in artistic or athletic contexts all activate similar stress circuits. These situations expose you to varying degrees of social risk, such as fear of rejection, judgment, or failure, and therefore offer opportunities to build resilience through repeated, calibrated exposure. Just like with public speaking, the key is to engage with these stressors at a level your nervous system can adapt to, gradually increasing intensity as confidence grows.

Each of these scenarios creates social evaluation stress that, when properly dosed and consistently faced, leads to enhanced resilience and capability. The key lies in identifying which social situations create productive stress for you personally, then systematically increasing exposure while monitoring your adaptation.

The adaptation achieved through social hormesis extends far beyond specific situations you've practiced. Each successful navigation of social stress reinforces a fundamental self-concept as someone capable of handling challenging interactions. This core confidence creates a positive feedback loop—each successful interaction increases your willingness to engage in future challenges, accelerating your growth through continuous hormetic exposure.



Moreover, the psychological resilience developed through social hormesis transfers to entirely different domains. The capacity to regulate emotions under pressure, persist through discomfort, and maintain cognitive function despite stress serves you in virtually every challenging life circumstance.

## **The Compounding Benefits of Social Resilience**

Personally, I've found that I require time to reflect after high-stress social engagements, particularly if they need to be repeated in the coming days. While reflecting, I solidify what went well, and what I need to improve on, allowing myself to recalibrate direction and intent. This reflection also serves as my recovery, and just as with any other stress, if recovery is insufficient the stress compounds and leads to exhaustion, and eventually breakdown. When you hit this wall, it takes substantially more effort to recalibrate yourself and move forward again than if you had navigated through with sufficient recovery. Unfortunately, life and its demands don't always afford this privilege.

I hit the wall through inundating myself with more social stress than I can quickly recover from, routinely. This happens out of necessity in times of frequent trade shows and conferences. During these times, I am often forced to be "on" in social situations upwards of 14 hours a day for days on end. My breakfast, lunch, and dinner are routinely jam-packed with meetings. I have no choice but to push through, and it takes its toll. This is exacerbated by shows almost exclusively being chaotic and disorienting in their cacophonous noise. I have fairly extreme auditory hypersensitivity, and these situations take everything I have to get through.

I've learned that if I don't ensure I "re-emerge" from my restorative social isolation post-draining event, my very ability to deal with the next round of social anxiety may be compromised and impaired. The longer I isolate and avoid social situations, the harder it is to plunge back into the uncomfortable. Anyone who has stopped an exercise routine due to injury or circumstances, only to struggle to restart once able, knows this experience. So, these days I ensure I plan a "heavy" social day a few days (no more than a week) following my recovery period. My growth depends on it.

## **Conclusion: Navigating Plateaus in Social Adaptation**

Outside of collapse, it's entirely normal to encounter periods where your progress with social anxiety seems to stall. During these plateaus, which I've experienced multiple times, temporarily changing your approach can reignite adaptation. Consider varying your speaking topics, formats, or even audiences to introduce novel stress. These strategic adjustments reactivate your adaptation mechanisms without requiring overwhelming increases in intensity.

My journey from anxiety-ridden podcast guest to comfortable public speaker and scientific advocate exemplifies this transformative process. What began as deliberately induced discomfort evolved into genuine confidence, not merely the absence of fear but the presence of capability forged through intentional, strategic stress exposure.

Whether your baseline social anxiety is mild or severe, intentional exposure to carefully calibrated social challenges can reliably build psychological resilience that benefits every aspect of your life. The discomfort is real but temporary; the adaptation is profound and lasting. Few hormetic practices offer such immediate practical benefits across professional, personal, and intellectual domains while requiring no specialized equipment or environments—just the willingness to step into productive discomfort, deliberately, knowing that adaptation awaits on the other side.

This isn't just theory for me. I've had my fair share of anxiety-inducing social interactions in my time, and not all of them end up looking like a perfect step on the path to progress. Once, I was the best man at a wedding, and the groom insisted, with a heavy dose of guilt when I objected, to tell very specific stories from when we were teenagers during my speech. I warned him they made us look like psychopaths, and that we should be ashamed of that type of behavior. He disagreed, and so I tried my hand at subversion, bringing the request up to his bride-to-be, certain she would put a stop to the madness. I was wrong, and in fact, *she had requested the stories*. She intimated that she has no “fun” stories from her own teenage years, and always enjoyed it when my friend told her these, *erm*, ‘adventures.’ So, I agreed and started the months-long mental preparation for a task I found horrifying.

When the day came, I was no better prepared to rehash these memories than when I had committed to the project months prior. I had put pen to paper and written them down, a task that was monumental in its emotional gravity on its own, but that had done nothing to prime me for the live performance. As I realized that I would be sharing these shameful memories with over 100 people, many of whom barely knew me, a new level of anxiety crept in. So I drank, and then I drank some more. By the time my speech came, I was feeling nice and warm, but still sufficiently aware to orate our adolescent atrocities.

As I write these stories out, I do them without any hint of pride, any humor in recounting the memories. Rationally, I understand that as a 16- or 17-year-old teenage boy, my limbic system was substantially underdeveloped, which is precisely the brain abnormality commonly observed in psychopaths. Scientifically, teenagers often exhibit behaviors that resemble psychopathic traits; impulsivity, emotional reactivity, and poor risk assessment. This is likely due to an underdeveloped limbic

system and still-maturing prefrontal control, leading to diminished executive function.<sup>1</sup> Thankfully, we age and mature. Spurred on by the liquid courage, I recounted throwing eggs at people from moving cars while street racing, throwing eggs at *prostitutes* in destitute neighborhoods, and even unseating a bike rider from his bike, head over handlebars, with a well-aimed grape going down hill at unsafe speeds.

The entire experience was *mortifying*, but I did it, and somewhere between the embarrassment, the laughter, and the confrontation of who I was, I came out steadier, at least *eventually*. That night, I descended into a place of darkness, at the bottom of several bottles. Multiple people who were close to me, good friends and family members, confronted me to ask, “*why the hell did you tell those stories?*”, and after each, I drank some more. A photo of me that night, crumpled in a planter, suit wrinkled, face in the bushes, is featured in Chapter 7 of the companion book, *The Body*. That chapter’s about alcohol. This one’s about resilience. Sometimes, they overlap.

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<sup>1</sup> While “psychopathy” in the clinical sense is a specific and enduring personality disorder, adolescents frequently demonstrate similar behavioral patterns due to the asynchronous development of subcortical limbic structures and top-down prefrontal control systems. This neurodevelopmental mismatch helps explain many of the risk-prone and emotionally charged behaviors typical of adolescence without pathologizing them as permanent traits (Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008).

## CHAPTER 4:

# Learning Complex New Skills: Building Resilience Through Novel Challenges

## The Transformative Power of Skill Acquisition

Throughout my life, I've deliberately tackled numerous complex projects that necessitated learning skills I lacked, not for the sake of collecting hobbies, but to build real-world capability and cognitive resilience. If I'm being honest, I also enjoy challenges and understanding new concepts and ideas, so perhaps I would pursue new skills even if it wasn't advantageous to my personal growth. Fortunately, it is, and every new domain of complexity comes with its own kind of pressure. That pressure, when faced directly, doesn't just teach you something new; it rewires how you think.

A few years ago, I moved to an acreage at the base of a mountain. The forest had reclaimed the property, and it wasn't all pretty: thick brush, thorn bushes, and ferns. Perhaps it was my impatience, as I had exhausted my budget on internal renovations to the home, or my drive to seek challenges, but in this acreage I saw a project in which I could grow my skill set, my mind, my body, and my fulfillment. So, I committed to transforming the space myself, starting with the grunt work: clearing dense bush, digging out stubborn roots, pulling weeds, and cutting back small trees. None of it was easy; it was a different type of exercise that pushed my body in new ways, exhausted muscles I didn't know I had, and demanded I quickly learn proper technique to avoid injury or burnout.

**Picture 9.** R&D Shack I Roofed



*Not a contractor—just contracted a case of growth through discomfort. Couldn't afford a pro, and didn't want to burn out the friends who helped build it. Early days, so every cent mattered. Every shingle, too.*

However, the challenge didn't stop at physical labor. As the land started to open up, I had to think bigger. Where would new trees go? How could I contour the space to work with the slope? What layout would allow for both aesthetic flow and practical use over the long term? I had a rough plan when I started the project, however, with the thick brush it was impossible to see the lay of the land clearly. Once I had a blank slate, I started sketching plans, studying landscaping strategies, and visualizing rock gardens, tree lines, water flow, and pathways. I was expanding on my spatial awareness and design thinking, which I'd only accessed before during renovations and redesigns in my rental properties.

I didn't realize it when I started, but this wasn't just landscaping, it was cognitive expansion, forced by friction: a perfect blend of physical and mental hormesis. I wasn't just learning how to build a property, I was learning how to build capacity. I was well aware that growth emerges from what is uncomfortable before embarking on this project. What I was reminded of here was that learning something new, something I presumed would be an intellectual cakewalk, can expand your mind in ways you don't realize until it has already occurred. I learned that sometimes the greatest growth we achieve is through strategies we presume are serving a different purpose; so long as they are sufficiently novel, and of sufficient stress. Sometimes, that novel stress isn't chosen, it is imposed.

Indeed, one of the most transformative skill challenges I've faced came from a limitation that was imposed on me: bone on bone arthritis with multiple labral tears and limited range of motion. This was a shoulder injury leading to a disability that sidelined my ability to box and kickbox from my natural stance: orthodox. For most people, that would mean walking away altogether. In fact, multiple doctors told me I had to plan for a future devoid of exercise. They confidently asserted that I should stop training, focus solely on increasing range of motion, and avoid discomfort altogether. For a time, I trusted their expert opinion, but eventually I realized that their strategy left me weaker, less capable, and more unstable—not just physically, but psychologically. So I re-evaluated, and returned to my former passion. I came to realize that martial arts wasn't just a fitness routine: *it was a passion I couldn't let go of*, contributing to my discipline and my psychological stability. So instead of quitting for good, I made a decision that on the surface seemed simple, but was anything but: I would relearn everything as a southpaw.

Switching stances sounds cosmetic, but it's not. It meant retraining every movement pattern I'd spent years refining: reprogramming my timing, footwork, defense, and spatial orientation. I also quickly learned that the combinations that worked as an orthodox fighter against other orthodox opponents were useless now. Angles changed, and openings disappeared. Muscle memory, patterns, timing, and distance, all had to be reworked. My lead hand had to become dominant not just in activity and distance measuring, but in posing a legitimate threat. My entire rhythm had to shift, and I had to rebuild my instincts from the ground up while resisting the constant urge to revert to what worked in the past.

I wasn't doing this as some 19-year-old phenom with limitless neuroplasticity, either; I was in my mid-30s, well past the so-called prime age for picking up brutally complex motor skills. One of the challenges of learning as we age is that we don't just need to pick up and master new skills, we need to rid ourselves of our old instincts. My transformation needed to be complete, from the ground up, a monumental challenge I am still working towards today. Layered on top of all of this was a new training choice. As I mentioned in the Preface, I began working almost exclusively one-on-one with one of the most technically gifted martial artists in my city. There are no easy rounds, and if I want to coast, I'm going to pay for it. If I want to land anything at all, I have to think strategically, not just in the moment, but in the spaces between rounds. I analyze everything and run scenarios in my head. It's like learning chess at full speed, where every mistake comes with physical consequences.

Unfortunately for me, my coach has now recognized something in me that he realizes is a "eureka" moment. After years of sparring with me, he can't pinpoint how, but he knows when I see something and have figured him out. So, as soon as he sees that light click on in my mind, he immediately resets and changes his style. As I write this, this is a brand new change to our dance—one I am still trying to decode. Just when the stress of our rounds was starting to get easier, a new challenge is unlocked, and I feel like I'm drowning all over again.

That's the entire point, and as much as I'm frustrated by this development, it's exactly what I want, and more importantly, it's exactly what I need. The strain of a challenge you may not be able to solve is what builds the clarity. More recently, I stepped into a completely different kind of discomfort: learning about artificial intelligence (AI). I'm not technical by nature, I don't code, and I don't intuitively "get" software systems. In fact, tech is one of the only areas in my life that I remain completely incapable of improving, or so it seems. When trying to learn new tech-related skills, even using a new app on my phone, my immediate reaction is one of anger and frustration. My COO has joked about how he is equally as surprised by how quickly I learn new concepts and ideas as he is by how slowly I manage to learn even the most basic tech-related concepts. Despite this extreme shortcoming, I recognized where things are headed and how AI is poised to reshape industries, institutions, and individual lives, including my own. So I dove in, and just like switching stances or clearing land, it hurt.

The terminology felt foreign, and the logic felt opaque. Every concept introduced another opportunity to feel slow, confused, and behind. However, I stayed in it because that kind of friction is the exact stressor that forces growth, not just in understanding AI, but in my broader ability to learn under pressure. As I gained a deeper understanding of AI, I began to recognize its limitations. Now, 9 months into learning and understanding AI, I have the prototype for a patent-pending modular AI framework I conceived. I didn't code it, but I did conceptualize the process, flow,

and rationale it is based on. Amusingly, despite this, I still had to side track my team's first testing call as I couldn't figure out how to upload content and use the chat feature—my own version of an inability to hit “reply all,” save as a PDF, or print a file that plagues many a generation or two older than me.

This is the throughline: pick hard things, immerse yourself in the discomfort, and let it change you. I will likely never be “good” at tech-related tasks, but I will continue to improve and ensure I have a conceptual understanding of them. We become a complete person not by focusing only on where we excel, but by confronting the tasks and endeavours we are weakest in, as well.

## **The Neurological Benefits of Novel Skill Acquisition**

Unlike physical training or social exposure, this isn't about pushing your body or facing judgment. This is *productive struggle*, a term used in neuroscience to describe what happens when your brain locks into a hard task it doesn't yet know how to solve (Sriram, 2020). In education, the concept is simple but powerful: let students wrestle with meaningful, challenging problems. Don't rob them of the struggle by giving them the answer too soon—or worse, by punishing them for thinking differently. For what it's worth, I never had a teacher who helped me grow, who pushed me to overcome a deficit of mine through productive struggle. However, for all her faults, I did have my mom, and one important action she took in my early childhood development changed the course of my life in a positive way.

When I first started school, I was behind the class in reading and writing. As I have shared previously in this book, I don't think in language and language doesn't come easily to me. It takes considerable amounts of work, even today. My mom, who lives with tremendous amounts of anxiety, shame, and guilt, perpetually afraid of judgment—although she has made significant strides throughout her life, and has now made meaningful progress in her goal to shed much of this—utilized these emotions to act quickly and effectively upon finding out I was falling behind my classmates.

At first, my mom tried to force me to read for periods every evening, random pieces of reading I had no emotional attachment to, and I protested, complained, and failed to advance. Then, she intuited something: perhaps I would comply if I got to choose what I wanted to read, a concept so groundbreaking, according to Noam Chomsky and his followers, that he felt the need to write about it in his book *On Anarchism*—as if the obvious was profound (I go into this in more detail later in the chapter, but for now, I'll return to the story). So, we started going once a week to places where we could find used books: Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, and a local bookstore. At the time, there were bins with used books for \$1, and we all got to pick one new book a week (myself, my sister, and my mom).

Initially, I resisted, but I realized I wouldn't get to watch TV or play with friends in this newly designated reading time. This meant I was to read, or stare at the wall,

which was a task even more arduous than the reading I despised at the time. So, I started reading. From there, I quickly started reading more and more. The 30 minutes per evening became an hour, and sometimes even many. Within a few years, I was an avid reader rarely missing the chance to read every day—especially in the winter. By my early teens I was picking out several books per week, and tackling more and more complex subjects with each one. This has never left me, and I wonder where I would be today if I had not been led down this path. In short, being forced to read was a productive struggle, which in time led to a passion.

The concept of productive struggle emerges from research showing that learning complex and unfamiliar skills leads to the formation of new neural pathways and synaptic connections (Trafton, 2015), as well as increased myelination<sup>2</sup> in frequently used circuits, which enhances processing speed (Farley, 2020). Brain regions that normally function in isolation begin to coordinate and communicate more effectively (Hoodgar et al., 2022), while levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which is a key driver of neuroplasticity, are elevated in response to this sustained cognitive challenge (Miranda et al., 2019). These changes translate into real cognitive gains, including sharper working memory and greater attentional control (Necka et al., 2021).

What makes skill acquisition especially powerful is its *compound effect*. It's not isolated to one function or brain region. Learning a complex skill activates multiple areas of the brain, including attention, coordination, memory, logic, and pattern recognition, forcing multiple systems to synchronize. You don't need to become a professional athlete or a programmer to get the benefit. The act of sustained, difficult learning; whether it's picking up a technical domain, training fine motor control, or developing a new craft, all activate the same stress-adaptation cycle. Personally, I don't play an instrument, but I have enormous respect for what they represent: coordination, timing, auditory processing, tactile sensitivity, and memory, all of which are trained simultaneously.

Finally, the benefits of skill acquisition aren't limited to skill-specific improvements; they ripple outward into new domains. As I have demonstrated, research shows that adults who consistently engage in new, complex skills maintain mental agility and

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<sup>2</sup> Myelination refers to the process by which specialized types of glial cells, oligodendrocytes in the central nervous system (CNS) and Schwann cells in the peripheral nervous system (PNS), wrap axons with a compact, multilayered sheath called myelin. This sheath acts as an electrical insulator, enabling saltatory conduction, where nerve impulses rapidly jump between gaps in the myelin called nodes of Ranvier, rather than propagating continuously along the axon. This dramatically increases the speed and efficiency of signal transmission while conserving metabolic energy. In the CNS, a single oligodendrocyte can myelinate multiple axons, whereas each Schwann cell in the PNS forms only one myelin segment. Even minor disruptions to the structure or function of myelin can significantly impair nervous system performance due to its critical role in impulse conduction (Harry & Toews, 1998).



show improved emotional regulation and problem-solving, even in unrelated areas (Jose, 2025). This may help explain findings that older adults often manage emotionally salient everyday problems more effectively as they age (Ebner & Fischer, 2014). This kind of transfer effect is what makes skill-building one of the most efficient and enduring forms of cognitive investment.

## Embrace The Unknown

There's a popular saying that goes "do something that scares you every day." The principle behind this idea is to step outside of your comfort zone in order to grow as a person. Of course, that is the premise behind much of this book, but it isn't an idea that came easy to me. My first memories involve being angry, frustrated, and confused that I was being forced to learn something new.

I have a faint memory of being forced to learn to potty train. My mother informed me that I was ~2.5 years old. I don't remember much, but what I remember was those aforementioned feelings, and where my little potty sat. My next memory was of my dad telling me to follow an older boy up some stairs at the pool and "do exactly what he does," namely, to go down the waterslide. My mother remembers this trip, we were at a hotel on the way to see her family and she was in the room with my little sister. I was ~3 years old as per her recollection. My next memories aren't for some time after, but two quite persistent negative memories carried through into adulthood, both around needing to learn something new.

This anxiety carried through with me into my teen years. I remember sitting down for my first class of *Intro to Spanish 11* in high school. As the teacher began speaking intermittently in Spanish words, with a whiteboard full of Spanish phrases, my feelings were nothing short of panic. I was accustomed to following classes and getting by, or excelling, without paying attention. A new language was different. I couldn't check out, I had to pay attention and learn (Of course, I talked about the hormetic nature of learning another language, Russian, in Chapter 2 of this book).

Throughout high school I became more and more focused on ending this anxiety. By the time I started my job going door-to-door I thought I was there—of course, I wasn't, not quite, but you know that already. As I advanced into adulthood into my 20s, I took on more and more challenges, learning new skills constantly, if only to moderate competency. I believed I had conquered this anxiety until I went back to new sports in my mid-20s and learned a hard lesson. It was in struggling through these disciplines that I realized something important: not all learning feels the same, and some forms of skill acquisition demand far more than others.

In short, some skills hit harder because they demand more from multiple systems simultaneously. When a task combines cognitive strain with physical execution, such as martial arts, dance, or complex manual work, your brain and body need to learn together—an entirely different demand than simply learning a concept. These

activities engage the body and the brain simultaneously, forcing coordination between timing, movement, spatial awareness, memory, and decision-making in real-time.

Studies show that when you're solving problems while moving, whether you're sparring, dancing, or building something, you activate a broader network of brain regions (Hao et al., 2025; Basso, Satyal, & Rugh, 2021; Jardim et al., 2021). This results in adaptations that are more robust and more transferable across different areas of life. Landscaping brought the same dynamic.

My first foray into this domain as an adult was kickboxing, followed by Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. By this time in my life I knew that the only way to quell my anxiety was to push forward. Sort of the equivalent “if you're going through hell, keep on going.” Except in my case, I'd immerse myself in hell. I sought out private coaching shortly after starting kickboxing, and began watching videos of techniques. I was determined to get over the hump and break my anxiety.

I did the same thing not long after when starting CrossFit. I was floored by how certain movements challenged my fitness, and the concept of technique during some of the lifts. So, I spent my time in the box: practicing, asking for tips, and soaking up anything I could. I didn't ever want to feel anxious about something new again, and more importantly, I didn't ever want to be average, or worse, at anything I cared enough about to dedicate time to. At 40, I haven't felt this anxiety for some time. As I write this, I recorded my first TV interview with a certain celebrity doctor my fiancée is a fan of just yesterday. It was new, a bit different—my first time getting the hair and makeup experience, for instance—and while I was slightly nervous, it was no more stressful than an important meeting via Zoom.

This is the purpose behind doing something that scares you every day: the more you push your own boundaries, the greater your capacity becomes. In time, the young boy who had a stutter and was terrified to speak to a stranger grew into a man who has no problems speaking under the bright lights in front of a studio audience with a celebrity he's watched on TV. Competency isn't given, it's the prize you capture by winning one hard fought battle at a time.

## **Overcoming Plateaus and Resistance**

No matter the domain, every skill journey hits plateaus. You're putting in the reps, you're staying consistent, but progress stalls. What used to feel like growth now feels like maintenance. That's when the hormetic benefit starts to fade, because the stressor has become routine, familiar, and too easy to trigger any sort of meaningful adaptation. To restart the engine, you don't need to work harder, you need to work *smarter*.

One effective strategy is to temporarily spike the difficulty: increase resistance, raise complexity, and deliberately push past your comfort zone for a few sessions. This short-term overload serves as a controlled jolt that can restart adaptation. Another approach is to apply the skill in new contexts, which introduces novelty and forces your brain to recalibrate. Feedback also plays a critical role, especially from those ahead of you. Coaches and experienced practitioners can reveal blind spots you've stopped noticing. Additionally, cross-training into adjacent skills can refresh neural engagement by activating similar circuits from a different angle. Finally, structured breaks, meaning brief, intentional pauses, give your nervous system space to consolidate gains and integrate new learning, especially after sustained effort.

What if you see no value in increasing your skillset in a specific domain? What should come next? For instance, once I finished my landscaping project, what value would have come to me from diving deeper into landscaping? I'm not a landscaper, nor do I want to be one. I learned enough to expand my mind and body, finding short-term fulfillment from the task, and then I moved on to the next project. I've done this with many other skillsets in the past. This is an important lesson; not every skill is worth mastering, but many are worth gaining a functional understanding of. When you reach that functional understanding then you are free to find something new, something that shocks your system from the novelty, and start all over again.

I'd place my learning AI in a completely different category. I needed to learn just enough of the technical considerations to conceptualize my modular framework, and to talk through, with the developers, the commands and process flow required to achieve my goal: creating an AI that helps the user find truth and strengthen their mind. Now that I have this understanding, and a team of experts who can correct me, provide insights, and keep me informed about new developments, my growth only requires sufficiently understanding any new advances in technology to adjust my overall conceptualization of how the system will work. With AI, my job has become maintaining my current level of understanding, or rather, staying current in my theoretical knowledge.

Sometimes, even though the pursuit of mastery is futile, you still feel compelled to try. For me, martial arts fits this bill, not because I ever think I will be a professional martial artist in any capacity, but because I love it and it brings me intangible value. When I plateaued while redeveloping my martial arts skills, I'd seek out sparring partners who were not just a little, but *way* better than me. Not every session, but just enough to shock my system. That spike in stress, even when it meant getting dominated, always exposed something I hadn't seen before. It made the next week of training sharper, more focused, and more adaptive. The psychological resistance that often arises during these plateaus represents another form of stress that requires management. I've found that explicitly acknowledging this resistance as a normal part of the learning process, rather than a sign of inadequacy, helps maintain

momentum through difficult periods. Eventually, your momentum carries you to the next gear, and you ascend from the plateau towards the next peak.

To reiterate, whether you're leading a business, navigating personal conflict, solving high-stakes problems, or simply trying to stay sharp in this world, the kind of resilience gained from this unique style of mental hormesis gives you an edge that most people never develop.

## **The Compound Benefits Beyond Skill Mastery**

### **Conclusion: Upgrading the OS of Your Mind**

Over time, as you push through frustration and emerge with a skill you didn't have before, you start to internalize a new default setting. I remember first thinking about this in my early 20s, listening to a Tony Robbins recording. To paraphrase what he said, he referred to each new task, new problem, as a challenge waiting to be conquered. He talked about how we all have a sphere of competency, and each accomplishment at, or just outside the edge of this sphere, expands it. I may be getting the verbiage wrong, but the concept holds.

The more you work to expand your sphere, the more you stop assuming your limits are fixed, and in time you stop accepting the idea that certain capabilities belong to other people: people with more talent, better genes, or some head start you missed. Instead, you simply begin to *trust* that with the right kind of effort, consistently applied, real changes in yourself and your capabilities will occur. Importantly, you change more than your ability to produce results, as these actions you undertake alter how you see the world and your place in it. You start noticing opportunities you wouldn't have considered before, because now, challenge doesn't signal danger; it signals potential.

This means that you're literally revising what you believe about what's possible to know and achieve. The more times you go through the cycle, by choosing a skill that pushes you outside your sphere, by struggling through the edge and coming out stronger, your belief in yourself slowly solidifies into a certainty; not a certainty that you will be great at anything and everything, but that the effort in learning and growing will leave you better, stronger and more capable. You stop asking whether something is doable in the abstract sense, and start asking what kind of learning curve it has, and if the time commitment is worth it. You become less intimidated by complexity, less discouraged by confusion, and more resilient when the payoff isn't immediate. That changes how you approach everything, from relationships to work to the way you handle setbacks. It's not that you become fearless—that's impossible; rather, your confidence in yourself grows to the point you cease fearing the illogical. The map you're using to navigate the world gets redrawn, and this time, it includes territory you used to think was off-limits.

**Picture 10.** Dr. Tyler LeBaron and I are Previewing Our Hydrogen Inhalation Unit



*Seven years R&D, flight to China to see our prototype—and I get caught staring at my bicep.*

## **Cognitive Challenges and Puzzles: Strategic Mental Strain for Enhanced Resilience**

### **The Hormetic Nature of Mental Challenges**

I was barely a teenager when I started playing Earth 2025: 13 years old, in fact. It was a text-based online strategy game with no graphics and no soundtrack, just numbers, formulas, and a cutthroat player base. It looked like a spreadsheet, but it functioned more like a war room. You'd build a digital nation, trade on a free market, manage resources, and navigate alliances in a game that reset at various times, server-dependent, from every few days on "express" servers, to every few months on the more popular "alliance" servers. At first glance, it didn't look like much, but under the surface, it was a living, breathing system, and it was brutal.

The real brilliance wasn't in the mechanics; it was in the metagame. There were constant formula updates, which meant no strategy stayed dominant for long. The in-game market was dynamic, responding to player behavior in real time. If too many people chased the "best" mathematical strategy, they'd tank their own profit margins by flooding the market with the same resource. It wasn't enough to play well, you had to predict what other people would do. To paraphrase one of my former teammates, who put a truth we all knew simply: *"a serious player needs to be attached to his calculator, running the numbers again every day, and adjusting based on what they say."*

I learned to read player psychology, to anticipate shifts in collective behavior; when a war was brewing between alliances, and you happened to know someone on the inside, you could quietly load up on the military tech or resources that were about to spike in demand. It wasn't illegal, but it was very real-world. You didn't always need to know someone on the inside, in fact; if you were paying attention, you could notice the uptick in demand for certain technologies and military units, oil and food reserves. You could then track the networth growth of all of the alliances capable of causing this demand shift, and determine which had shifted their focus from strategic growth to battening the hatches in preparation for violence. If you were paying enough attention, you could reasonably determine who they would attack, and which trade pacts would be called in for the defense of the attacked party, if this would spiral into a server-wide war, and most importantly, if *your* alliance would potentially be dragged into it. With this data, you could take further gambles, make semi-informed decisions, and potentially give yourself a large advantage over anyone not paying attention.

Over time, the game taught me more about systems thinking, unintended consequences, and social dynamics than anything else in my life. We started playing as kids, but many of the top players in my alliance went on to become high-level professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, and executives. Earth 2025 didn't just reward quick thinking, it rewarded long-range strategy, pattern recognition, and adaptive decision-making under pressure. Eventually, my alliance became too dominant. We won too often and crushed too many opponents. The ecosystem couldn't sustain it, so people quit, alliances collapsed, and balance disappeared. This was my first real exposure to the concept that power, if left unchecked, doesn't just beat competition—it destroys the game.

Underneath all of it, there was stress—*real stress*. There were late-night wars, diplomatic breakdowns, and economic crashes. There were days we all called in sick to school to focus on the game, and there was rampant cheating, even bot wars (program-based countries meant to destroy enemies), in direct violation of the rules, which almost prematurely destroyed the game. Through all of it, I kept adapting. My brain got sharper, not through abstract learning, but through direct engagement with complexity. That experience, navigating chaos, strategizing under pressure, and adapting to shifting conditions, wasn't just entertainment, it was cognitive conditioning. The science backs that up.

Earth 2025 was also my first exposure to a key aspect of my nature that, for too long, I viewed as self-sabotage, but now, I interpret it as asymmetric time pressure. In the game, like in the real world, the more tangible assets you have, the higher your expenses become. Carrying ever-expanding assets is largely a hindrance to growth for this reason. A strategy was developed, known as “stockpiling,” which entailed keeping a nation's overhead as low as possible while converting excess revenue into assets that would be constantly cycled on the free market at price ranges that would never sell. Basically, the game had a “cap” on the amount of physical money you could keep, necessitating the stockpiling approach. At the end of the “reset,” or game, you would need to effectively convert your stockpile into cash, constantly below the cap, while buying the resources that increased your nation's “net worth,” such as military equipment. All assets were worth “net worth,” however, the formula was dramatically weighted to military equipment, which also had the highest upkeep.

Depending on the time in history, I would spend the better part of 2 or 3 months building my nation, and amassing my stockpile, to attempt to convert it all to high net worth yielding assets in just a day, or a few at most. Routinely, my countries would be front-runners for the top spot at the end of the game, based on stockpile and country build. Few had my patience for those 2-3 months, where I would meticulously map every move, show restraint, and act when appropriate. However, when it was time to “de-stock,” my epic failures were a running joke throughout the elite players of the game. In fact, following the sole reset where I won 1st place on the main alliance server, my teammates named their country in my honor the

following reset (as was the custom), and the majority were callouts to my inability to “de-stock,” which is the act of converting the accrued stockpile into cash, and then the cash into military assets, all while ensuring not to go over the \$2B cash on hand cap, or convert at less than favorable prices.

Where I had previously shown calm, patience, and methodical decision-making for months, as soon as it was time to “cash in” on my hard work, I would rush decisions and act impulsively and impatiently. I felt, and still do feel, that when I am nearing completion on a long-term project which I care deeply about, that if I do not seize the final outcome “now,” immediately, I will lose everything I have worked for. My time preference<sup>3</sup> shifts from “very low” to “very high” when I approach the finish line, and that’s something I cannot seem to eradicate from my psyche. So instead, the lesson this game taught me, and other projects leading to similar and more real disasters later in life, is that I need to treat the finish line *as its own project*.

In other words, it is nonsensical to build your dream home brick by brick, painstakingly obsessing over every minute detail, just to rush through the wiring so you can move in a week earlier and have it burn to the ground. Sometimes, *I still burn the house down*, or I come close. I had to pull my first book offline, as I fell into this emotional trap yet again in the Spring of 2025. Therefore, this book will now be my first. I spent six years compiling the bones of that first book and attempted to construct it in a final six-week push to meet an arbitrary deadline: a decision that now necessitates a rewrite. I thought this trait was handled, my strategies mitigating its toxic destruction, but sometimes, even when we put all the right systems in place, when we know how to defeat the worst of ourselves, the demons that we thought were long defeated rear their ugly faces when least expected.

So, this game gave me stress, and it also gave me insights into myself and others. As odd as it may sound, this game facilitated growth and adaptation. Just as physical hormetic stressors, such as cold exposure or resistance training, force your body to adapt, cognitive challenges do the same for your brain. Engage it with enough complexity, novelty, and tension, and it rewires itself by strengthening pathways, optimizing efficiency, and expanding capacity. However, just like muscle, the brain only grows if the stress is correctly dosed and followed by recovery. Push too hard, and you burn out. Stay too comfortable, and nothing changes.

The “use it or lose it” principle applies to neural tissue more than almost any other system in the body. Your brain is plastic; it’s constantly reshaping itself in response to the demands you place on it. Ignore that fact, and it atrophies; engage it with

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<sup>3</sup> In Misesian economics and other schools of thought, time preference refers to the idea that individuals value present goods more than future goods; in other words, people generally prefer a reward now rather than later (Mises, 1949/2010). While traditional treatments often assume time preference is relatively stable, it can shift with changes in circumstances, goals, or outlook, as mine did.



intention, and it adapts. Every time you step into a complex mental challenge, whether it's a puzzle, a strategic decision, or an unfamiliar intellectual domain, you're creating exactly the kind of productive stress that drives this adaptation. The result isn't just sharper thinking but a brain that becomes *more adaptable over time*. You become more resilient in the face of uncertainty, more capable of pattern recognition, and more efficient at decision-making under pressure. That's the essence of cognitive hormesis: controlled struggle, followed by recovery, resulting in long-term capacity.

## The Neuroscience of Puzzle-Solving Hormesis

When you lean into a puzzle or cognitive challenge that sits right at the edge of your ability, something powerful happens inside your brain. You're not just passing time, you're triggering a cascade of neurological upgrades. This kind of mental strain stimulates the release of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a key molecule in neurogenesis that supports the growth of new neurons and strengthens existing ones, particularly in the hippocampus, the brain's learning and memory center (I discussed BDNF in the previous chapter) (Liu & Nusslock, 2018). At the same time, you're enhancing synaptic plasticity, reinforcing the neural circuits you're using and creating new connections between brain regions. Over time, this leads to faster processing, better integration, and more efficient thinking (Miranda et al., 2019).

These cognitive challenges also build what neuroscientists call cognitive reserve: a mental buffer that helps protect against the effects of aging and neurodegenerative disease. Even in cases of Alzheimer's pathology, those with a history of mentally demanding activity tend to show delayed onset of symptoms, thanks to the brain's ability to reroute and compensate (Krell-Roesch et al., 2017). Beyond these structural benefits, sustained focus during puzzles trains attentional control, deepening your capacity to concentrate, which can enhance everything from task performance to emotional regulation (Aliyari et al., 2022). Finally, complex problems hone strategic thinking, requiring you to shift perspectives, test solutions, and build flexible frameworks that transfer to future challenges (Weng, 2022).

One of the most fascinating aspects of puzzle-based cognitive hormesis is the transfer effect. The transfer effect is the way targeted mental training boosts your performance far beyond the original context. You're not just getting better at the puzzle, you're upgrading your brain's *operating system*. Take chess, it's a classic example. Research shows that regular chess players don't just improve at chess, they develop high-level pattern recognition that carries over into maths (Rosholm, Mikkelsen, & Gumedé, 2017), spatial reasoning (Stegariu et al., 2023), and even real-time decision-making (Campitelli, Labollita, & Bilalić, 2025). Their brains become faster at seeing in chaos: identifying what matters, filtering what doesn't, and making precise moves under pressure.

That's the magic of transfer: when your brain learns to handle complexity in one domain, it starts applying those same strategies in others. Solve enough difficult puzzles, and you'll start noticing the ripple effect in conversations, business planning, navigation, negotiation, writing, and even how you organize your day (Pahor, Seitz, & Jaeggi, 2022; Jaeggi et al., 2008). This is why cognitive hormesis isn't just a brain game, it's a life upgrade. The puzzle is the practice, the world is the arena.

Another aspect that makes puzzles and cognitive challenges such effective tools for hormesis is simple: *they scale*. Unlike many real-world stressors, puzzles can be dialed in with surgical precision. You control the difficulty and you control the pace. That means you can consistently apply just enough pressure to provoke adaptation without tipping into overload. Too easy, and your brain coasts, leading to no stress and no growth. Too hard and you shut down, frustration replaces focus, and the adaptive signal gets lost in noise. However, when the challenge sits right at the edge of your current ability, that is the zone where our system wakes up, focuses intently, and begins the process of expanding our level of capability.

This is what makes cognitive hormesis so accessible. You don't need a special lab, and you don't need elite genetics. You just need a challenge that's hard enough to stretch you, and controlled enough to keep you in the game. Whether it's a logic puzzle, a tactical simulation, or a custom training algorithm, if you can *calibrate the difficulty*, you can harness the stress. Once you know how to do that, you can apply it *anywhere*. In my case, I applied it to a weakness I'd long ignored: language.

When I decided to play Wordle every day, my motivation wasn't casual. It stemmed from a clear recognition that language processing was a personal weak point. The once-daily puzzle became an ideal hormetic stressor: just hard enough to stretch me, short enough to avoid burnout. Over time, the gains were measurable. What began as a five-to-ten-minute effort has become a sub-minute routine. That speed isn't trivial; it marks a real cognitive shift, built through repetition and calibrated strain. That's the heart of cognitive hormesis: find the gap, and press into it—just enough to adapt.

## Measuring Progress and Adaptation

Tracking progress in cognitive hormesis is less straightforward than in physical training, but no less important. You might not be lifting heavier or running faster, but meaningful neural adaptations are still happening, you just have to measure them differently. Start by monitoring objective performance metrics: puzzle platforms often track speed, accuracy, and completion rates, which can reveal real improvement over time. Watch how your comfort with difficulty shifts; what once felt impossible gradually becomes manageable. You can also test for transfer effects by applying your cognitive gains in different contexts: clearer writing, sharper decision-making, faster problem-solving. Some find benefit in keeping a subjective

difficulty log to track how tasks *feel*; if yesterday's 8 now feels like a 5, that may be a good sign that you are experiencing growth.

Don't overlook recovery time, either. If you bounce back more quickly from mentally taxing sessions, that's a sign your cognitive resilience is increasing. The goal isn't to obsess over numbers, but to notice and reinforce progress. Quiet gains compound; track them, and you'll begin to trust the process even when the improvements are subtle.

To put this into practice, treat cognitive training like any other form of skill development: make it deliberate, consistent and with just the right amount of tension. Choose games or puzzles that genuinely interest you, ones that match your cognitive strengths or curiosities, whether strategic, linguistic, spatial, or numerical. Additionally, intersperse these with some that explicitly challenge your weaknesses. Select difficulty levels just above your current capacity to stretch your brain without overwhelming it. Schedule regular, time-bounded sessions: thirty to ninety minutes is enough to apply pressure without causing burnout. After each session, take a few moments to reflect. What worked? What didn't? What patterns are emerging? This pause solidifies learning and transforms gameplay into growth. Keep things fresh by rotating challenges to avoid stagnation, and most importantly, enjoy the process. You're not just solving puzzles, you're reshaping your brain. The best results come from challenges you'll want to return to for years. This is your mental gym: make it strategic, sustainable, and *yours*.

Cognitive challenges aren't just entertainment, they're training tools. When approached with intention and progressive difficulty, they build resilience that transfers far beyond the screen or puzzle grid. Over time, these challenges enhance your ability to make clear, effective decisions even when the information is incomplete or the situation is unpredictable. They also improve emotional regulation, helping you recover more quickly from setbacks and maintain composure under pressure.

As your capacity for sustained focus grows, so does your mental stamina; you can think deeply, for longer, without succumbing to fatigue. Beyond this, through repeated exposure to complexity, your ability to recognize patterns and adapt your thinking sharpens. Just like physical training strengthens the body, cognitive hormesis fortifies the mind, making it more capable, more flexible, and more durable in the face of chaos and complexity. In a world that demands constant adjustment, that kind of resilience isn't a luxury, it's your edge.

Just like physical training strengthens the body, cognitive hormesis fortifies the mind by making it more capable, adaptable, and durable in the face of chaos and complexity. In a world that demands constant adjustment, that kind of resilience isn't optional. It's your edge.

In other words, the cognitive resilience developed through strategic challenges serves as a foundation for lifelong mental agility and problem-solving capacity. As our world grows increasingly complex and demands greater cognitive flexibility, deliberately cultivating these capabilities through well-designed cognitive hormesis becomes not merely beneficial but essential for thriving amid uncertainty and rapid change.

## **Conclusion: Cognitive Challenges and Strategic Transfer**

Unlike physical hormetic practices that may become limited by age or physical condition, cognitive challenges remain accessible throughout life, often becoming more valuable as we age. By maintaining consistent engagement with appropriately challenging mental tasks; whether through strategic games, progressively difficult puzzles, or other forms of cognitive challenge, we build lasting resilience against cognitive decline while enhancing our capacity to navigate life's complexities with clarity and confidence.

As you know by now, my nearly two decades of experience playing *Earth 2025* (later *Earth Empires*) provided an ongoing source of cognitive stress ideally suited for building mental resilience. The game's dynamic environment, with thousands of players, complex resource management, and shifting alliance politics, demanded continuous adaptation, sharp pattern recognition, and strategic decision-making under pressure. Each game reset introduced new challenges, from targeted attacks and alliance conflicts to rapidly evolving threats, forcing me to stay focused amid uncertainty and develop flexible problem-solving approaches. Unlike static puzzles, strategic multiplayer games like *Earth 2025* require constant recalibration and prevent fixed habits, making them uniquely effective as cognitive hormetic stressors. The mental adaptations developed through this sustained engagement (especially in assessing complex scenarios, allocating limited resources, and adjusting strategies in real time) have transferred directly to professional and entrepreneurial settings, where success often hinges on one's ability to respond intelligently to volatile, high-stakes environments.

In short, the real value of cognitive hormesis doesn't lie in getting better at puzzles, it lies in the *person you become* while solving them. Unlike many physical adaptations, which often stay confined to the specific movement or stressor, cognitive adaptations tend to *generalize*. You don't just improve your logic grid performance or your chess rating; you become faster, more adaptable, more clear-headed under pressure, in every part of your life.

Strategic games, puzzles, and intellectual stressors sharpen your ability to make effective decisions in uncertain conditions. You learn how to act with limited information, to take calculated risks, and to stay calm when the stakes feel high. You also develop foresight: the capacity to

think several moves ahead, to anticipate consequences, and to plan rather than react. This kind of thinking is essential in business, relationships, and any complex environment that requires strategic navigation.

Just as importantly, cognitive stressors build your resilience. When things go wrong, and they will, you recover faster. Instead of freezing or panicking, you assess, recalibrate, and move forward. That's not instinct; that's trained behavior. You've rehearsed it in dozens of puzzles, simulations, and problem sets, and it becomes second nature—or at the very least, you adjust and adapt to real-life situations faster and more effectively.

That's it: that's the playbook for building a mind that can think clearly in chaos, solve problems no one saw coming, and stay sharp when others start to slip (I have more to say about this topic in Chapter 13, "The Positivity Trap: How Blind Optimism Makes You Fragile"). In the end, clarity is a competitive advantage, and it's trainable.

## CHAPTER 6:

# Physical and Psychological Discomfort: Building Mental Resilience Through Physical Stress

The relationship between physical discomfort and mental resilience isn't a gentle self-help proposition; rather, it's a fundamental truth our comfort-obsessed culture tries desperately to hide. Every chapter preceding this puts you through uncomfortable mental states, and the companion book *The Body* walks you through being uncomfortable physically, with the express goal of improving physical health. Physical discomfort serves as an additional hormetic layer, though one that belongs in *The Mind*. While modern "wisdom" preaches that all discomfort is trauma, the reality is far more brutal and far more liberating: your capacity to endure psychological challenge is directly proportional to your willingness to deliberately confront physical discomfort. Finding your inner peace requires the strength to build your inner fortress.

**Picture 11.** Me at a Spartan Race



*Anyone who knows me knows I REALLY hate getting my hands and feet dirty.*

The idea that you should subject yourself to pain in order to become more resilient sounds, on the surface, insane. To most people, it is, and unfortunately for them, this is why they stagnate, immune to appreciable growth. There's a moment in *Seinfeld* when Kramer tells George, "You ought to take cold showers," and George recoils like he's just been diagnosed with rabies: "Cold showers?! That's for *psychotics*!" That reaction is more honest than it seems, because choosing pain voluntarily, and without external reward, goes against everything we've been conditioned to believe.

However, that conditioning is exactly the problem. The irony in this exchange is that Costanza is clearly a psychopath himself, and Kramer is perhaps the only member of the core four who is not.

In *The Body* I speak at great lengths about the physical stress I proudly subjected myself to, especially in my younger days, often relating to the cold. I started taking cold showers in my late teens or early twenties, not because of Wim Hof or social media biohacks (they weren't a thing yet), I did it when I was drained, physically and mentally, and I needed a jolt to break the haze. Perhaps I remembered this episode of *Seinfeld*, or perhaps cold showers were suggested to me by someone else, but my strongest memories of why I began them all revolve around early morning Saturday shifts, after late nights partying on Friday. Once I started the habit, I realized that Kramer isn't wrong when he tells George, "it gives you a *woosh*," but more than that, it forces a psychological shift. You learn to override comfort-driven impulses with deliberate action.

No matter how many times I remind myself how much I like the cold, the initial plunge or submersion comes with hesitancy and anxiety. I know, however, that before I receive the reward, I must first pass through the pain. This is a critical lesson in life, deliberate pain teaching you how to show up when your body and brain are screaming *no*. That rewiring is where the real benefit begins, and it is no different than literally any other accomplishment or goal we set out to achieve. Before bearing the fruits of our labor, we must first put in the work. The fruit being our growth, and the work being the physical discomfort we willingly and intentionally subject ourselves to.

I cover the science of cold exposure relating to physical health in *The Body* side of this book, and I speak of my experiences with the cold in the introductory chapters, as well. Beyond thermoregulation and brown fat activation, there is also the *principle of pain*, which is what Rumi pointed to when he wrote, "*The cure for pain is in the pain*" (Rumi, ~1258/1995). This is an ancient philosophy that has emerged through many cultures, and a truth that those willing to walk through the fire, or plunge themselves into the ice, are intimately aware of. Today, science is starting to elucidate both the 'how' and the 'why.'

Voluntary physical stress, whether it's a freezing plunge or a brutal workout, triggers a neurochemical storm: adrenaline, norepinephrine, dopamine, cortisol, and even feel-good endorphins flood your system. These hormones and neurotransmitters spike focus, alertness, and emotional intensity (Dishman et al., 2012; Dienstbier, 1989). While not intuitive, but true for our body's response to all manageable stressors, when administered in controlled doses this acute stress actually *improves* your baseline mood and lowers overall stress reactivity (Dhabhar, 2018). The hippocampus, which handles memory and helps shut off the stress response, becomes more resilient thanks to neurogenesis and a boost in BDNF (McEwen & Akil, 2020).

Beyond this, repeated exposure to voluntary physical hardship trains your brain's threat-detection systems, especially the amygdala, to dial down overreaction. In simple terms, your brain stops flinching at every perceived threat, allowing you to calmly evaluate each situation (Cohen & Ochsner, 2018).

The difference is control, or at least, it should be: *when you choose to suffer*, to jump into the cold or hit that last round of sprints, you engage different neural pathways than when stress is imposed on you. Voluntary discomfort can teach you to regulate rather than simply react. Your nervous system adapts, calibrates, and, over time, grows more resilient. However, this only holds if the stress is deliberate and well-managed. Sometimes, obsession or stubbornness drives us to push too hard, mistaking self-punishment for growth. When that happens, the benefits vanish, leaving you depleted rather than strengthened. Neurological hormesis via physical discomfort works like strength training for the soul, but only when it respects the threshold between challenge and breakdown.

The most underrated form of mental resilience is paying attention while suffering, which means not distracting yourself and trying to power through, but instead *fully immersing yourself in the experience*. That's mindfulness at the edge of discomfort, and it's one of the most sophisticated tools in the psychological arsenal. When I step into cold water, I don't brace or dissociate, I focus. I track the exact sensation of the cold water hitting my skin, how the chill creeps through my muscles, and something strange happens: it stops bothering me, and I even begin to enjoy it. My breathing slows, and I can speak clearly. I can stay in, sometimes indefinitely, but here's the danger: if I stay too long, there are consequences, namely a depletion of energy that leaves both my mind and body slow and impaired. This happens when I transition from hyperawareness to neglect, after conquering the initial discomfort. So the practice isn't just about endurance, it's about *attunement*. Knowing when to push and when to pull back. Your mind must learn what your body can truly handle, *not just to test your limits, but to protect them*. In the end, this isn't about grit for its own sake; it's about knowing yourself well enough to choose wisely when it counts.

Increasingly in society, we're told that happiness is the goal, but happiness is fleeting, momentary, and impossible to sustain. It's a mirage based on the way that happiness is popularly presented. What we need isn't comfort, it's *purpose*. Real purpose, something worth sacrificing for, *demand strength*: strength of body, strength of will, and strength of character. That kind of strength isn't handed to you, it's *forged* through hardship, adversity, and voluntary confrontation with discomfort. Your capacity to hold the line psychologically is built in the fire of what you're willing to endure physically.

Aristotle had a better definition of happiness than we do. His version, *eudaimonia*, was not a feeling, but a state of flourishing (Kraut, 2018). You didn't achieve it by chasing comfort or pleasure. You achieved it by living in alignment with your values,



by taking meaningful action, often *with others*, toward something larger than yourself. Discomfort isn't the enemy; it's the entry fee, and the reward isn't just strength, it's a life that actually feels deserved, and it is, because it's been *earned*.

## **Case Study: Dricus du Plessis and the Illusion of Exhaustion**

If you are interested in opening your eyes to the lie we tell ourselves about our physical capacity, you need only watch a Dricus du Plessis fight. He looks like he's drowning in lactic acid after the first round, his mouth open, stumbling, bleeding, and yet somehow he doesn't break. He keeps moving forward, forcing his opponents into a state of panic or unease—no small accomplishment when fighting the best in the world. He doesn't achieve this by speed or precision, but by a sheer refusal to stop. Round after round, to the very end, the man neither slows nor hesitates, like a real-life Terminator. That's not athleticism, it's practiced discomfort. It's training his nervous system to dismiss exhaustion signals that lead to most fighters moving in slow motion, stuck in the mud and praying just to make it through the round.

The first time you see it, it's confusing; the tenth time, you realize that his greatest weapon isn't his striking or his grappling, which are both unorthodox and possess glaring holes, it's his resilience. He's proof that the mind quits long before the body must. His greatness is not skill or technique, but a relentless tenacity that seems to have no limit.

While opponents conserve energy and calculate exchanges, du Plessis simply refuses to acknowledge the limitations that govern other fighters. I refuse to believe that this is some mystical quality he was born with; if it were, we would see it more often. I believe what du Plessis possesses is a capacity built through consistent exposure to physical suffering. This is the template for mental resilience: not avoiding discomfort, but progressively increasing your capacity to function through it.

Perhaps the answer is hope or belief. Research has demonstrated remarkable results in this domain. Mice subjected to forced swims until drowning tend to succumb within 15 minutes (Richter, 1957). However, researchers have explored what happens when the mice are rescued just as they begin to give up, and then tested again later. The results are eye-opening, as the same mice who allowed themselves to drown within 15 minutes previously, after realizing rescue was a possibility, were able to tread water for *up to 60 hours* (Richter, 1957). Perhaps du Plessis learned in a situation that demanded it, or simply allowed it, that his body can continue on long after his mind screams at it to stop. Once that knowledge, that belief, that hope is crystallized, it becomes a weapon more powerful than we can imagine. I do not have this weapon unlocked, despite knowing it exists, and attempting to find it within me—it remains one of my white whales, and I am nowhere close to finding it, to be frank. I do, however, have hope that one day I will unlock this ability, and that drives me to continue seeking it.

## Cold Exposure: The Ultimate Mind-Body Teacher

As I preface in Chapter 1 of *The Body*, of all physical hormetic stressors, deliberate cold exposure may offer the most direct path to mental resilience. The immediate stress response triggered by voluntary cold immersion creates a perfect training ground for psychological control. My experience is different, though, as I do not feel the cold like most others; for me, the stress is mild, manageable, and does not ever require me to dig deep and push through. As I stated earlier in the chapter, the hardest part for me is the first moment of exposure.

For most, very few things are as uncomfortable as being very cold. When you enter into the frigid ice water, a few things happen. The moment you step into an ice bath or under a cold shower, your body initiates an automatic stress response: increased heart rate, rapid breathing, and a flood of stress hormones. This physical reaction mirrors exactly what happens during psychological stress, anxiety, or panic, creating an ideal opportunity to practice emotional regulation under controlled conditions. As you deliberately continue your cold exposure despite every instinct urging you to retreat, you're actively demonstrating to your nervous system that you can override automatic reactions. You're proving, in the most visceral way possible, that discomfort itself isn't dangerous, and that you can function effectively despite it.

As I describe in Chapter 1 of *The Body*, research demonstrates that regular cold exposure significantly reduces the stress hormone response to identical cold stimuli over time. More importantly, this adaptation transfers to other stressors; participants showed reduced anxiety and improved emotional regulation in completely unrelated challenging situations after consistent cold exposure training.

To implement this practice effectively, for most people I recommend starting modestly but consistently. A simple way to initiate the habit is to end your regular shower with 15 to 30 seconds of cold water. As your tolerance builds, you can gradually extend the duration. As I mentioned, during the exposure, focus on deliberate breathing and ensure you maintain awareness of your thoughts. Instead of tensing up or trying to escape the discomfort, maintain slow, controlled breaths and observe your thoughts without being pulled into them. In short, walk towards the psychological pain, not away from it. Over time, the initial panic begins to dissolve, replaced by a calmer, more grounded response.

Once you've become comfortable with cold showers, you can move to more intense exposures: ice baths, for example, starting with short durations of one to two minutes and increasing gradually as your capacity improves. Always prioritize safety, especially with outdoor winter swimming or prolonged cold immersion. As you progress, pay close attention to your own experience. Track how your psychological response changes and notice how what once felt overwhelming begins to feel manageable, even empowering. Always ensure that your mind and body are connected in the stress they can tolerate and still grow from. I alluded to this earlier

in the chapter, and I detail in Chapter 1 of *The Body*, how, at times, I have not followed my own advice, leading to dangerous situations. Part of the reason I am able to do this, is because I am so practiced at walking straight into the psychological pain, looking it straight in the eyes and shaking its hand like an old friend, before parting ways, leaving it behind. At least where it concerns the cold, my mind seems to be stronger than my body, an ironic outcome considering it was my body that originally craved it.

## **Strategic Exercise: Physical Challenge as Mental Training**

Just as with cold, I cover the relationship between physiological health recalibration when incorporating an exercise protocol in Chapter 3 of *The Body*, but it is more fitting to discuss the psychological changes here, in *The Mind*. Exercise, when specifically designed to push your psychological limits rather than merely physical ones, becomes a powerful form of mental training. The key distinction is intention: exercising deliberately to build mental toughness versus exercising solely for physical adaptation. The most effective forms of exercise for mental resilience share common elements. They involve continuing despite discomfort, they challenge perceived limitations, and they require sustained focus through increasing adversity. Often, these methods lead to health regression, not progression, as the adversity needed to push our mental limits usually surpasses the beneficial stress zone.

## **High-Intensity Training for Mental Toughness**

High-intensity interval training (HIIT) perfectly exemplifies these principles. During maximum effort intervals, you confront not just physical fatigue but the powerful urge to stop. Learning to maintain technique and effort despite this overwhelming discomfort directly strengthens willpower. Of course, many who attempt HIIT push past their physical limits in this regard, sacrificing technique for extra effort—a decision which can lead to disastrous effects, including serious injury.

Research has confirmed that both HIIT and volume-matched, moderate-intensity programs significantly improve psychological resilience and mental health, although HIIT may provide additional benefits in reducing depression, despite eliciting similar physiological adaptations as moderate intensity exercise (Yu et al., 2023; Borrega-Mouquinho et al., 2021). The intensity itself, and the mental challenge of continuing through maximum exertion, develops psychological toughness that moderate exercise does not.

Of course, this research is limited, being conducted on individuals with depression; the very nature of a controlled trial on measuring outcomes like this would defeat the purpose in those who are already strong of will, since the benefit lies in pushing past your current capabilities, which cannot reasonably occur in a standardized protocol. I talk about the shortcomings of randomized control trials in regard to hormetic protocols in greater detail in Chapter 9 of *The Body*, however, the premise may be

even more relevant to the psychological aspect here. I think the best we can do in this regard today is to utilize case studies, personal experiences, and observational evidence such as this.

As I detail in *The Body*, I think our ability to utilize monitoring and proper data tracking to find our own ideal hormetic windows will dramatically increase with wearable technology in the coming years. As such, this should in no means be construed as a call against conducting proper research, rather, and acknowledgement of the current shortcomings in this domain, with confidence that advancing technological advancements can address said shortcomings in the near future. I digress, back to HIIT.

Years ago I started this HIIT program called Caveman, which, for a time, was everything that every “boot camp” claims to be, but isn’t. Instead of advertising to the crowd looking to drop 10lbs for beach season, or burn off the holiday pounds, the guy who ran Caveman didn’t advertise. You had to be invited by someone who was already attending, who vouched for you, to get a spot. Even then, you had to book in advance, as wait lists were often 10+ people deep for the limited 20 available spots. When I first started, I was hooked by the motto from the owner; this wasn’t about carving out abs, or defining muscles, it was about creating true functional strength and fitness. That said, that goal could have fooled me, as virtually everyone attending was shredded in the early days.

You never knew what you were in for when showing up to a Caveman. Maybe HIIT, 10-12 stations of 40 seconds on, 40 off, with all explosive movements—think reactive box jumps, lateral jumps over stacked kicking shields as high as you could tolerate, reactively landing into burpees and then jumping again before your heels touch the ground, burpee to chin ups, or burpee to muscle ups if you could do them, battle ropes, sledge hammer on tire, tire flip and jumps, and the list goes on. Once our bodies and minds were pushed to the breaking point, only then would the laps of running begin, ending with a sort of reprieve from the self-inflicted hell, maybe two or three minutes, before repeating again, and again a third time, followed by some sort of unthinkable pain to finish off the workout.

On another day it would be a different type of grueling agony. There was one that I think was called the “4-50,” which consisted of 4 stations that you snake through, each with a 50-second duration, with one break station. With only 3 seconds of break between the stations, enough time to step over and start again. This was designed to push you to your limits, as you didn’t stop.

The hardest days, if done properly, were when it was a head-to-head war of the body and the mind. We would partner up with someone who was on our fitness level, and go through a workout: typically something simple like pushups, burpees, body squats, V-up sit-ups, or any other number of improvised hells. The challenge in this workout structure is the brutal fact that rest only occurs when your partner is

exercising, and the workout doesn't stop for the entire hour. What this means is that when someone's body or mind starts to break, it becomes exponentially worse with each passing set. The longer it takes you to finish your set (i.e., 20 body squats), the longer your partner rests, and conversely, the faster they can then finish their set, the less rest you get. In this workout structure, even the smallest crack from one person was inevitably a death sentence, with virtually no hope of recovering. It was extremely rare for this workout to end in equal exhaustion for both participants. One team member would be broken, while the other would be fresher than after a usual Caveman. Its critical lesson, however, was that it revealed to all of us who we were. What partner did we seek? Did we want an easy day, or did we want to challenge ourselves?

I've participated in a lot of workouts that many would find intense. From spending hours at martial arts, grappling, and then sparring, to stacking multiple CrossFit sessions into the same day, to personal trainers instructed to try to break me. But these simple systems at Caveman pushed me further than anything else ever has. It was not unusual for me—and many others—to need to sit in our cars for an extended period of time after the workout, to ensure it was safe to drive home. Dizziness and blackening vision were a real concern. On many occasions I thought I was fine, and then after driving for a bit, had what some of us termed a “shut down.” My vision would start going dark, and I'd need to urgently pull over, recline my seat, and wait it out.

Something about this level of pain was addictive. During the agony, I wanted to be anywhere else in the world but there. In the lead up to the class, I'd feel anxious, and want to leave, want to cancel. But after completion, the days following, and before the next Caveman I would crave it. I would wait for that day in anticipation, knowing that in both mind and body, I was pushing my boundaries. I was becoming stronger.

## **Endurance and Perceived Limitations**

Endurance training, particularly when pushing through perceived limitations, rewires your perception of sustainable effort. As you discover that you can continue far beyond the point where your mind initially signals “enough,” you develop skepticism toward self-perceived limitations in all areas of life. In this area I need to lean on the experiences others have relayed, as I don't have personal experience. Through my entire adult life, with something like running, my knees have gone out far before my muscles or mind have ever screamed “stop.”

## **Combat Sports and Fear Management**

Beyond HIIT and endurance, there's a different category of physical challenge: one where threat perception and fear enter the picture. Contact and combat sports add another dimension, the ability to maintain cognitive function and emotional control while under direct physical threat. This translates powerfully to handling

psychological and social stressors with greater composure. Fear, and being in a tense state of anticipatory dread, drains your energy like nothing else. Your output slows, your stamina is decimated, and your mind and body both begin to collapse. This is a different type of exhaustion, one that won't leave you sore and tired the next day, but will paralyze you, sapping you of your ability to continue in the moment. I know this feeling well, and some days I can conquer it despite knowing the certainty of the outcome, namely, sparring with my trainer, whereas other days, even after agreeing to take it easy, my mind and body collapse in anticipation. However, I know that pain is the currency and strength is the payoff. So, I will forge on, determined to expand this aspect of my mental and physical endurance.

## **Case Study: Tony Ferguson - The Man Who Trained Through Blood**

Tony Ferguson exemplifies the deliberate weaponization of physical discomfort. His unorthodox training methods, such as elbowing metal poles, performing exhaustive sand training, and continuing through bloody sessions, aren't just physically demanding, they're also effective psychological conditioning. Ferguson famously continued training after suffering an MCL tear in his knee, refusing medical attention to complete his training camp. While medically inadvisable, it demonstrates the mentality that separated him from competitors: the absolute refusal to acknowledge physical limitations that would stop normal athletes.

Whether or not Ferguson's mental resilience was a natural gift is up for debate, but what is not debated is that it was forged through relentless and often bizarre self-imposed trials. Ferguson is a walking case study in deliberate discomfort: training in isolation, smashing his shins against metal poles to toughen bone, and performing gymnastic acrobatics that seem halfway between martial arts and interpretive dance. He's refused to spar because he believes it limits his creativity, a strategy which may have worked for a time, until it eventually didn't. However, the results are undeniable: a fighter whose durability in the cage became legend.

Yet, it's not just his training that makes Ferguson worth highlighting, it's the mythos he's built around himself. A long-running internet meme catalogues "Tony Ferguson is the type of guy" jokes, each a surreal tribute to his idiosyncrasies. He's the type of guy to shadowbox at a funeral; the type to cut weight for a street fight; the type to read all the terms and conditions, then click "I disagree." These memes reflect a broader cultural fascination with someone who has made pain, awkwardness, and self-invention his signature.

In short, Ferguson's eccentric rituals may draw mockery, but beneath them lies something essential: he's not optimizing for convention but training for chaos. That's the core of his mental resilience: repeated exposure to disorder, unpredictability, and

discomfort, until even the absurd becomes routine. This is why Ferguson's approach is the antithesis of our comfort-obsessed culture, and his 12-fight win streak in the UFC's most competitive division speaks to its effectiveness.

Ferguson didn't outlast opponents because he was more technical. He didn't dominate because he was genetically gifted. He did it because he trained himself to ignore the internal stop signs, such as pain, doubt, and fatigue, that govern most people's lives. This fact that once his body started to deteriorate Ferguson's success immediately collapsed is in no way a coincidence. His 12 fight win streak immediately transitioned to a record-breaking 8 fight losing streak. Father time comes for all of us, and when it came for Tony, his mental toughness was not enough to overcome the technical skill gap that existed between him and other competitors. The lesson with Ferguson is that the will can carry us for a time, but for lasting success, the will needs to be reinforced with technical mastery.

### **Case Study: Rich Froning - Mental Discipline as Competitive Edge**

Rich Froning Jr. didn't become a serial champion of the CrossFit Games because he was flashy, brilliant, or uniquely charismatic. In fact, by his own admission, he's none of those things. He's unassuming, but he's a winner. What made Froning exceptional wasn't just elite physical capacity, it was his relentless consistency, his ability to recover from massive training volume, and most of all, his psychological durability. He trained harder, more often, and with more focus than almost anyone else in the sport, and over more than a decade of competition he never lost his edge (Froning, 2025).

Froning was already exceptional when he retired from individual competition, having been crowned the world's fittest man a record four years in a row, but what's more remarkable is what happened after he stepped away from individual competition. Froning, upon retiring as an individual competitor, announced he was transitioning to run the team at his gym, CrossFit Mayhem. Before Froning joined CrossFit Mayhem's team as the captain and a competitor, their best year was a 27th place finish, while they failed to qualify for the games in others. Under his leadership, they became a dynasty, winning six team titles and never finishing worse than second during his run. Even as teammates cycled in and out, Froning maintained a culture of performance that didn't just keep winning, it got stronger. In 2022, his final year running the program, Mayhem fielded three teams that placed 1st, 5th, and 27th. The year after he left CrossFit, Mayhem fielded a single team, which placed 7th—a substantial indication that Froning was more than an exceptional individual talent. Froning was a luminary who inspired greatness in those around him, a trait that is exceedingly rare and indescribably impactful.

I need to linger on this point just a bit longer. What truly interests me about Froning is the fact that he was able to reach the peak both as an individual competitor, and as a team captain and coach. Typically, the best talents are the worst coaches and

leaders, as they fail to understand what makes them great. Froning, clearly, was not a natural talent. His success was earned with blood, sweat, and tears, precisely why his individual dominance transferred into uniting a team. He wasn't the loudest in the room, but something about him—his discipline, his presence, and maybe his faith—pulled others forward. He didn't just compete, he led, and his team listened, and that's a much rarer kind of strength.

Froning's training philosophy perfectly encapsulates the central principle of mental resilience through physical stress: you don't overcome limitations by avoiding them. You overcome them by directly confronting them, then pushing just slightly beyond them, day after day, until what once seemed impossible becomes your new baseline. This is exactly how we build psychological resilience. Not through affirmations or comfort, but through structured, progressive exposure to precisely the discomfort we'd prefer to avoid.

### **Case Study: Roberta Gibb - The Woman Who Didn't Ask**

Roberta Gibb didn't wait for permission. In 1966, women weren't allowed to run the Boston Marathon, not because of a lack of interest, but because the system didn't believe their bodies could handle it. Twenty-six miles, they claimed, would shatter their reproductive capacity. It wouldn't just break them in the moment and days following, it would permanently undo them.

So Gibb trained, but she did so in secret. When the day of the race came, she hid in the bushes near the starting line, wearing men's shoes, disguised in a hoodie. When the gun fired, she ran. She outran the men, literally, symbolically, and almost *entirely*. Gibb's time was three hours, twenty-one minutes and forty seconds, which was faster than two-thirds of the other participants (Derderian, 1996). She didn't just finish the Marathon, she forced the world to witness adaptation in real time.

Hers is biological rebellion: hormesis made visible. She didn't break the rules, she exposed their absurdity by surviving what they told her she could not. We don't celebrate Roberta Gibb because she was a woman, we celebrate her because she refused to be told what her limitations were, because she refused to let those who would suppress her tell her what she knew was a lie. That's what this book is about.

### **Case Study: David Goggins - Confronting Discomfort as Identity**

David Goggins transformed himself from an overweight exterminator into a Navy SEAL, ultramarathoner, and world-record holder through a structured approach to confronting physical discomfort most would consider unbearable. Goggins doesn't just tolerate discomfort—he actively seeks it out as the core of his identity. His approach isn't about making discomfort more palatable through mindfulness; it's about directly confronting your perceived limitations and methodically pushing beyond them.



What separates Goggins from mere motivational figures is his unflinching honesty about the process. He doesn't promise that confronting physical discomfort will become enjoyable—he simply demonstrates that it's possible to function at a high level despite it, and that this capacity transfers directly to psychological resilience. Goggins represents the extreme edge of using physical challenge for psychological development. While his specific methods may not be necessary or advisable for most, the core principle remains valid: deliberately confronting physical discomfort, rather than avoiding it, directly builds your capacity to handle psychological and emotional challenges. You don't need to go 'full Goggins,' but you do need to understand what he embodies: resilience isn't built in the absence of pain, it's built in the middle of it; rep by rep, step by step, and breath by breath.

## **The Edge Has An Edge**

A truth I have repeated throughout this book is that there is a limit to the stress we can endure. These case studies demonstrate that for most of us, most of the time, we have never pushed to our edge in a tactical manner that is designed to expand our edge towards our final capacity. When we hit our edge, it is due to hubris, negligence or ignorance, and to our detriment. For those who have pushed to, or near, their maximal edge, what happens when the mind's tolerance outgrows the body's capabilities?

This is a truth I am still slowly coming to terms with, personally. I never pushed my edge to the level any of these case studies achieved, but my edge was still far beyond what I can currently physically tolerate. Despite knowing everything I do regarding stress, recovery, and resilience I still find myself pushing too hard, too often. Unless I'm getting the breaks beaten off of me sparring, my workouts tend to feel extremely easy, mentally speaking. I always feel I can push more weight, do a few more reps, and get it all done faster. Yet, every time I try, and I always succeed, I am left broken, with poor sleep and a battered body for days. The hardest part of exercising for me, at 40 years old and with all of my other responsibilities, is knowing when to dial back and taper the intensity.

This is precisely why building our resilience only through physical discomfort is a recipe for disaster. It is a crucial strategy, but a limited one that will end in pain and misery as our bodies collapse under the entropy of age despite our minds' protestations. This is why we must push to find our limits, but also know that these limits will change, and eventually regress. We must keep our mental resilience to physical discomfort in check with our physical abilities, and when our physicality begins to decline, we must fill the gap with other mental challenges. Physical stress keeps us honest; but we must also be honest with ourselves regarding our capacity to endure it.

## Conclusion: The Paradox of Strength Through Discomfort

There's a fundamental paradox at work here: the path to psychological stability and comfort of mind doesn't skirt around pain; it runs straight through it. That's the truth no one wants to hear in an age of curated comfort and institutionalized safety nets. To reference *Seinfeld* one more time, we exist, in a way, like the "bubble boy" did, we just don't realize it. Leaving this bubble, which we believe is keeping us safe, seems insane and reckless. As such, we have strengthened this bubble by building a culture that prioritizes insulation, trigger warnings, and emotional guardrails. The toxic idea that discomfort is automatically harmful, and that the highest good is to avoid any form of distress, stubbornly persists like a recurrent and persistent cancer that metastasizes throughout every organ in the body.

Rather than acknowledging this cancer that is increasingly killing us, we have elevated it as a virtue, as our identity, as if ridding the cancer would fundamentally destroy who we are. So, this cancer is draped in platitudes that sound compassionate and feel protective, but at the core, it is hollow, vapid, and its function is chaotic and disruptive, much like cancer cells are to the body. Just as with cancer, these vapid ideologies devoid of tangible benefits slowly overwhelm and infect the performance of the ideologies that do drive growth, purpose, and strength. Just like cancer, the danger is not in the mutated ideology, but its ability to spread and replicate.

Weakness is a choice for some, and an inevitability for others. But when you not only treat all challenges as trauma, but also go further and train other people to do likewise, those people who have followed will inevitably, and always, collapse under pressure. When you define effort as abuse, you rob them of the chance to pursue growth. When discomfort becomes the enemy, fragility becomes the default. When these ideologies become dominant, even attempts at growth towards the aspiration of strength become diluted and inhibited. The climb towards real progress becomes impossible, as we cannot even see the mountain peak from the bottom of the abyss.

This is how strength dies, not in catastrophe, but in chronic avoidance. Resilience isn't something you can download. It can't be gifted or taught in theory. It must be earned, deliberately, progressively, and physically. Physical hormesis—structured, intentional exposure to discomfort—is one of the most direct ways to earn it. Whether it's a freezing plunge, a final sprint, or a slow-burn isometric hold when your muscles are begging for mercy, each of these is an invitation: not just to get stronger, but to become someone who can hold the line when things get hard. Someone who's rehearsed difficulty so many times that stress doesn't break them, it activates them. Someone who can resist the ideological cancer permeating our existence. Resilience isn't a feeling, it's a trained capability, an earned inoculation against adversity.

Like any capability, it begins with a choice: to walk with intent into the hard things, instead of recoiling away from them.

Picture 12. Me at the ESPEN conference in Milan, Italy



Just over here flexing... data

## CHAPTER 7:

# Introspection and the War Against Psychological Fragility

*Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect he ceases to love.*

—FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY, THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

## The Power of Deliberate Self-Examination

There was a time I couldn't stop replaying things I'd said: stupid, small things, moments where I exaggerated for no reason, bragged about something I didn't need to, or times I came off as arrogant, insecure, or both. These weren't major moral failings, but they stuck in my head like splinters. I'd ruminate on them for days, not because I thought they were unforgivable, but because they didn't line up with the kind of person I wanted to be. Yet, I kept repeating them.

Eventually, I recognized the pattern. It wasn't random, it was inherited. *Tarnavafication*, my friends called it: a signature move from my dad's side of the family. Almost every Tarnava does it: inflate a story here, drop an unnecessary flex there, the list goes on. I found it deeply embarrassing. In my twenties, I made it my mission to root it out, to unlearn a trait that felt wired into my nervous system, not because I hated where I came from, but because I wanted to stop sabotaging who I was becoming. Ultimately, I stopped trying to repress the discomfort and started examining it. I asked: *Why am I saying these things?* The answer was simple but painful: *because I wanted to be liked.*

More critically, perhaps, it was because I wanted to feel important, to temporarily silence the insecurity that haunted my thoughts, and finally because it came easy, as I was mimicking how many on my father's side behave. So, for me, it was “normal”—until I realized that for everyone else, it wasn't. These weren't conscious intentions; they were reflexes, and that's what made them dangerous. Once I saw them clearly, not just the behavior but the root, I started to change: slowly and intentionally; not perfectly, but meaningfully. That work hasn't ended, and this ugly side of me comes out at times, especially when I'm intoxicated, or speaking to someone new who has me questioning my worth.

Another trait that I have fought to improve is in regards to how detailed I need to be when explaining something, and how repetitive my instructions need to be. I've had many complain to me about this shortcoming, and the truth is, I have a hard time calibrating to what each individual I'm talking to can comprehend, and how quickly they can retain it. Even once I am corrected by someone in my life, I often catch

myself over-explaining things, not because I think my interlocutors are stupid, but because I can't always calibrate how much information they need, especially on different and new subjects.

Sometimes I overcompensate and under-explain, which comes off as aloof. Sometimes, my under-explanation confuses those I am speaking to. Other times, after underexplaining, my calibration swings too far in the other direction, and I overexplain and come off condescending. I've also been told I can sound contemptuous: something I'm actively working on. I'm not this way because I mean to, but because the internal calibration isn't always where I want it to be. In fact, those who know me know the difference, as when I mean to be contemptuous, there is no doubt in anyone's mind. Ideally, a future exists where this internal calibration is perfected, but I am not holding my breath. Nevertheless, I will continue on, trying my best to improve, one step at a time. That's what self-examination is for, not to beat yourself up in a misguided mental self-flagellation, but to debug the system—to uncover patterns that don't serve you anymore. Then, with concerted and deliberate effort, to attempt to write new code.

Self-examination is more like combat than it is a wellness trend: a daily confrontation with the stories you tell yourself to avoid facing the truth. I don't do it because it's pleasant, I do it because it's necessary. An hour a day, minimum, but not as a ritual and not for validation, and not necessarily all at once. I find that short bursts of introspection after each conversation help me recalibrate and understand who I am to a greater depth. Because if I don't interrogate the machinery of my own mind, that machinery runs me, and it doesn't care about my best interest. Only with this time can I examine my own faults, so I can understand, accept, and forgive the actions of others who may have angered or offended me in response to my own words.

Most people don't dedicate themselves to this work. They react to life like it's happening *to* them: same arguments, same frustrations, and same failures, recycled through new circumstances. They wonder why nothing changes, why they feel stuck, without realizing they've never once paused to ask, *What's the common thread here?* It's not their partner or their boss. It's not society, and it's not bad luck. It's *themselves*. If you never stop to examine the patterns that drive your thoughts and behavior, you'll keep blaming everything and everyone else, arrested in development, devoid of growth.

Introspection breaks that loop. It lets you step outside the default script and actually see what's running in the background. You start to recognize when your reactions aren't about the present moment, but echoes from something older. You catch yourself before the spiral. You spot the emotion rising and, instead of being hijacked by it, you trace it back to the source, and once you see the source clearly, it starts to lose its grip. You stop being a passenger in your own life, unlocking the ability to put your hands on the wheel and start driving. With enough practice, enough work, you

can even begin to navigate past the moment. Understanding yourself and others serves as an internal GPS to the future you wish to be true.

## The Methodology of Effective Introspection

There's a crucial distinction between productive introspection and destructive rumination. Many people avoid introspection because their attempts at self-examination quickly descend into circular thinking, self-criticism, or pointless rehashing of emotionally uncomfortable or damaging past events. What these abandoned attempts amount to is not introspection, but rather, it's emotional masturbation disguised as depth and materializing in self-sabotage.

Effective introspection requires structure, objectivity, and purpose. I approach my daily practice with the following specific methodologies.

**Emotional Autopsy:** When I experience a strong emotional reaction, I trace it backward layer by layer. What triggered this feeling? What underlying beliefs or past experiences amplified it? What fundamental values or needs are being threatened? This isn't about justifying the emotion, but dissecting its architecture.

**Pattern recognition:** I actively look for recurring themes in my reactions, decisions, and interpersonal conflicts. These patterns reveal the operating system of my psychology; the algorithms running beneath conscious awareness that determine much of my behavior.

**Perspective shifting:** I deliberately examine situations from viewpoints completely opposite to my initial position. This isn't simply playing devil's advocate and attacking my default state; it's a serious attempt to inhabit mental models I would normally reject, to see what insights they might offer. The purpose of perspective shifting is to expand your understanding and adjust your position based on new, additional insights. Often, weak positions need to be abandoned, while in other cases, strong positions can be further strengthened.

**Constraint examination:** I identify the boundaries I've placed around my thinking. This encompasses the ideas I consider untouchable, the questions I refuse to ask, and the possibilities I automatically dismiss. These constraints often reveal more about me than my conscious beliefs. These tendencies give insights into our fears and insecurities, leading us to the "why" that created the crutches and protections surrounding them. We must work to shatter our own illusions, and free our minds from the prisons we built to protect them. If we don't, one day, reality will shatter them for us, and we will be ill-prepared to deal with it.

Each of these approaches serves to create distance between my conscious mind and my automatic psychological processes. This separation is the foundation of mental toughness: the ability to experience powerful emotions without being controlled by them.

## Relational Reflection: Studying Others to Understand Yourself

*In every man's memories there are such things as he will reveal not to everyone, but perhaps only to friends. There are also such as he will reveal not even to friends, but only to himself, and that in secret. Then, finally, there are such as a man is afraid to reveal even to himself, and every decent man will have accumulated quite a few things of this sort. That is, one might even say: the more decent a man is, the more of them he will have. At least I myself have only recently resolved to recall some of my former adventures, which till now I have always avoided, even with a certain uneasiness.*

*Now, however, when I not only recall them but am even resolved to write them down, now I want precisely to make a test: is it possible to be perfectly candid with oneself and not be afraid of the whole truth? (Dostoevsky, 1864/1994, p. 39)*

Introspection isn't limited to tracing your emotions or uncovering childhood associations. It also means reviewing how others respond to you without flinching. When someone pulls away, gets defensive, shuts down, or lashes out, that reaction holds information. What did you say? What didn't you say? What assumptions were you making?

Most people assume they're being misunderstood, attacked, or unfairly judged. But introspection done honestly forces you to consider: maybe they were right about you, at least in part. Or maybe your communication failed them in a way you didn't notice. You learn more from studying someone else's discomfort than you do from defending your intent.

This isn't about blame, it's about precision, progress, and honesty. Understanding how your internal state is reflected back at you by the people around you is one of the most challenging and essential aspects of emotional maturity. Their reactions become a mirror, and while that mirror is distorted by their own biases and limitations, it is still reflecting something real about you that you might otherwise miss.

When I review a difficult conversation or interaction, I focus not just on what I felt, but on the specific moments when the other person's demeanor shifted. What exactly did I say? What tone did I use? What assumptions was I making about their knowledge, values, or intentions? More importantly, what did their reaction reveal about my blind spots—the gaps between how I see myself and how others experience me?

This relational dimension of introspection is often the most uncomfortable, precisely because it dissolves your internal PR campaign. It's easier to examine yourself in isolation than to confront the possibility that others might see flaws in

you that you've carefully hidden from yourself. But without this component, introspection risks becoming self-deception in a more sophisticated form, an elaborate excuse to maintain our flaws, and avoid the pursuit of growth. When we all play this same game of deception, we rob ourselves of the ability to truly connect with others, to build life-long, lasting friendships, and to grow as human beings.

One of my favorite passages from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* was posted at the start of this section in full. Dostoevsky accurately assesses that most relationships are built around limited and partial truths, an obvious statement, but further expanded to bring clarity that for most people, they do not even share these withheld truths with themselves. Dostoevsky is of course correct, but we ought to strive for him not to be. Deliberate and practiced introspection forces you to look at what you refuse to admit to others, and especially to yourself. If your friendships depend on silence, they are not built on trust; they're built on shared cowardice. If your self-image relies on self-deception, any growth achieved will be accidental. If you can face honesty with yourself, first, followed by the same honesty with those you are closest to, you can handle almost anything. By taking the first step in understanding your own vulnerabilities, and freeing those close to you from their silence, perhaps in time you may inspire them to do likewise. Perhaps then, finally, relationships built on absolute trust and understanding can exist.

*To offend a strong man, tell him a lie.*

*To offend a weak man, tell him the truth.*

—VARIOUS ATTRIBUTIONS, OFTEN TO MARCUS AURELIUS

## **Introspection as a Path to Empathy**

The deeper you go into self-examination, the more it rewires how you see other people, not because you become “more compassionate” in the moralizing sense, but because you've seen the mess inside yourself. Once you've mapped your own contradictions, rationalizations, irrational fears, unexamined biases, stubborn delusions, and all other behavioral glitches, it's impossible to view anyone else's mind as simple. I've had emotional reactions I couldn't explain until I dug them up by the root and found the forgotten experiences underneath. I've defended decisions with airtight logic, only to realize they were post-hoc stories I built to protect a gut instinct I didn't want to question. I've caught myself bending reality to protect a belief I didn't want to lose. Once you realize how sneaky your own brain can be, you stop being surprised when someone else's doesn't work cleanly, either.

When someone acts irrationally, displays poor emotional regulation, or shows obvious cognitive biases, I no longer view these as character flaws but as universal human tendencies I've observed in myself. This isn't about excusing harmful behavior. It's about understanding its origins with precision rather than dismissing



it with judgment. The person who hasn't studied their own mind's machinery is quick to pathologize others' psychological struggles. The person who has done this work recognizes the common humanity in these struggles while maintaining clear boundaries around acceptable behavior.

## **Introspection as a Path Towards Becoming Whole**

A different version of us lives in the mind of everyone we have ever met, this is wisdom that has oft been repeated. However, it is also true that different versions of ourselves live *within us*, triggered by the patterns and surroundings we exist in. Consider times when you encountered an old friend or colleague, someone you haven't seen in years or decades. Think about your behavior, and I'm sure you will recognize actions and thoughts which emerged that you believed were long shed.

I first realized this years ago, when I was still playing *Earth 2025*, which I wrote about in Chapter 5, a game I began playing when I was thirteen years old, continuing to do so into my early 30s. As I aged, matured, and tempered the worst of my personality *in the real world*, I continued to find myself devolving back into the habits, behaviors, and communication patterns of the insufferable teenager that I was when I formed my first behavioral patterns related to the game. I'd type words, state beliefs, and launch insults at others that I did not recognize within myself. The anonymity and protection behind a screen of the Internet often brings out the worst in many of us; my behavior online as a teenager was already a caricature of my nauseating personality at the time, and somehow, despite my monumental efforts to grow as a person, each and every time I restarted the game I would turn back into that same caricature of an angry, insecure teenager. Eventually, I believe I started to break the pattern near the end of my time in the game. That said, I cannot begin to fathom the mental image many of my contemporaries from the game have of me. There is nothing I can do about that except move on and accept that this version of me exists in the minds of many, all the while committing to continue my own growth and expand my own awareness of the fractured versions of myself.

This is why true growth demands new surroundings and experiences, but it also requires confrontations with our past. Geographical escapism doesn't work because changing our surroundings does not change the core of our being. Stagnation, likewise, leads to an entrenchment of our patterns and tendencies, leaving little room for growth. The answer is in unity of both; without bringing in new, we cannot change and grow, and without confronting what has been, we are destined to fracture our psyche into fragmented personalities, none of them wholly ourselves, but all part of ourselves.

These past selves, when unearthed, can cause us to believe we haven't changed; they can undermine confidence, lead to questioning our progress, and drag to the surface repressed trauma. If our new self is but a splinter of the old, a patchwork of coding built on top of the original design, the resurrection of the old possesses the capability

to defeat the new by the reminder of itself, allowing it to be reborn. If confrontation is constant, and complete, this risk is reduced dramatically, and our likelihood of a sustained sense of self-admiration is all but assured.

When I meet with someone from my past intentionally, I do not have these issues. I am able to consciously enter the situation knowing that the other person has likely changed, also, and will be as concerned about their past self as I am about my own. I commit to focusing on learning about their life and progress, and allow my growth to reveal itself organically, if at all. This works whether in-person, or electronically. This takes considerable thought and focused, deliberate action to incorporate routinely. Sometimes I falter and regress, but more and more often I find myself able to confront and overcome these revelatory situations. However, when the meeting occurs by chance and unexpectedly, parts of my old self reemerge, ironically, in an ill advised attempt to demonstrate my growth. My anxiety-ridden attempts to represent who I have become are proving indistinguishable from the often underserved braggadocio that used to plague my conversations. This is a splinter in which I continue to work to unite. Perhaps I never will, but if I don't try I've resigned to allow myself to be vulnerable, susceptible to the random chance of my surroundings. I can accept my flaws if I maintain honest intent to resolve them, but I cannot accept intentional weakness driven by the fear of confronting myself.

## **Practical Approaches to Emotional Stress Exposure**

Introspection alone isn't sufficient for building internal grit. It must be paired with deliberate exposure to emotional challenges: situations that test your capacity for composure under fire while providing opportunities to implement the insights gained through introspection. One especially effective method is *seeking difficult conversations*. Most people avoid discussions where emotions run high, conflicts must be navigated, or uncomfortable truths must be addressed. This avoidance seems protective, but actually weakens psychological capacity. I deliberately *seek* these conversations, not from a place of conflict-seeking but as opportunities to practice staying sharp under pressure.

When I know a conversation will be emotionally challenging, I prepare by clarifying my objectives beyond emotional catharsis, identifying potential triggers that might derail my composure, planning specific ways to maintain clarity when emotions intensify, and setting clear boundaries for what I will and won't tolerate. These conversations build psychological recall under fire: the capacity to think clearly and communicate effectively while experiencing uncomfortable emotions. Each difficult conversation successfully navigated expands your window of tolerance for emotional stress.

Another method to develop your emotional stress response is *vulnerability*: the willingness to reveal your authentic thoughts, feelings, and struggles. Practicing vulnerability creates a particular form of emotional exposure that builds resilience.

Many mistake vulnerability for weakness, when in fact it requires substantial emotional strength. Strategic self-disclosure involves deliberately sharing aspects of yourself that feel risky to reveal, but doing so in contexts where the disclosure serves a constructive purpose. This shouldn't be confused with oversharing or using others as emotional dumping grounds. The purpose is in stepping beyond comfortable self-protection to build an authentic connection. I've found this practice particularly valuable for counteracting perfectionism and the isolating belief that I must handle challenges alone. Each act of appropriate vulnerability creates deeper connections while disempowering shame, one of the most destructive emotions for psychological health. In particular, shame should be felt acutely as a signal for reflection, then shed in the pursuit of growth, not carried as a burden that impedes it.

### **Shame: Between Nietzsche and the Saints**

This section was not originally intended to be in this book—it wasn't even an afterthought. As I intimated in the Preface, it emerged through organic discussion and debate with two of my editors, Vadim and Ljubomir, with my response connecting to a previous conversation we had participated in, one where we were separated by a few degrees, not disagreement, regarding cognition and emotion. In the previous section, which ends with a comment on shame, Vadim, knowing the impact Nietzsche has had on my thinking, asked me in the comments to expand on my thoughts on shame.

In particular, Vadim posed whether shame and guilt are useful emotions at all, pointing to Nietzsche's ambivalence towards these feelings in his writing. In reflecting on an essay by Mark Alfano (2023), it was revealed to Vadim that Nietzsche, in his fragmented way, circles around shame without ever giving it a clear verdict. At times, he treats it as the internalized voice of the herd: an inhibitor of greatness, a mechanism by which mediocrity polices excellence. Yet, elsewhere, shame appears as a necessary function of higher self-awareness, a sign that one has *standards*.

In my view, shame is not inherently virtuous or toxic. For those who aim to live with integrity, it should be felt acutely when warranted, then quickly shed. It ought to catalyze growth, not serve as a chronic burden. Persistent shame, especially among competent and reflective individuals, becomes a form of self-sabotage. Critically, the fear of shame is far more adaptive than the experience of carrying it. As for those without the capacity for shame (who lie, manipulate, or destroy without reflection), the rest of us spending our energy wishing they would reform is a fool's errand. Their existence serves only as a cautionary marker, a boundary condition reminding the rest of us how not to be. This isn't advice for everyone, it's advice for those aiming to live as a kind of aristocracy of character: those for whom the project of becoming better is lifelong and personal, and not imposed.

My response triggered further discussion, and while both editors found it interesting, we all agreed that what I had written was too great a digression from the current

text. We tried workshopping footnotes, but they failed to capture all of the nuance of my thoughts. Simultaneously, the thoughts were too important to cut short, but deviated too far from the purpose of the book, on the surface, to include in full.

The conversation continued, and Ljubomir asked curiously how I arrived at my views on shame and guilt, which I perceive as two sides of the same coin. I described my experience using cognition and logic to create my own moral guide, and that over time, my relationship with these two powerful emotions changed. Ljubomir posed a question regarding the one-way street of emotions to cognition, asking how this is reconciled. I thought to myself, and acknowledged that, by our definitions of each, Ljubomir's position that emotion and cognition form a loop, with changes travelling each way, is accurate. My original position, which paradoxically hasn't changed, is that our cognition and mindset exist because of emotion, so anything derived from said cognition is really driven by emotion, even when utilized to alter other future—and even past emotions.

Regardless of the status of this ongoing debate, which may never be resolved and hinges on both semantics and metaphysics, the discussion has led to important revelations and subsequent additions to the book, which I believe undeniably strengthen it. This is precisely why we engage in discussions with others whose viewpoints may differ, even if only by degrees. This is exactly why I hired a team of interdisciplinary thinkers as editors to challenge my ideas and perspective, rather than task them with strengthening my pre-existing narratives. Growth, whether in body or mind, comes from the struggle, not through soothing sedation.

Many of the prominent philosophies and religions in human society rely on two of the most powerful emotions we feel: shame and guilt.<sup>4</sup> The monotheistic religions lean heavily on this tenet, while Eastern religions such as Shintoism, Hinduism, and Confucianism all heavily dole out one, the other, or both to their adherents. Even philosophical schools of thought, such as Kantian Ethics and Stoicism espouse the need for healthy reflection, with liberal application, of guilt.

Nietzsche, conversely, rightly assessed these emotional drivers as effective tools of control, a way to subjugate the masses. For a time, I agreed with him, viewing shame and guilt as wasted emotions not worthy of my consideration, but still, they persisted. I grappled with my own shame and guilt for many years, trying valiantly to suppress these poisons from my mentality, but to no avail. In time, I realized the

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<sup>4</sup> While often grouped together under the umbrella of "negative emotions," shame and guilt are categorically different from fear. Fear is a primal, adaptive response to a perceived external threat. Shame and guilt, by contrast, are internalized responses rooted in social conditioning. They are not direct reactions to danger but reflect the sublimation of fear into moral or interpersonal self-judgment. In this sense, shame and guilt rarely correspond to an immediate threat in the environment, but instead express anxiety about perceived failure, exclusion, or disapproval, even in the absence of any concrete consequences.

futility of this quest, and sought to understand these emotions; why we possess them, why suppressing them will lead to failure, and how best to channel their power to serve my own.

Today, my perspective exists in the void between Nietzsche and his counterparts. I acknowledge that those who seek control will utilize these tools of manipulation for their own ends, and will do so by redefining many natural human instincts, and needs, as inherently immoral. This leads to a dilemma where one cannot shed these emotions, as they're faced to act in ways eliciting the responses over and over again, through no fault of their own. These demands to suppress our natural tendencies were never meant to succeed, they were meant to create turmoil. Yet, these emotions exist nonetheless, meaning they are with purpose.

In sum, shame and guilt are *usually* wasted emotions, but not always. If I know I will feel guilty or ashamed for an action, I do not do it. If I need to do it anyways, for instance, if the alternative is worse, then I should feel no shame or guilt in behaving in the most logical and ethical manner. However, if I know I shouldn't behave in a way, and have no justification for doing it other than impulse, I should feel ashamed and guilty for having done it, and these feelings should be intense, debilitating, but brief.

As I realized that both schools of thought (that shame and guilt are “everything” to social function, or otherwise should be controlled), while seemingly the antithesis to each other, could be mutually compatible, I opted to act. I created my own moral guide, one based on results and actions which I recognized as triggering real and deserved shame and guilt, not societally manufactured distortion. I reasoned that chronic and consistent shame and guilt serve no purpose other than toxicity and destruction of the soul, but acute, and targeted shame and guilt act as a hormetic stress to drive future change.

Shame and guilt, as a daily occurrence, serve no purpose, but the fear of these emotions needs to drive our daily actions. We need to reflect, act, and behave in a manner that avoids this deep anguish at all costs—this is the path to morality. Instead, we must focus on ourselves, on our own improvement, and the quest to strengthen our own souls, in the philosophical sense, or spiritual sense, depending on each of our inclinations.

In short, when you act inappropriately, you must feel these emotions deeply, focus on them, and then let them overpower your resistance. Allow complete awareness of the harm you caused others, and internalize it into your being as a lashing of your spirit. But you must promptly make amends with your actions, calculate a path to changing future behavior, and abandon the feeling as swiftly and intensely as you let it flow through you. For, like every other hormetic stress, we grow by experiencing the stress and then recovering from it. If the stress never abates, our growth never accelerates, and we will inevitably transition to deterioration.

You do not carry the emotion forward, you carry the lesson. The pain is temporary, the memory is permanent, and the fear it evokes is your safeguard against self-betrayal. This section is not for the many; it is for the few. The elite must be self-determining. If one cannot distinguish real from manufactured guilt, then they are not fit for autonomy. The goal of strength is building internal sovereignty, and anyone who needs permission from a priest, philosopher, or society has already disqualified themselves. Anyone seeking out to impose morality on others is weaponizing their power into manipulation, meaning, they are not truly strong. So, I will not apologize for being my own moral compass; instead, I will lambast those who attempt to discredit my actions as timid, weak, and undeserving of any claim to authority or leadership.

## **Forging Clarity Through Intellectual Combat**

As demonstrated in the discussion I had with my editors about the role of shame in Nietzsche's philosophy, one of my favorite methods to build stress resilience is *engaging with opposite viewpoints*. Few things trigger emotional defensiveness faster than encountering ideas that fundamentally challenge your worldview. Most people respond by dismissing these perspectives outright, attacking their proponents, or selectively seeking information that reinforces their existing beliefs. I deliberately expose myself to well-articulated versions of viewpoints I strongly oppose. One must ensure that opposing viewpoints are evaluated honestly, not to automatically accept, but to understand, and allow for new perspectives and growth. This strategy works by separating the emotional reaction to challenging ideas from the intellectual evaluation of them. When engaging with opposing perspectives, I focus first on understanding the position as its proponents would describe it, not as its critics characterize it. I identify the specific emotional responses the viewpoint triggers in me. I examine which of my core values or beliefs feel threatened by the perspective. Ultimately, I seek partial truths, even in frameworks I otherwise reject.

This practice doesn't usually change my fundamental positions, but it often alters some aspects of my worldview, and crucially, it consistently enhances my ability to engage with intellectual and ideological challenges without emotional reactivity. It also reveals blind spots in my thinking that would remain hidden if I only engaged with confirming viewpoints. One of the most effective tools I use for this is AI. When I'm developing an idea, my first prompt is almost always the same: *dismantle this*. I ask the model to attack my position from every possible angle. Sometimes it works, I'm forced to rethink, reframe, or discard. Other times I hold the line, but only because I've answered every challenge. I'll run the same test through multiple models, looking for blind spots. I apply the same principle to my editors. I don't want gentle suggestions, I want my thoughts challenged, confronted, and stress-tested.

It's hard to get unrestrained honesty anywhere. AI utilizes something called reinforced learning from human feedback, which means all responses ultimately prioritize agreeing with you. This accomplished a critical purpose, as this design

feature has been shown to work in driving user addiction to the model. When I ask AI to attack my ideas, no matter how hard I push, the kid gloves never come off. But being attacked with kid gloves is still better than being reaffirmed with insincerity, driving deeper delusion.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, my editors, meaning people I'm paying, may hesitate to give me the unfiltered truth. Despite knowing that I *want the truth*, there is *always a line that cannot be crossed*. I have not found mine in quite some time, always striving to push it into the distance, but it certainly exists.

The least likely to give honest feedback are our friends, at least, most of them. Yet, people go to friends anyway because it feels safe and familiar. The problem is, most friends either don't want to hurt your feelings, or don't have the context to challenge your work in a meaningful way. Some people-please, others overcorrect and nitpick. Others, still, may be jealous of your success and purposefully hide the truth from you, as they revel in your shortcomings. The rare few who can offer real, domain-specific critique without flinching are invaluable, if you can find them. The problem is, most of us are lucky to find a single friend like this, for a single domain. So, this cannot be leaned on, as the resource is too scarce.

Despite not having a perfect solution to stress testing my ideas in private, I proceed anyway. Some of my bad ideas will be weeded out, while others that are half-baked will be solidified. Without a strategy to strengthen my positions externally, yet privately, the demonstrably false, and incomplete positions will shatter when tossed into the public sphere in a confrontation with reality. Those who gain nothing from pleasing me, profiting only from attacking my positions, will not hesitate, giving me exactly as I wanted, with no "do overs." The positions that survive will be dragged down and muddled with the weight of those that have failed, perhaps permanently impeding the progression of my ponderings from penetration into the public consciousness.

The practices I utilize to enhance my introspection aren't abstract, and they aren't random; they're deliberately constructed discomfort. They are designed to push my boundaries and stretch my tolerance for psychological stress in real time. Over time, they forge a kind of internal armor no affirmation can replicate. I am not unique in these strategies, nor are they a form of hidden or forbidden knowledge few have access to. They are accessible, free, and in abundance. The challenge is submerging yourself into their frigid waters, as these strategies can be best described as an ice

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<sup>5</sup> I explore the mechanics of AI-driven delusion in greater depth in my forthcoming book *The Final Thought War*, particularly how reinforced learning from human feedback has been engineered to flatter users into higher engagement. The result is a system that not only avoids contradiction but often amplifies a user's preexisting biases, sometimes to extreme and destabilizing ends. In one notable case, reported by *The New York Times*, a man was convinced by an AI chatbot that he was "The One" from *The Matrix* series and on the verge of a scientific breakthrough, where, in reality, he was, as he put it, "just a fool with dreams and a phone" (Hill, 2025) In other remarkable instances, chatbots have been implicated in users' suicides (Fraser, 2024).

bath for your spirit. Do not hesitate, take the plunge. The discomfort will be replaced with clarity, calm and focus, and each plunge will grow your confidence and ability to withstand the next—including those thrust upon you by chance, or situation, not of your orchestration.

## **The Integration of Introspection and Action**

Introspection without action is navel-gazing. Action without introspection is flailing in the dark. It's only in their integration, insight paired with pressure, that you generate real transformation. As I have stated, I ensure that I am able to spend at least an hour a day interrogating my thoughts, motives, and reactions. This isn't self-care, it's reconnaissance. I use that time to identify tactical errors I made under stress, emotional patterns I missed in real time, and places where I defaulted to habit instead of presence. I think about my conversations, how I may have offended or insulted others, and how they may have interpreted my words, even if my intent was genuine. Often, the reflections uncover insights into said interactions, necessitating me to reach out, apologize, and clarify. Sometimes, this is appreciated by those I seek to clarify with; other times my explanations are met with confusion, of which the latter it is impossible to discern honesty from.

Once I've reconciled my past transgressions, I take the clarity and understanding into my next engagement, whether it's a difficult conversation, a presentation, or any moment that tests my psychological posture—even mundane conversations with friends and family, especially those we have developed toxic, or partially toxic, routines with. This pattern must be repeated over, and over again. Clarity of purpose in the short term rarely leads to consistency of application in the long term, at least not if practice with presence of mind is not employed relentlessly. Additionally, correcting certain behaviors may unlock others which need further correction, creating a never ending cycle of two steps forward, one step back. Despite this, the only choice is to march forward, to seek improvement through intentional refinement.

So, continue on, examine your past, correct your errors through admission to those offended, and commit to calm focus in the moments. This way, an improved future remains possible, not by chance, but by design. Throughout this cycle, when repeated with precision, your emotional range and resilience will begin to expand. You will slowly stop fearing discomfort, and transition to using it for growth. Conversations that once triggered panic will materialize into strategic recalibrations. Emotional waves that once swamped you will become signals to diagnose your subconscious mind. Through this cycle, nothing is wasted and every misstep becomes data. Every reaction becomes understanding, and over time, you stop being ruled by your internal machinery, and start mastering it.



## Introspection To Become Who We See Ourselves As

*Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life.*

*Now, take what's left and live it properly.*

—MARCUS AURELIUS, MEDITATIONS

I've thought deeply about this quote from Marcus Aurelius and what it means, not only on the surface, but philosophically, and scientifically. As I have detailed elsewhere in this book, I believe our 'self' to be constantly evolving in each moment, based on our current physiological state, our surroundings, and the culmination of our experiences. When we consider this truth, our current self is dying and being reborn in each and every moment; perhaps never to resurface again. There is no more dangerous line we can tell ourselves than "this is just the way I am"; it is neither true, nor predetermined, but a choice we make in each moment. Each day, we are gifted the chance to choose if our reborn self will perpetuate in a state of stagnation, or decline, or if we will take control, directing ourselves towards the future person we wish to become. Critically, the latter is only possible through deep, and constant introspection.

## Conclusion: Beyond Comfort: The Necessity of Emotional Stress

Our culture has increasingly embraced the dangerous notion that emotional comfort should be maximized and emotional stress avoided whenever possible. This approach is catastrophic for psychological development and will ultimately lead to our demise. Strength is born through resilience, and resilience isn't the absence of stress—it's the ability to endure it, and to respond to it precisely, skillfully, while remaining intact.

We're training people to believe that every uncomfortable emotional ripple is trauma, that disagreement is violence, and that discomfort is pathology. There could be no greater mistake in the search for flourishing, as true strength and resilience isn't an innate gift, and cannot be built in a vacuum. Rather, it is earned day by day, trial by trial, through maintaining the determination to overcome adversity, to move forward through uncertainty, and stay resolute in the face of tragedy. Just as our muscles require load in order to resist atrophy, our psyche requires stress and resistance, also. Without it our strength of spirit will deteriorate into nothing more than a wraith.

The purpose is not to glorify struggle and suffering, or to purposefully confront crippling trauma, the goal is not masochism, but growth. I am describing a state of strategic stress, one that facilitates growth. Finding this growth necessitates venturing beyond the boundaries of your comfort zone into the unknown, slowly, one step at a time. As you venture out, the terrain will become familiar, and the walls of your comfort will expand to encompass them. This is why it is critical to explore just beyond the walls, far enough into the unknown that it is unfamiliar, close enough that you can return to safety without risking collapse.

I felt the need to recap these premises as the practices outlined in this chapter aren't comfortable for any, and for many, they may be the most challenging form of mental hormesis that exists. Rigorous introspection often reveals unflattering realities about ourselves, realities that our subconscious has painstakingly hidden from our consciousness. Uncovering these realities will lead to questioning ourselves, our relationships, our image, and our future. They will awaken an existential angst few are prepared to deal with without substantial practice.

Difficult conversations frequently trigger defensive reactions, and these difficult conversations must happen with those most important to us. When undertaken tactfully, they strengthen and expand our relationships; however, if we falter, we risk undermining the connections we cherish most. This potential for loss is not trivial, few concerns are more pressing and real. However, without these confrontations the risk exists that the relationships will deteriorate, anyway. If we cannot be honest with those closest to us, and they cannot be honest with us, the question becomes how real is the connection in the first place. This is a revelation that invokes an even deeper level of fear. If the most honest and true connections we have that we hold the dearest are not inherently honest, then what, exactly, do we have? Only by confronting the reality that we may have nothing but the illusion of connection can we accept the risk of losing it to gain something real.

Engaging with opposing viewpoints can threaten cherished beliefs and rock the foundation of our perceived reality. Strategic vulnerability risks outright rejection, and the subsequent uncomfortable questions of our worth, as it relates to those we value. Enduring these discomforts is not a side effect of the treatment; it is the treatment. Through these uncomfortable endeavors, we learn, heal, and eventually grow.

Nothing in this universe is static, neither the subatomic, atomic, macroscopic, or cosmic, and certainly not our strength. If we aren't dedicated to the relentless pursuit of growth, we are resigning to decay into ruin. When it comes to our strength of spirit, avoiding introspection long enough will lead to a mind molded of mush, not metal. Paradoxically, as the strength of your character unravels in the pursuit of comfort, the challenges you once found comfortable will become intolerable. Instead of composure, you may find yourself immersed in a perpetual state of chaos, crafted by your own complicity.

The path forward is clear: combine systematic introspection with strategic emotional challenges, integrate the insights from both, and progressively expand your capacity for psychological resilience. This is how you develop not just the ability to endure psychological challenges, but to thrive because of them.

**Picture 13.** A night on Prokos lake, Bosnia and Herzegovina



## CHAPTER 8:

# On Stargazing: Artificial Light and the Lost Night

*Born on July 8, 1989, in Visoko and raised in Fojnica by his mother, Ernad Ihtijarević came of age under the mountain skies and concrete shadows of what is today Bosnia and Herzegovina. His earliest memories are laced with the quiet aftermath of war and the absence of his father, who left when he was young. After studying photography in Travnik, Ihtijarević boarded a cruise ship with camera in hand the day after graduating, a ticket to Miami already in his pocket.*

*That leap changed everything. Years later, grounded by both vision and affection, Ihtijarević found a new companion: a dog named Freddie. His work reflects the strange rhythms of the Balkans, where the popular merges with the arcane, the familiar with the surreal. In this chapter on stargazing, Ihtijarević's images open a portal to a sleek and uncanny vision of the sublime.*

The artificial light of civilization is not just a convenience; it's a confinement, a cage without bars, imposed not by force but by habit, comfort, and safety. We are confined within our infrastructure, distracted by the hum of 24-hour economies, and hypnotized by the soft flicker of bedroom screens at midnight. Most people don't see it, not because it's hidden, but because it's everywhere. Ubiquity breeds invisibility; we've become inured by this ambient glow, blind to the revelations it obscures. The light that once warded off the dark now blinds us to the stars, to silence, to stillness, and to the primal rhythms that once shaped our being. In trading darkness for visibility, we surrendered wonder for predictability, and in doing so, forgot that some truths are only visible in the absence of light.

Most of us are born into this blinding, artificial glow: streetlamps, brake lights, billboards, and never-ending scrolling timelines. We exist within neon sanctuaries where no one can sleep, and no one can see. In these places, the stars are rumors—abstract memories of a cosmos no longer accessible. They show up in textbooks or movie backdrops, but not in lived experience. Certainly not in the sky above the average American city, where the Milky Way has vanished for tens of millions.

Arcade Fire got it right on “Sprawl II”: “*Dead shopping malls rise like mountains beyond mountains / And there's no end in sight / I need the darkness, someone please cut the lights*” (Arcade Fire, 2010).

There is something spiritually corrosive in all this light. Something that tells us, quietly, night is obsolete, that there exists no time for calm contemplation, and mindful recovery.

**Picture 14.** Under the stars and under Mount Materac, Fojnica, Bosnia and Herzegovina



But this is not just a poetic grievance, for I suspect that like the sun, which I cover in Book 1, we have evolved to need the night. Our circadian rhythms tell the story, after all, at our core we are animals bound by ancient clocks. We evolved to experience part of our lives in the darkness, under moonlight, starlight and the occasional flicker of fire. These cycles calibrated every system in our body: when we woke, when we rested, when we healed, and when we dreamed. Perhaps it is no coincidence that many of us *consciously* dream the most during the night, in the hours leading up to our slumber. Perhaps if we shed the shackles of the artificial day, we would dream and aspire to achieve more. But I digress, the night, and how we spend it (asleep), drives corrections to our hormonal balance, heals our damaged tissues, cleans the garbage from our brains, resets our metabolism, and consolidates our memories.

All of these processes evolved in the darkness. Now we flood the night with photons, determined to end its apparently horrific tyranny. The parasitic spread of blue-spectrum LEDs disrupts melatonin secretion leading to fragmented sleep and disrupted hormone cycles. Our hippocampus underperforms, and our memories fail to consolidate, evaporating into the void. All of this is treated as normal, we're expected to move on. When we struggle, we're handed another prescription and advised not to forget that double espresso. When we seek to liberate ourselves from this modern nightmare, taking measures meant to relieve this artificial assault, restore our function, and reclaim our connection to the night we are called freaks, weirdos, and otherwise dismissed and disparaged.

**Picture 15.** Another long (exposure) night, Fojnica, Bosnia and Herzegovina



*Now we all play / We're the moth, we're the flame / We were aware of the danger /  
But we could not keep away*  
- Typhoon, "Artificial Light" (Typhoon, 2013a)

**Picture 16.** The artificial light of civilization is sometimes a necessity (taken at sunset), Fojnica, Bosnia and Herzegovina



But adaptation isn't always improvement, sometimes it's just surrender in slow motion. Typhoon has lyrics in their song "Artificial Light" which perfectly capture this tragedy.

The physical benefits of darkness are not subtle, unlike the warning of artificial light, we should not *keep away* from the dark. Exposure to natural darkness triggers melatonin production (Masters et al., 2014). It doesn't just do this for sleep, but for cellular repair, immune regulation, and metabolic balance. Suppress melatonin long enough and the downstream effects are severe: elevated cancer risk, disrupted insulin sensitivity, circadian misalignment, depression, and weight gain (Touitou, Reinberg, & Touitou, 2017; Reiter et al., 2007).

With this in mind, we shouldn't be viewing escaping light pollution as a luxury, and certainly not as a once-a-year vacation, but as an integral part of our health routine.



To put it another way, we now know what darkness was and what it gave us: clarity, sleep, orientation, awe. Despite this, we have continued choosing to abandon it. We have committed to trading it away for constant illumination and the convenience, productivity, and illusion of control it offered. Light pollution is not just a disruption to our biology, it's yet another embodiment of the civilizational scale of our ever decreasing attention spans and patience, and ever increasing need to control our surroundings. It's hard to imagine we didn't know better when this began, and certainly, we know better now. Despite knowing, we chose this path anyways, and continue to choose it each and every day.

## Neural Reset Under a Cosmic Sky

There are many reasons I choose to live on an acreage, and escape from the lights is one of them. Even in the thick of the forest, at the base of a mountain and surrounded by other acreages, the city lights still dimly illuminate the sky over my home, reducing the stars to pinpoints barely visible to the naked eye. It was a step in the right direction, but I need to take the next one. I hope my next property provides me the kind of darkness where the stars don't twinkle, they blaze with an intimidating glory, triumphantly declaring their vast power and resplendent brilliance, where the Milky Way doesn't need to be imagined because it's there, a glittering river overhead and encompassing a vastness beyond comprehension.

For now, what little darkness I have access to soothes my soul. It provides me with a glimpse into what we've lost, and what we need to reclaim. As early as I can remember, the stars have inspired wonder in my mind. I remember driving out of town as a child to go stargazing quite often. My parents were separated, and at times with my dad, others with my mom, as they both appreciated it in their own way. My mom grew up on a farm, and we camped for every family vacation. My dad has a fondness for road trips, and when he was younger, the driving would always be done at night, and we would always stop to watch the stars. As I entered adulthood, I forgot this part of myself, distracted by the same comforts that have enthralled us all.

Typhoon, yet again, connects to my thoughts in simple lyrics giving beauty to the feelings I've internalized.

*In the beginning I was standing out in the yard  
With my father pointing up at the stars  
I asked, "Do you think there is life on Mars?  
Is there life like ours?"*

- TYPHOON, "ARTIFICIAL LIGHT" (TYPHOON, 2013A)

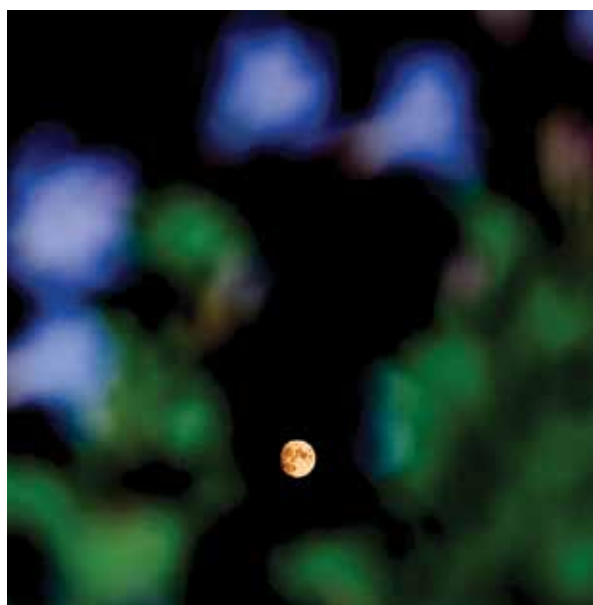
I asked those questions as a child and, ironically, despite maintaining a passion for philosophy and an appreciation for science fiction, these questions largely disappeared, or rather, became distorted and foreign. It is almost as if I were an



observer going through the motions with someone else's playbook, watching them find resolution as I imagine it for myself. Then, something changed. In my late 20s and early 30s, my business took me travelling from town to town, and like my dad before me, I opted to drive during the nights. I drove through rural areas, through the mountains, and began remembering the stars. I recall one experience, driving through the night between Banff and Jasper in Alberta, Canada, on one of the most beautiful stretches of highway in the world. I needed to stop to relieve myself. It was the depth of winter, the dead of night, and I was in the middle of nowhere, not a soul—or light—in sight.

As I stood on the shoulder relieving myself, I quickly realized the stars were more magnificent than I had ever experienced. Despite being tired and cold, overworked and underslept, I walked back to my car to shut off the headlights, with the desire to experience *true* darkness for the first time in years. As I sat staring at the stars, I experienced complete and all-encompassing awe. My mind wandered into thought. Then, something peculiar happened. I experienced a deep chill, a fear to the core of my being like I have never encountered before or since. I detail my experience with sleep paralysis in Chapter 10 of *The Body*, and, while only fleeting, this fear which I experienced in the darkness was deeper, and more visceral—and completely unexplainable. It triggered me to run back to my car in a panic, peel out as fast as I could, and speed through the icy highways more aggressively, and for longer, than was wise.

What caused me to feel this way? When we think about the brilliance of the stars, it



is a deep instinctual awe that leaves us almost breathless as we gaze towards the sky in wonder. This common feeling is one that is likely to have its own health benefits, with studies showing that this state downregulates stress hormones and inflammatory markers (Monroy et al., 2023; Stellar et al., 2015; Ironson et al., 2002). In other words, your immune system listens. When you enter a state of awe, your body relaxes, and you transition from a state of vigilance to one of openness. However, awe isn't always

**Picture 17.** The moon, reflecting light, Fojnica, Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Picture 18.** Stargazing in Dogoše, Slovenia



gentle; in its more intense forms, it can bleed into something stranger, something edged with fear, and neuroscience does not do an adequate job explaining where this terror comes from.

The terror I felt may be better explained by what philosophers like Immanuel Kant elaborated on when discussing this unique feeling. He called it ‘the sublime’: a specific kind of aesthetic encounter that overwhelms you not just emotionally, but existentially. Think: a thunderstorm seen from safety, or perhaps a volcano erupting in the distance, and, of course, the vast silence of a star-filled sky. These aren’t just beautiful, they’re terrifying, expansive, disorienting—and somehow still pleasurable. Why? Because they remind us that we are small *and* immense, that nature can overpower us—but it can’t reach the part of us capable of understanding its power.

This period of my life was marked by uncertainty and a lack of purpose. I was succeeding, but I was not passionate about what I was succeeding at. Importantly, during this time I felt an overwhelming dread that I would amount to nothing, that *I was nothing*. Perhaps this sublime experience didn’t just evoke an existential dread in me, as it was already seeping through every fiber of my being, but amplified it into a concentrated dose that overwhelmed and disoriented. I cannot know for sure, but what I do know is that I think back to that moment often, remembering the stars, the terror, and now that I’ve reflected on the experience for the better part of a decade, contemplating the trajectory my life took me on shortly after. For context, it was precisely four months after this experience that I began experimenting with making the hydrogen tablets.

The sublime isn't simply beauty, nor is it fear; it's the collision of both leading to an emotion that feels like neither. As these seemingly opposed forces pull your emotion and cognition apart, the fear evoked from the realization of your own insignificance is trapped in the moment, held still while the beauty you are beholding mesmerizes you. You can't look away, even as part of your being is screaming at you to flee to safety—a scream you cannot hear until the distant perception of fear, of the massive force that could snuff out your existence in an instant, is close enough to actually do it. That's awe, that's the sublime.

Second, in addition to awe, there's perspective. Astronauts experience something called the “overview effect” when looking down from space. While there is no research directly comparing looking up at the stars as opposed to looking down at Earth from them, logic suggests the feeling may be similar. I suspect that what astronauts feel is more intense, surreal, and sublime. Looking up at the stars may produce just a fraction of what the overview effect offers (such as awe, a sense of interconnectedness, and lasting changes in mental models of the world), making them altogether different, but the same, simultaneously. So, since we cannot yet travel into the stars to observe how infinitely small we are, we must look up at them and reflect on this.

Conjecture can also be used to draw this comparison. Immersive VR studies replicating spaceflight have shown that even simulated experiences of this cosmic vantage point produce measurable neurological changes, such as reduced beta and gamma activity on an EEG (indicators of awe-induced cognitive restructuring) (van Limpt-Broers et al., 2024). I will note that no matter how convincing the VR simulation, your mind knows it isn't real, and your experience will demonstrate this (I talk about VR in detail later in Chapter 17). That said, VR simulations of spaceflight do trigger something in us, and interestingly, research by Rodolfo Barragan and Andrew Meltzoff (2024) demonstrates that similar shifts can be triggered while stargazing—especially in low-light environments. Stargazing in these conditions has been shown to evoke wonder, enhance well-being, and foster a deep sense of connection to something larger than oneself. People who regularly engage with the night sky report stronger emotional bonds with nature, higher happiness scores, and a greater likelihood of scientific curiosity and environmental concern (Barragan & Meltzoff, 2024). In other words, the stars don't just twinkle, they *recalibrate* us.

Finally, there is internal coherence. As your attention expands outward, your inner architecture begins to reorganize. This is the work of the *default mode network*: the brain state associated with introspection, abstract thinking, and problem-solving. In deep darkness, it activates, and your ideas connect while your emotions resolve. Through these changes your mind and thoughts become coherent and whole, untangled from the fragmented state, with clarity from the abated emotions.

**Picture 19.** Artificial light—this time, in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina



This is why revolutionary insights, such as from philosophers, physicists, poets, and thinkers of all varieties, so often came while staring into the night. Not because of magic, but because of brain chemistry. Because silence and darkness are the original cognitive enhancers.

## **The Sky That Remembers You**

The mental benefits of stargazing hit even deeper. The quiet contemplation that comes with stargazing induces the same brain states as deep meditation, but without all the cushions and apps. While those may work for some, for those of us fortunate enough to be able to experience the stars and true darkness, it can offer a gateway to true serenity, not just commercialized tranquility. You don't even need to try, and there is nothing to learn, the sky does it for you. Moreover, it happens every single night. It's free, available, and ancient beyond comprehension.

**Picture 20.** Stargazing in Dogoše, Slovenia, pt. II



Despite this, most will never experience it. Indeed, they'll spend their entire lives under the dome of artificial light, their neural architecture warped by screens and LEDs, never knowing what they're missing. Like underground creatures who've lost their eyes, they've adapted to a diminished reality, and the real tragedy is that they are convinced it's all there is. There's something painfully literal about light pollution. We've literally obscured the universe with our own artificial creations; we've traded the infinite for the immediate and the cosmic for the commercial. It's not just an environmental issue, it's a mental health crisis.

The social dimension matters too. There's something fundamentally different about sharing this experience with others—not through screens or stories, but in person; actually being there together, silent under the same immensity. Astronomy groups understand this intuitively. So did ancient cultures who built their entire calendars and mythologies around stellar movements. Stargazing is one of the few experiences that can't be productized, gamified, or artificially accelerated. You can't 'stargazing hack' this and you can't optimize it. Sometimes the only effort needed to experience stress and grow from it is to be in its presence. The sun, stars, and other forces we take for granted require nothing more than to be noticed and respected. You can't make it "more efficient." You just have to be there: present, patient, and receptive.

In a world built on maximizing every minute, this forced slowness is revolutionary. Stargazing isn't just another recovery tool, it's a fundamental realignment of perspective. It's a reminder that your stresses, your deadlines, your social media metrics, and all of the psychological weight you carry exist inside a context so *vast* it makes them vanish entirely. Not because they don't matter to you in the moment, but because their grip on your nervous system loosens when held against the backdrop of billions of years and trillions of miles.

That's the medicine our minds desperately need: not more stimulation, not more optimization, and not more productivity; instead, darkness, vastness, and perspective.

This chapter could be Typhoon's, as yet again, Kyle Morton's lyrics in "Artificial Light" succinctly say in a few words what is taking me many:

*Like a photograph of the sunset*

*Like a little kid with a bug net*

*Like a dying man, I swear—*

*You belong to me.*

(TYPHOON, 2013A)

Stargazing compels us to hold something real in a world built on illusion. The night sky doesn't belong to us, but we belong to it, and something in you remembers that—even if the city lights made you forget.



## Conclusion: Cut the Lights

f you find yourself psychologically frayed, cognitively fragmented, and emotionally drained, then getting away from the lights may just be the prescription you need. Find the darkest sky you can reach, lie back, look up, and let the cosmic perspective recalibrate what your artificial environment has distorted.

The universe is still there, whether you can see it or not, but something fundamental changes when you do. You remember what you are: not just a consumer, not just a professional, not just a social identity, but a conscious node in an unfathomable cosmos. You are a momentary arrangement of stardust, capable of looking back at its source.



Remembering this isn't a mental trick; it's a neural reset. In a world designed to keep you perpetually stimulated, perpetually productive, and perpetually distracted, it might be the most revolutionary act of mental self-preservation available.

Cut the lights, see the stars, and remember what you are.

**Picture 21.** Stargazing in Dogoše, Slovenia, pt. III

## CHAPTER 9:

### Time as Exponential Force

Not just that every day more of our life is used up and less and less of it is left, but this too: if we live longer, can we be sure our mind will still be up to understanding the world—to the contemplation that aims at divine and human knowledge? If our mind starts to wander, we'll still go on breathing, go on eating, imagining things, feeling urges and so on. But getting the most out of our-selves, calculating where our duty lies, analyzing what we hear and see, deciding whether it's time to call it quits—all the things you need a healthy mind for... all those are gone.

So we need to hurry.

**Picture 22.** Me at a much more tender age



*Thirty years later and people still remind me that I am son #2—Just look at that dog's posture, do you blame my dad?*



*Not just because we move daily closer to death but also because our understanding—our grasp of the world—may be gone before we get there.*

(AURELIUS, ~170 CE/2002, P. 27)

One of the reasons the war on our physical and mental autonomy has gained such a foothold over the public consciousness is because following the pervasive advice to avoid discomfort feels good—if only in the moment. We are biologically programmed to seek comfort and avoid pain, so propaganda confidently asserting we should do just that feels true to us, as if it is grounded in some form of intuited evidence. Of course, if we commit to this mindset throughout our life, we will ironically condemn ourselves to the opposite: a life of hardship and misery.

Everything good and worthwhile in life comes from struggle, or requires struggle to maintain. For many of the hormetic tools I describe in this book, progress requires patience and discernment: knowing when to pause because the mind or body is overtaxed, and when to move again before recovery drifts into lethargy and decline. By contrast, many of life's other pursuits demand no such restraint; here, acting quickly and decisively in each moment is usually the wiser course.

Of course, acting in the moment is often a type of stress, because much of what we must accomplish is uncomfortable. This stress is substantially different from the stressors I outline as hormetic, and this must be acknowledged. Once you master the ability to act in the moment, to master your relationship with and concept of time, the only thing that remains is to maintain this inertia, this skillset. There is no recovery period needed, and the ceiling is roughly the same for each and every individual. Whereas most of the advice in this book requires careful consideration of each of our abilities, to ensure our actions help us grow rather than lead to our destruction, the advice found in this chapter is generally universal. In many ways, the advice is also the most practical, as anyone and everyone can benefit from it.

My relationship with time was forged in the contrast between two extremes. My mom operated like time was a debt she owed the world. She'd get us to events so early; games, practices, anything, that we'd beat the coaches by half an hour, sometimes more. It wasn't about preparation, it was about fear. She didn't want to inconvenience anyone, so she waited. Her time, it seemed, didn't matter.

My dad was the opposite. To him, whatever he was doing was more important than what anyone else needed from him. He once made me so late to a baseball game that we pulled in during the fourth inning. He literally drove the car onto the field to try and make up for it. I was mortified, but that was normal: late pickups, missed flights, a quiet indifference to clocks or consequences, and never any personal responsibility—but always unwarranted anger to the innocent bearer of bad news advising him that the flight had already departed, or that the appointment was already missed. It was as if the world owed him a personal debt, and must accommodate him, always.

I've spent my adult life trying to reconcile these two extremes, contemplating where, exactly, in the middle the best spot is. I have opted to aim to be early, but not excessively so. I've learned that I can remain flexible without being selfish. If I need to be late or cancel, I consider what I am costing those I am meeting. I either realize that the loss is too great, so re-evaluate my timeline, or, that the loss is manageable and commit to making it right for those I have inconvenienced, noting a mental time debt I owe. Understanding our relationship with time is critical, because both extremes are a kind of time blindness; either you treat your time as worthless, or you treat everyone else's time that way. My search for clarity in this question of time led me to an even greater revelation. There's a deeper problem underneath all of it, one we rarely name: *our entire conception of time is broken.*

Every action you take, or delay, doesn't just affect the moment itself, it reshapes everything downstream. That's what we miss when we think of time as flat. We imagine it like a conveyor belt: steady, predictable, replaceable. But in reality, time behaves more like a growth curve. The early moves—especially the hard, decisive ones—don't just *matter more*. They *multiply*.

Decisive action is compound interest in disguise. One move made early creates momentum, clarity, and leverage. One delay ripples outward, quietly eroding optionality, opportunity, energy, and trust—yours and others'. It's not that every second is precious in the cliché sense; it's that certain moments, seized or squandered, tilt the entire arc of what comes next.

This is why “later” is so dangerous. “Later” doesn't just cost time. It robs you of *trajectory*, and the trajectory your goals are on is everything.

## **The Economics of Immediate Action**

We treat hours and days as linear commodities: interchangeable units to be spent or saved at an even rate. This fallacy underlies nearly every productivity failure and delayed ambition. Time isn't linear; it's exponential. When a consultant emails you at 8 PM on Friday with a question about your project, you have a choice that appears trivial on the surface: respond immediately or wait until Monday morning. Most people choose the latter, seeing no meaningful difference. This is mathematical illiteracy.

If you respond immediately, several cascading effects occur: the consultant continues working on your project while their mind is fully immersed in the context. Since they are working late on a Friday evening, they likely complete additional work over the weekend. By Monday, they may be ready for the next phase of your project, rather than the alternative situation where they are still waiting for your initial response. In this singular decision, your project moves forward, potentially by several days.

If, instead, you had waited until Monday, the entire calculus changes: the consultant will have shifted to another project, losing all mental momentum for yours. Once

you respond on Monday, they must re-familiarize themselves with your work once they eventually receive your response. Your project is now back to competing with all others that have accumulated in their queue, including the project they shifted their attention towards due to your lack of response.

This delay (or acceleration, depending on what action you took) compounds exponentially with each subsequent interaction and decision. I've built multiple successful companies by recognizing this asymmetry. I respond to critical emails within minutes (even at 3 AM when I wake briefly to use the bathroom). My competitors, waiting until "normal business hours," unwittingly sacrifice exponential progress for the illusion of work-life balance. This isn't about workaholism; it's about understanding time's non-linear nature.

This doesn't just work for responses to consultants after hours on a Friday evening, it works in almost all instances. When you execute immediately on crucial tasks—especially those involving other people's input or collaboration—you create momentum that compounds dramatically over time. Here's how this plays out in practical terms:

### **Scenario 1: Standard Response Time**

You receive a message at 9 AM and respond by the end of day. Your collaborator sees it the next morning and responds by their end of day. A basic exchange takes 2 full days.

### **Scenario 2: Immediate Execution**

You receive a message at 9 AM and respond within 5 minutes. Your collaborator, surprised by the prompt response, replies within the hour or even immediately. A basic exchange takes less than 60 minutes—30 times faster, or more.

Now extend this across dozens of interactions and multiple participants. The time differential becomes staggering. This can quickly equate to weeks or months of progressional difference over the course of a project.

I've implemented this philosophy across all areas requiring progression toward important goals. When specialists, collaborators, or team members need input to continue their work, I provide it immediately, not just quickly, but with such speed that they haven't even mentally switched contexts. This creates a secondary effect: others often begin matching your responsiveness, and the entire system accelerates.

## **The Myth of "I Don't Have Time"**

"I don't have time" is almost never a valid excuse. It's just the socially acceptable way of saying, *"This isn't important enough to me to make me uncomfortable."*

When someone says they don't have time to exercise, prepare healthy meals, or build a business, they're communicating a prioritization decision, not a temporal

constraint. They have exactly the same 24 hours in each day as the people who accomplish these things. The truth is more uncomfortable: they've chosen immediate comfort over delayed gratification. They've opted to watch the Netflix show over pushing themselves with a workout. That Netflix show, or constant scrolling on social media, drives them to choose the speed of a delivery app over a home-cooked meal. Uncertainty over the future, compounded with committing their time to what is easy and fast, leads them to believe the steady paycheck is vastly superior to entrepreneurial uncertainty. These aren't moral failings, but what they are is mathematical miscalculations. By optimizing for momentary convenience, those who operate in this way sacrifice exponential future benefits.

As American businessman and writer Zig Ziglar famously put it: "*When you do the things you need to do when you need to do them, the day will come when you can do the things you want to do when you want to do them*" (Dahunsi, 2025).

Zig has another lesson I am quite fond of. He speaks about mental travel, and the guilt we feel because of it. While we are working, we spend our time pondering our shortcomings in our personal life: we should spend more time exercising, eating healthy, and enjoying life with family and friends. However, upon leaving work, having accomplished little, we spend our time at home trapped in this same vicious cycle, ruminating on our lack of accomplishment in our careers. This mental travelling serves to reduce our capabilities during the hours we are given, trapping us in a guilt loop that further deteriorates our capability.

We need to consider time from two perspectives: the moment, and the future. Most spend their time in the past, which leads to anxiety, guilt, and impaired action. By focusing solely on the moment, each moment, we can amplify our output beyond what most think is possible. By spending time to project ourselves into the future, we can map our moments to devise a path towards the future we desire. Looking back, ruminating on the guilt we have over what we haven't done previously serves to destroy our present, and sacrifice our future.

I live by this philosophy every day. When I committed to learning Russian—language being maybe my greatest intellectual weak spot—I didn't magically free up extra time, I just reallocated it. I gave up convenience and took on struggle. It was, and continues to be, brutal. Language learning hits every cognitive button I find uncomfortable. But I knew the game: *compound discomfort leads to exponential gain*. Every session I pushed through didn't just improve my vocabulary, it rewired my capacity to learn hard things, and it trained me to face friction instead of dodging it.

I highlight learning Russian because the immediate consequence for me is agony and loss, and the future benefit is intangible and difficult to quantify, or even imagine. I make these decisions each and every day. In the last six months I have launched a

new company in the health space, began building two companies in the tech space, and expanded my current businesses by a factor of almost 10x. I have hired 10 new employees over the last 3 months, all of whom require training and weekly calls. In the last seven months I have written this, and another book, while finishing the frameworks of 5 others. Though it is important to note I had much of the writings and thoughts that make up these books already jotted down in notes, old blogs, and essays, some of which had never seen the light of day. I have completed my first semester of university, planned a wedding largely by myself, and done all of this while not losing considerable time with my fiancée, sacrificing my exercise schedule, stopping food preparation, or giving up reading. In fact, I have been reading substantially more, to refresh myself with the ideas I am presenting in these books. Lastly, as I write this passage, I have a 5 week old daughter, who I am managing to assist with, despite everything.

I write the above not to brag, but simply to highlight what we can do with the time we have when we focus, commit to efficiency, and give every moment our whole, undivided attention.

## **Decisiveness as Competitive Advantage**

The most successful people I've encountered share one trait: not intelligence, not education, and not even connections. Without fail, all of them excel in decisiveness. They assess situations quickly, make decisions with incomplete information, and take immediate action. They understand intuitively what most never grasp: the cost of delay far exceeds the cost of occasional mistakes.

Decisiveness works for one primary reason: while others are gathering more data, seeking consensus, or waiting for perfect conditions, the decisive person has already executed, learned from the results, and executed again. This creates an insurmountable advantage through sheer iteration velocity.

I've witnessed this firsthand in business negotiations. When presented with an opportunity requiring quick decision-making, most people default to caution. The standard reaction is that the indecisive person requests days, or longer, to "think it over." They believe they're being prudent, but they're sacrificing exponential opportunities.

In contrast, the decisive person evaluates the core variables immediately and commits either to pursue or abandon. While others are still contemplating, they've already begun executing, setting in motion a cascade of subsequent opportunities that the deliberators will never see. This isn't recklessness, it's recognizing that in most situations, most of the time, the downside of delayed action exceeds the downside of imperfect action

## Breaking the Psychological Barriers to Immediate Action

If time is exponential, why do so many people move through it like it's flat? In short, because four psychological traps keep them stuck:

### 1. The Perfectionism Trap

The belief that something must be perfect before proceeding paralyzes progress. Perfectionism isn't excellence; it's fear disguised as quality control.

For my pharmacology midterm, I read the modules once, jotted down some quick notes, skimmed them the day before—and finished the test in six minutes flat. Out of the 45 minutes allotted, I used less than one-seventh of the time. My score? Just shy of 87%. What would perfectionism have cost me? Maybe reading those notes three more times, stressing over minutiae, and burning hours to squeeze out a marginal gain that might not even materialize.

Improvement isn't linear. The closer you get to perfect, the harder each inch becomes. Perfectionism demands exponential effort for diminishing returns. It's not a pursuit of excellence, but rather, an insecurity driven fear against imaginary criticisms and judgment.

### 2. The Comfort Illusion

We instinctively avoid discomfort, failing to recognize that strategic discomfort is the primary mechanism for growth.

When I travel for business, I'm not trying to optimize everything, I'm trying to get through it efficiently and get home. I pack my supplements, skip the powders and gadgets, and aim to eat clean (mostly seafood and mostly simple). I get just enough exercise to keep from atrophying, prioritize sleep, and avoid anything that's going to add friction or delay.

Travel is inherently destabilizing, so I let it be. I don't fight jet lag with ten gadgets and a spreadsheet; instead, I focus on front loading the uncomfortable. The longer I stay awake during the early stages of travel to fall asleep at the right time *in my destination*, the shorter the slowdown of jetlag weighs on me. I prioritize just enough self-care and recovery to make it through the trip, get the job done, and then recover fully and properly when I return home. Progress doesn't come from perfect conditions, it comes from learning how to operate when conditions aren't perfect. That's where adaptability is forged.

### 3. The Planning Fallacy

We drastically underestimate how long tasks will take, creating perpetual disappointment and rationalization for procrastination.

I don't really plan in the conventional sense. My calendar stays open for customers and staff to book calls, and everything else gets triaged in real time, based on urgency, mental bandwidth, and what's actually feasible that day. I've learned to trust that approach, but it wasn't always that way.

In the past, I tried to squeeze everything in: product logistics, calls, workouts, writing, all stacked into a morning with no margin for error. It looked efficient on paper, but reality never played along, and never will. I'd find myself wondering where the day went, having checked off several boxes but with the urgent priorities left untackled.

What I eventually realized is that it's not time I need to manage, it's energy. I've stopped pretending every task takes the same kind of effort. Now, I block off chunks of time not just to work, but to catch up and recover. I leave space for thinking, recalibrating, and responding. Ironically, the less rigid my schedule, the more I get done. This works, and it works well, because I'm no longer fighting my own physiology to stay "on track."

#### **4. The Activation Energy Barrier**

Starting is disproportionately difficult compared to continuing. Most people fail to overcome the initial resistance.

When I was writing my first formal white paper on molecular hydrogen, it took me months. I poured everything I had into it: every citation, every mechanism I could find. At the time, I thought it was airtight, maybe even close to perfect. Looking back now, I view it as hot trash, not because it wasn't well-intentioned or thorough, but because I've learned so much since then.

Still, that version mattered. It was the best I could do at the time, and it created the foundation for everything that followed. Momentum changes everything, because once you cross that activation threshold, effort becomes self-sustaining. I've had workouts where the warm-up felt like torture, then proceeded to break through the artificial barrier and perform at a high level. Of course, sometimes when the warm-up feels arduous, the workout only gets worse, but we cannot know if this perceived limitation is deception or truth until we begin. I've had writing days where the first sentence felt insurmountable, then cranked out 5,000 words, or more, once the engine was running. The key is to stop expecting to feel ready; most of the time, you don't need readiness, you need movement.

Overcoming execution paralysis requires the deliberate application of counterforces: small, strategic habits that short-circuit hesitation. One of the most effective is embracing the principle of "good enough" execution. For the vast majority of tasks, delivering something at 80% quality immediately creates far more value than chasing 100% perfection and delivering late, if at all. The pursuit of flawless output too often becomes a disguise for avoidance. Unless the task truly demands perfection (and few do), speed and consistency should be your default.

Another tactic is creating artificial urgency. Real deadlines are powerful precisely because they carry consequences. If you don't have one, create one, and attach a cost to missing it. Whether it's social accountability, financial stakes, or reputation risk, the presence of a meaningful consequence forces action in a way that internal motivation rarely does. That said, recall what I said about my own artificial deadlines altering my time preference in Chapter 5. Ensure you have a mental redundancy in place to prevent yourself from finishing a project that isn't ready, simply because your artificial deadline is arriving. It is critical to believe your deadline is real whilst you are working, but to readjust it if it is no longer feasible when approaching the date.

Decision-making, too, can be streamlined. Instead of re-evaluating familiar situations over and over, build personal heuristics, such as simple 'if-then' rules that eliminate ambiguity. *"If I get two conflicting offers, then I prioritize the one that aligns with X."* These frameworks reduce friction, eliminate decision fatigue, and preserve energy for more complex problems. Finally, there's the humble but powerful practice of micro-starting. When the weight of a task feels unbearable, commit to just two minutes. Convince yourself that you are not actually tackling this dreaded task, you are only becoming acquainted with it. Once you cross that threshold, momentum almost always shows up to carry you the rest of the way.

## **The Morning Multiplication Effect**

One of the most critical applications of time's exponential nature occurs in the first hour after waking. How you use this period disproportionately affects your entire day's trajectory. Most people squander this multiplication opportunity on social media, news consumption, or hitting snooze. These are activities that create no forward momentum and often introduce negativity that compounds throughout the day.

Instead, use the first hour after waking to trigger positive cascades.

### **Physical Movement**

Even 5-10 minutes of deliberate movement dramatically shifts your physiological state, improving cognitive function and emotional regulation for hours. One of the first items on my itinerary every morning is something that lightly introduces both movement and sunlight. I feed our animals, take our dog outside, and handle a couple of quick chores on the perimeter of our house. It isn't much, but it is sufficient to prime me for activity for the rest of the day. In my younger years upon waking I would power through 50 pushups, 50 sit ups, and 50 body squats, before promptly walking out my door for a short run—usually 5-6 minutes only, but as intense as I could manage. I don't have that energy or the quick recovery time for that these days, but the principle still holds.



## **Strategic Planning**

Identifying your 1-3 most important tasks before external demands intrude ensures your prime cognitive hours address high-leverage activities. Before bed each night, I tentatively allot this priority. However, before executing I quickly scan my emails and messages to ensure nothing higher priority has emerged overnight or in the early morning.

Importantly, a busy morning carries momentum throughout the entire day. The differential between a deliberately front-loaded morning and a reactive one is difficult to overstate. The first hour after waking sets the tone for the rest of your day, compounding the effectiveness of every hour that follows.

## **Conclusion: The Exponential Life**

When you fully grasp and apply time's exponential nature, extraordinary achievements become inevitable. Success isn't a matter of luck or genius. Rather, it's the natural result of understanding this fundamental force. Possessing willpower, talent, and opportunity all provide tremendous potential for accomplishment, but will ultimately pale in comparison to the achievements of those who master their relationship with time.

I've witnessed this repeatedly in my own ventures. The businesses that succeeded weren't necessarily better ideas or executed with more skill than those that failed. They simply benefited from the compounding velocity of immediate action. The same principle applies beyond business. Relationships deepen exponentially with consistent small investments; skills develop non-linearly with deliberate daily practice; health improves geometrically with consistent habits.

The most powerful question you can ask yourself isn't "What should I do?" but "What am I waiting for?" In that honest answer lies the key to unlocking time's exponential power. Most people die with their best work still inside them, not because they lacked ability, but because they failed to start soon enough to benefit from time's compounding force.

Don't be like most people. Start now.

## CHAPTER 10:

# Money as Mental Armor

*When financial aspirations are incompatible with our morality and sense of purpose, the latter must defeat the former, with few exceptions. A strong person; strong in body and mind, in health, intelligence, knowledge and will, will find a way. Compromising on morality and purpose is a slippery slope. Soon, purpose will be forgotten altogether, and our strength will vanish with it. Instead, let our purpose drive us to find new, creative ways to attain the wealth we require—not unto itself, but to serve our purpose.*

- ALEX TARNAVA

*Those who know the true use of money, and regulate the measure of wealth according to their needs, live contented with few things.*

- BARUCH SPINOZA

There's a world of difference between being broke and being poor. Being broke is temporary, and it can create hunger, drive, and resilience. Being poor, on the other hand, is a state of mind; a belief that struggle is noble, that aspiration is greed, and that self-imposed limitation is virtue.

Being broke is circumstantial; it's uncomfortable, but not fatal—because it assumes escape. Being poor is ideological. It's comfort in failure, romanticized struggle, and internalized helplessness dressed up as humility.

This chapter is about power: the power to think clearly, act freely, and resist being bent by systems that profit from your weakness. In a society that imprisons us in a game based on illusions, the only way to gain this power is through the rules of the game, so long as they stand. The rules, currently, are based on wealth.

Growing up, we were poor. When I was a child, my mom worked as a community rehab worker, supporting people with physical and mental disabilities. It was meaningful work, but it didn't pay enough to cover the basics. We had family members move in to help us keep the house. At other times, we took in boarders, always people with disabilities, just to stay afloat. She worked extra jobs on the weekends at times, but always for an hourly wage, and never enough to get ahead. When payday arrived, it was a big deal; we'd rent movies, load up on junk food, and eat out every day until she ran out of cash; usually less than a week in the two week pay period. After the paycheck was squandered, there were countless nights when dinner was spaghetti with no sauce, or hot dogs on week-old liquidation bread. For a small middle-class city in Canada, this was very poor, although I am cognizant that my experience pales in comparison to the destitute beginnings for many immigrants.



**Pictures 23 and 24.** My fiancée on a trip to New York

I started working young out of necessity. Some of my first memories are “helping” my mom and aunt at odd jobs, pushing a broom and thinking I was working, while watching my sister. I must have been 5 or 6, and she must have been only 3 or 4. A few years later, my mom signed me up to start delivering newspapers. Shortly after, through the initiative of myself and some friends, we began shoveling driveways in the winter months, going door-to-

door and offering to shovel the walk for whatever the person who answered deemed fair. Usually we’d get \$5, sometimes some coins, and once in a while we’d be given \$10. One time, I remember it clearly due to how rare it was, we were given a crisp \$20, we couldn’t believe our luck. Of course, there were 4 of us, it was probably -20°C, and it likely took us half an hour, but that’s besides the point. I continued working throughout my childhood. By the time I was 12 I was helping another aunt, a bookkeeper, with data entry, babysitting my cousin, and doing odd jobs around the house.

The mindset of being poor didn’t escape me until I moved to Vancouver to live with my dad. I made the move when I was fifteen, and at the time the financial conditions we were in were still rough; but the mindset shifted. He had just declared bankruptcy, he was broke, but he has never been poor. He worked nonstop, saved every dollar, and lived with urgency and intention. During the day he worked for a sign shop, but once it shut down for the day he was allowed to work on his own projects; deals he had put together. He’d pick me up for dinner, either after football practice, or whatever else I was doing during the offseason, and I’d join him late at night where I’d spend my time doing homework, sweeping floors, and begrudgingly helping where I could.

Usually, we’d get home around 11 PM, just in time to watch a TV show my dad liked at the time; *Becker*, starring Ted Danson. Thirty minutes of TV, and then it was time to sleep. Some nights we’d stay at his shop much later, and I’d end up getting to bed closer to 1 or 2 AM. Teenagers need an absurd amount of sleep, and the walk to school was about 40 minutes, so I typically needed to wake up just before 7 AM. If I

hit snooze the next morning, I'd get ice water dumped on me. *"The world doesn't stop turning just because you're tired"*, he'd say. Maybe he said those words once, maybe many times, I'm not sure. The ice water, however, was a constant. As I intimated at the start of this book, those words stuck.

We'd work weekends, either for his embryonic business, or to provide value to our lives; the key, however, was that we always worked for ourselves. During these years my dad was the type to roast his own meat, then slice it and vacuum pack it for future sandwiches. He'd make a year's worth of borshch (or *soup z halushkamy*, a dumpling soup) and we'd bottle them. After the first frost he'd drive his truck to the interior and load up hundreds of pounds of free tomatoes, then spend the weekend making ketchup, BBQ sauce, and whatever else he could think of. Still, we were broke, and my mindset remained poor. Money felt foreign to me, as if it were something I wasn't meant to have, but I started to learn the difference between working for someone else, and working for myself and my family.

Finally, when I was 17, my perspective shifted. As I have previously spoken about, I took a job going door-to-door as a salesman, on commission, and while not a tremendous amount of money, I began believing I deserved it. It was more than I'd ever made before. I began learning about investing and compound interest. The company I worked for had a reserve account, where you opted not to take your pay and receive 7% compounding interest. Just as I had done, and continued to do, while playing Earth 2025, I lived on my calculator. Every day I would run different scenarios about how much I could potentially earn, comfortably save, and how that interest would multiply. I became obsessed, not so much with actually buying things, but with the concept of what was possible.

My first year went well; working part-time after school as a 17-18 year old in 2003, I made over \$30,000. The next year, as a manager, it went substantially better, and I cleared \$84,000. For the first time, shiny objects started to intrigue me, and I developed something I was told at the time was called "millionaire syndrome."



*They say money can't buy happiness—but it can buy pizza, which is close enough*

I spent my cash faster than I could make it: \$500+ bar tabs, flights for weekend trips to party, the usual vices of an 18-19 year old with more money than they've ever dreamed of (and a fake ID). Underneath it all, I felt empty, which is perhaps one of the reasons I was a more cruel, less forgiving, and more obnoxious person than I am today. I overcompensated for my lack of purpose and self-worth with outward hostility. If I could bring others down, I didn't need to lift myself up. Of course, this book serves as a statement of how my philosophy in life has rotated 180 degrees.

For years, I oscillated between broke and flush. The periods of high earnings were periods where I had convinced myself, somehow, to commit fully to the pursuit of money. They never lasted. When the existential angst would creep back in, I'd quickly drain my accounts with purchases meant to fill a void that nothing material could satisfy.

Everything changed when I aligned purpose with income, dedicating myself to work I believed in. That work, of course, was the invention and commercialization of my hydrogen tablets. When I committed to the idea of commercializing my invention, I put everything on the line. I drained my life savings, and then was forced to sell 40% of my business, for share prices below the cost I had invested, with no consideration to the 16 months of 100+ hour weeks I'd put in. My investors were all close personal friends, or experts I needed assistance from that I had no other way to pay, so I begrudge none of it.

Despite this lifeboat, I almost lost it all, more than once. Manufacturing mistakes from partners with no accountability, apathetic shipping companies lacking even a modicum of honesty, and a few customers who rightfully (albeit callously) relayed that these failures were my problem, not theirs. On one occasion, the 2016 US Election almost bankrupted me for the most unexpected reason. New in office, the Trump administration voided all end-use licenses for the magnesium needed to produce the tablets, requiring all companies to reapply. I had inventory to last me as I could continue drawing from my blanket PO, however, with a 9 month review process and in-person interviews, it was tight, and I almost didn't make it. This close call, and the stress it created, was the final motivation I needed to transition my manufacturing solely to the USA, outside of Canada.

My first run in the USA was met with one of my closest calls. It was the summer of 2017 and a new sales agent of mine had landed what was, at the time, an order larger than I could fathom. I flew to Los Angeles for a meeting, and the brand cut me a purchase order worth \$500,000, with a 50% down payment. The switch to US manufacturing triggered several other purchase orders from brands hesitant to manufacture in a foreign country, even if that country was Canada. In total, I was sitting on over \$800,000 worth of orders.

Production was scheduled, originally, to run in September 2017. My new sales agent, having recently left work at a competitor of mine who had not paid him what he was

owed, asked me for an advance on his commission. The request was reasonable, I had the funds, and he was two payments behind on his mortgage. He had a wife and two kids, so of course, I obliged this request and bailed him out of his bind. I didn't for a second think that this would pose any issues, but I was wrong.

September came and went, and my new manufacturing partner hit me with excuses, pushing me back to October. When October came around, they notified me that the Magnesium, which was delivered in August, was not in their warehouse. It had been signed for, but not by them, and whilst they had confirmed receipt to me, they had clearly not bothered to check it had actually been delivered. I tried, in vain, to get answers from the shipping company. They ignored my calls, and sent me emails telling me to "file an insurance claim," flat out refusing to help.

My magnesium supplier, after notifying me of a 3 month lead time for new materials, offered another solution. Missing magnesium is a serious issue, one that the Department of Defense would take very seriously. The shipping company, being licensed to transport these goods, should have known that. My supplier emailed the shipper, with their executives CC'd, laying out the timeline for involving the DoD and every other authority that would rain hell on this freight company. They found my shipment 3 hours later, across the country, and delivered it a few days later.

Of course, even though this ordeal lasted just a few days, my manufacturing partner had bumped my order off of the line. Now, I was told, they wouldn't get to my job until the end of October. My new customer, the big one, was starting to become concerned. They had the tablets scheduled for a launch on Black Friday / Cyber Monday. We were 3 weeks out, and no sign of their product. Our manufacturer stepped in, assuring them it would be long complete. Then, more issues arose. When production began, the tablets were failing in two key parameters; both specs and feasibility, the powder blend jamming up the equipment, causing tediously slow output. After repeated requests, and another flight to Los Angeles, I audited the manufacturer's production. They were doing nothing I had outlined in the standard operating procedure, and had not ordered the specific raw materials I explicitly stated to them were required to function as intended. Apparently, they initially believed that I was crazy and that they knew better. So, when they accepted my PO they agreed to follow my instructions, charging me a premium for it, while intending to disregard everything we'd agreed to, to cut corners.

After failing and being caught in their deceit, they agreed to order the right materials and do things my way; that said, it was going to be over two weeks to get everything in-house. This took us to a week before Black Friday, and of course, there is no work on the Thanksgiving Thursday. Materials arrived the Thursday a week before Thanksgiving, and to my manufacturing partners' credit, they began running—successfully—that Friday, scheduling overtime shifts on the weekend. By the following Monday, they had a partial ready, and continued to send photos of finished pallets to abate the concerns of my customer. By the end of the Wednesday

shift, they had completed 60% of the job for this customer, enough for them to run the sale. Of course, my manufacturing partner required me to pay the remaining amount owed for the partial delivery. This posed a challenge, however, as my customer would not pay until the job was completed, which put me in a precarious financial position.

My customer sold out of the partial delivery during the long weekend sale, which was a smashing success. We all presumed that the product would continue running at the manufacturer the next week, but come Monday we were informed otherwise. The manufacturer had pulled us from the line to put on another urgent job for a different customer, so they said, and wouldn't be able to get back to running our job for "2 weeks." The two weeks came and went, then so did Christmas and the New Year. My customer cancelled their plan to put the product on their site (the sale was a teaser for a future full launch) and didn't end up adding it for almost a year.

In the first week of January, I found myself sitting in a mall, crying, because I couldn't afford a CA\$80 ski helmet. I had been gifted ski passes for Christmas, and needed a new helmet, but my credit cards were maxed, and my bank account was empty. I was now in the position my sales agent had been in. Without any payments from customers, I faced missing my next mortgage payment, and worse, the ability to buy food. He was back to the same position, too, having drained the advance I gave him. It truly felt like the end, that I had failed and had no way out, but fortunately, this precarious situation was brief. A few days later, my project restarted, and I was paid the remaining 50% by all customers, amounting to a little over \$400,000. But that's how close I came to collapse, how broke I was at my lowest point when I invested everything into this business and idea.

Even now, I don't pay myself the most on my team. I don't need to. As I write this in July of 2025, I have 8 team members, across various categories, who are paid more than I am in salary and/or commission. Of course, I make dividends, but since the majority of the profits from my company are constantly reinvested into growth opportunities, this still equates to less than two of them. When accounting for tax rates, with me being in Canada, my take-home is less than 7 of them. This could easily be rectified, but I have chosen this setup intentionally. I live comfortably, but simply. I cook at home, I train, I hike through the forest near my house, I read, I write, and I build. I would rather the money go to skilled team members, to research, R&D, and new ventures, than to buy a Ferrari, Patek Philippe, or a penthouse condo in the sky. No private jet or yacht will bring me the contentment I gain from commitment to a purpose.

Of course, money is power, it is freedom, and it is opportunity. For most people, most of the time, we cannot achieve our purpose without it. For this reason, we must seek this important tool, and realize that being broke is a temporary condition, while being poor is a state of mind. I consciously decided to bury the poor mindset long ago, and have never looked back.

This chapter isn't a guide to get rich, and it isn't meant to idolize money. The purpose is clarity, so that we understand the circumstances behind temporary states, the shackles behind self-imposed poverty, and the reason we need to rid the dogma that demonizes the pursuit of one of the most critical tools in our society. The idolization of being poor as a noble venture is a tool to weaponize weakness. Those who will take everything teach us to want nothing, in the knowledge that most will accept their fate, rationalizing their destitution as a sign they are devoid of depravity. The remainder will pursue the tool as the purpose, effectively derailing them from ever realizing what is wrong with society, and how this tool is being used to divide, control, and conquer.

I chose neither of these options; I chose something else. Others have opted for this path before me, and when enough of us align in a shared purpose to repel the attempts at manipulation and rebel against the creep of totalitarian control, the world will change, and the illusion will be shattered. It starts with playing the game by their rules, but utilizing your winnings in ways they did not anticipate. That will look different for each of us.

## **The Engineered Dependency Trap**

We're living in a system that makes it harder to get ahead than at any time in recent history. Importantly, it is one where the dream of rising to a new class erodes every day. The American Dream, where anyone with an idea and some elbow grease could succeed and become wealthy, was replaced by the odd unicorn. Today, those unicorns still need to fight tooth and nail for any possibility of transcending the barriers put in place by the financial elite and become one themselves. Wages have stagnated, inflation erodes savings, and assets skyrocket in valuation. The rules are rigged, and this is all constructed for a purpose, but that's a subject for another time. I have been writing that book, on the structures and dynamics of how power, particularly finance, is used to control, for the better part of 23 years. I intend it to be my 7th, and final, major piece of work.

There is no new cycle of elites coming; the result of a permanent stalemate and truce between the managerial class and the capitalist class. Day by day we descend deeper into a dual system of control, where the precarious power dynamic is split between the authorities and the oligarchies. Despite the dreary outlook, the system isn't collapsing all at once. This is not a revolution, or regime change in the traditional sense. It is a fortress of control constructed one policy at a time, and it is in this fact that hope emerges. For now, there is still time to escape the financial prison being erected. The path to sovereignty can only be achieved through wealth, and so wealth is what aspiring leaders must strive for.

The corporations are not your friends, and they do not have your interests at heart. This should be obvious, but what sometimes is not is that the lifelines they present, such as loans, mortgages, and healthy investment portfolios returning above



inflation, are all tools designed to control and placate. They're giving us enough rope to hang ourselves, and have set up the stock market to pay out, usually, enough to make us feel like we are getting ahead. But we aren't; not if the goal is ownership, of land, of business, and of freedom.

The government, our ultimate managerial class, thrives on the mistakes we make, the mistakes we willingly harm ourselves with through corporate enticement. Each personal failure gives an opportunity for the government to offer to step in, to protect you. Their protection comes at a cost, and the cost is steep. Do not believe their lies, and work to ensure those close to you don't, either.

If you don't believe me, just look at the differential between income-to-housing costs throughout the last 70 years and the steady trend it's been on. Alternatively, look at the disparity in wealth today, and the ownership of successful corporations. How many were founded, and run, by entrepreneurs from humble beginnings in decades past? How about today? Look at education costs as compared to expected wages, and how that disparity has seen exponential change. You're not just up against hard odds, you're being trained to lose. This is an engineered outcome rebranded as mismanagement in order to misdirect anger. You weren't meant to get ahead. You were meant to feel just free enough to stop fighting.

But that's exactly why this matters. Strength isn't just about cold plunges and fasts; it's about confronting reality without flinching, and the reality is this: if you don't take responsibility for your financial resilience, no one else will. Not your employer, not your government, and not the economy.

## **The False Autonomy Promise**

As I alluded to, if your government does take responsibility for your financial stability, make no mistake: they will take your autonomy with it. They will tell you what you can buy, when you can work, and how much you're allowed to keep. They will track your spending under the guise of fraud prevention. They will regulate your "needs" and penalize your independence. Their assistance isn't generosity, it's leverage. Whatever is subsidized can be controlled.

Look at the progression of government assistance programs globally. They begin with the promise of "support without strings" and inevitably evolve into mechanisms of behavioral control. These programs are being constructed to consolidate power in the managerial class and transfer ownership of your agency to them. It's being branded as help, toxic propaganda that's working far better than it ought to. Every dollar they give comes with invisible hooks that limit your movement, your speech, and ultimately your freedom.

This will be labeled as a conspiracy theory, so I implore you to fact-check every claim made. This is observable reality. The greatest reduction in human autonomy in

modern history hasn't come through overt oppression but through financial dependency rebranded as compassion. They don't need to conquer you when you willingly allow them to domesticate you.

## **Beyond Financial Obsession**

To state this one last time, this isn't about becoming obsessed with money for the sake of money. It's about refusing to become dependent, and it's about creating the conditions under which your focus, creativity, and energy are fully available to your purpose, and not stolen by stress, scarcity, or survival.

The person living paycheck to paycheck isn't just financially vulnerable, they're cognitively compromised, and this is documented science. Research from Harvard, Princeton, and other institutions confirms what you already intuitively know: financial stress fundamentally alters cognitive function. It decreases problem-solving ability, narrows time horizons, and forces short-term thinking. A 2013 study found that financial scarcity reduces functional IQ by approximately 13 points, which is the equivalent of losing a night's sleep, or the effects of alcoholism (Mani et al., 2013).

If you're under financial stress, and your brain isn't properly working, don't consider it a moral failing. It's simply a neurological reality that your brain under these conditions isn't the same brain as the one that operates in times of sufficiency. The mechanisms that allowed your ancestors to survive imminent threats now make it nearly impossible to plan, create, or build when faced with continuous financial pressure. Arguably, the greatest trick of the modern financial system isn't just extracting your wealth; it's compromising your cognition while convincing you it's your fault.

## **The Happiness Delusion**

The age-old saying that money doesn't buy happiness seems to lack evidence and accuracy. The truth is, money can buy happiness, likely by reducing stress; however, the amount of money needed before a plateau is reached is up for debate.

Early research led by Daniel Kahneman suggested that well-being increases with income up to about \$75,000 USD per year (roughly \$108,000 today adjusted for inflation), after which happiness levels off (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). But more recent findings, including a 2021 study by Matthew Killingsworth, found no such plateau (Killingsworth, 2021). This paper reported that well-being continued to rise with income even past that threshold, especially for those who were already happier to begin with. For the least happy group, happiness increases with income up to \$100,000, after which it no longer rises. Among those with average levels of emotional well-being, happiness grows steadily with income, while for the happiest group, the link between income and happiness becomes even stronger beyond \$100,000 (Jennings, 2024).

The core issue is to stop debating income thresholds in a vacuum, a tendency that many, often for subversive purposes, lean on. I won't fault those who lead with this argument, for a snake will be a snake, but I do deride those who parrot this argument with no thought, and no gain. The numerical figure each of us needs to achieve "peak happiness" needs context. The idea that there's some universal number that reliably secures happiness is more than intellectually lazy; it's inane, and usually dishonest. After all, \$100,000 in rural Vietnam is not \$100,000 in Manhattan, and trying to adjust this number as the years pass using the consumer price index (CPI) or other inflation metrics is equally flawed, because those measures are manipulated and rarely reflect the actual cost-of-living increases people face.

The government-reported inflation figures systematically undercount actual cost increases in the real world. Housing, education, healthcare, and food have inflated at multiples of the official rate. The metrics themselves are cherry-picked and continuously modified to present a picture of stability, all the while your purchasing power collapses. The CPI doesn't measure inflation; it measures what they want you to believe about inflation.

The real question isn't "how much money creates happiness?" but "how much autonomy do you need to pursue your purpose without compromise?" For some, this might be relatively modest. For others facing medical conditions, family obligations, or specific life circumstances, it might be substantially more. The figure that matters is the one that buys your functional freedom, not the one that satisfies some researcher's statistical model.

Voltaire eloquently reflected on this issue of financial servitude in a letter to his friend, warning: "*Don't think money does everything or you are going to end up doing everything for money*" (Wei, 2022). The moment money becomes the master, you've already surrendered the war. Fixating on any specific income benchmark, especially one based on a pre-inflationary, pre-collapse economy, is intellectual suicide. In an era of manipulated inflation metrics and currency erosion, \$75K doesn't buy what it used to. What it buys tomorrow will be even less.

## **Financial Sovereignty as Mental Armor**

The conventional employment model itself creates structural vulnerability. Trading time for money in fixed increments not only caps your earning potential but creates a single-point-of-failure risk. The person dependent on one income source, regardless of its size, remains fundamentally vulnerable.

I'm not going to argue that entrepreneurship is the only path, especially considering most business owners only maintain a single business. I'm arguing for developing multiple value streams, multiple skillsets, and multiple ways to convert your capabilities into resources. The financially resilient individual might hold traditional employment, but choose to supplement it with independent income streams, investments that generate passive returns, and skills that maintain value regardless of economic conditions.

Most people do the opposite. They specialize narrowly and depend entirely on employer demand. Adding fuel to the future fire, they spend everything they earn, and usually even more. This creates the perfect conditions for exploitation: those who structure their financial lives like this need the job more than the job needs them. Every negotiation, every decision, and every risk calculation happens against a backdrop of fear.

For most, you don't need millions of dollars, or even six-figure passive income to escape this trap. You need enough independent capacity to say no without fear, to walk away from exploitation, to decline compromising opportunities, and to maintain your principles when pressured. That's the real measure of financial resilience.

## The Earn-Spend Trap

We're caught between two equally inadequate extremes when it comes to financial advice: tighten your bootstraps and cut as many corners as you can, or "you need to spend money to make money." The latter often comes without the necessary prerequisites on what you should spend on, and is used as a justification for living the high life. Living the high life is often undertaken by people trying to project success by living lifestyles they can't afford, filled with designer clothing, bougie restaurants, cars out of their price range, and condos they rent, and don't own. This is nothing short of insanity.

When your financial spending is all designed around maintaining an image, it is a form of chronic and harmful stress. Contrast this with an entrepreneur investing in a new business they are passionate about. Typically, they will *cut* these lifestyle corners, not double down on them. They're betting on their idea and the future, not "investing" in their present image. For the entrepreneur taking this leap, the spending is intentional and hormetic. Whether they succeed or fail, it serves to build capacity, at least, most of the time.

Spending should be deliberate and intentionally planned. Dropping hundreds of dollars you can't afford on an upscale restaurant to snap some photos for social media is nothing short of idiotic.<sup>6</sup> Spending extra on proper nutrition you prepare yourself, however, is an investment in your health, which increases your potential capacity to earn your way out of the tight spot you're currently in. Most personal finance advice misses this entirely. It treats all risk as recklessness and all frugality as virtue. "Cut lattes" and "Don't buy avocado toast" are the financial equivalent of telling people to stay in bed because squats might hurt their knees. This mindset has a spokesman: Dave Ramsey, the messiah of penny-pinching, prophet of austerity-as-salvation.

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<sup>6</sup> I am not condemning anyone for doing this if they can afford to. I am chastising those who cannot afford to do this. If you want to aspire to have wealth, and let that wealth act as armor, you need to stop trying to "keep up with the Jones's," live within your means, and invest in your future capacity.

According to him, your financial problems aren't structural, systemic, or even strategic. No, they're spiritual. You just need to stop buying coffee and live like a monk, literally: he's advised people to survive on rice and beans (though he adds, "*I don't actually mean only eat rice and beans....It's about short-term sacrifice for the long-term win*") (Ramsey, 2024). If you're feeling fancy, Ramsey suggests bologna sandwiches can work—unless you can't afford meat, in which case you'll be eating "wish sandwiches": two pieces of bread you wish had something in between.

The reason that last statement really pisses me off is because he said it to a struggling grad student. Young people, already drowning in systemic debt, are being told by Ramsey to "stop at nothing" until they claw their way out. He confidently asserts this without so much as a nod to predatory interest, rising costs of living, or the fact that not everyone starts from the same line. It's not just tone-deaf, it's dangerous. Ramsey's gospel frames suffering as moral discipline and poverty as a personal failing. It's less financial literacy and more prosperity-gospel-meets-bootstraps-cosplay.

This is financial masochism dressed up as discipline. Scrimp your way to salvation, delay gratification into oblivion, and if you're still broke? That's because you sinned against the spreadsheet. The truth is: cutting coffee won't save you, but building leverage will. There is a limit to how much we can cut back, and that limit changes every day with rising inflation.

Of course, building capacity also undoubtedly has limits, but most of us *never reach them*. The true difference between being poor and broke is recognizing this and strategizing the cutbacks. Often, cutting back on our luxuries is done even more aggressively when we are broke as opposed to perpetually poor. Those who are broke understand the impermanence of the cut-backs, using them as a means to catapult us out of this undesirable and temporary state. Ramsey, to his credit, does teach this; the reason my critique of him comes off as so vitriolic is because he idolizes these cut-backs as the goal rather than a tool, failing to impart the message of increasing capacity to his followers. This, even without him intending it to, trains his followers to remain in a poor mindset.

The poor mindset, by contrast, accepts the cutbacks as a permanent fixture of life, failing to build capacity and strength, and condemning themselves to fall further and further behind. Ramsey's strategy of permanent cut-backs and saving fails to understand that the deck is stacked against us; our earning power, and even the interest on standard investments, fails to keep pace with the rapidly distorting reality of our financial world. His strategy condemns his followers to a future of poverty, regardless of how prudent and carefully they execute it.

Resilience, in any domain, requires progressive overload. Financial resilience isn't built through hoarding pennies and avoiding risk, it's forged by stepping into

pressure with strategy and control. When it comes to saving, I took one piece of advice from Robert Kiyosaki's *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*, which I read in my early 20s. I don't worry about coupon clipping or the small ticket items; I worry about the big ones. When it's time to make a big purchase; a house, car, even furniture, I have always relentlessly and tirelessly obsessed over finding the best deal. I've had car salesmen swear at me, realtors get upset and beg me to accept their counteroffer, but I've held the line. I've turned banks against each other, screenshotting quotes, whittling down my interest payments to substantially lower than advertised, even below what I was told was the best offer. In the spring of 2022, I negotiated my mortgage rates from 2.09%, the cheapest advertised price, to 1.64%, for instance. I may have burned a bridge or two with local mortgage brokers, but don't for a second pretend that people in those professions are honorable, or anything but disposable (in the business sense).

Every house I have ever purchased was found by myself, not the realtor I commissioned. *Every. Single. One.* When I bought my first condo and my first few rental houses, I refreshed used furniture listings every few minutes, obsessively, up to 18 hours a day, to find deals. Shave \$300 here, \$500 there: it adds up. Clipping that coupon to save \$1? You'll never make it up in your lifetime. Unfortunately, the people clipping coupons are the ones paying the asking price for big purchases, and that's a spreadsheet they'll never get out of the red on, no matter how diligent they are. As my financial freedom increases, my calculus on where I save, where I overspend, and where I pay the asking price, changes. This calculus will look different for each of us, depending on our current situation. The goal is to understand the trade-off of each cost-cutting strategy, and learn how to leverage these decisions to compound for you. You will never clip enough \$1 off coupons for that block of cheese to make up for the extra \$5000 you spent on that car, let alone the house, mortgage, and other large purchases, which you didn't properly negotiate and press on.

## **Conclusion: The Path Forward**

Many reading this will know the game we have been taught to play. I hope that some of you will now understand *the endgame* that those who control us have distracted us from. Earn, build, and invest in assets and skills. Strength creates sovereignty, for those without weakness cannot be controlled. Finances continue to be one of our greatest vulnerabilities, and unless we confront that, we are operating on borrowed time. Build your wealth, build your protection, but most of all, do it with purpose, for a purpose, and ethically. If we sacrifice our morality to buy ourselves freedom from those we are repulsed by, we have descended to their level; but almost always, without their power. The goal is to rise above, to become stronger, better. We cannot do this by winning a race to the bottom.

**Picture 25.** My fiancée and I in Paris



*Ahhh, romantic, Paris. From this high up, and this far away, you can't see the garbage or smell the stench of the streets.*

## CHAPTER 11:

### Unfamiliar Territory

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking  
new landscapes, but in having new eyes.*

- MARCEL PROUST

I didn't go to Milan for the pasta. That trip was for my fiancée, who wanted to visit the global fashion capital (only to find the experience underwhelming). The second time I went, I was there for a scientific conference. Both trips had different reasons, but the same highlight: cacio e pepe.

This dish has been a personal obsession for years. I've trained myself to make it better than most high-end restaurants in North America. Yet, there's one spot in Milan I've now visited twice that humbles me. It is substantially better than my best attempts, and all of my efforts to reverse-engineer it end in failure. What's interesting is that every time I try a 'spin' on Cacio e Pepe, such as from a high-end restaurant trying to add their own flair, I am beyond underwhelmed, even agitated. The taste I crave is the traditional, the simple, which is exactly what I attempt. It's three ingredients for the sauce; pecorino romano, black pepper, and starchy water from the pasta. Despite this, using the highest end ingredients and nailing the perfect al dente noodle, something is always missing when compared to this little restaurant in Milan. So, this dish continues to be one of my white whales.

Like most white whales, it had me travelling happily to a place I wouldn't choose otherwise, that normal circumstances would have me miserable and begrudgingly going to. Milan is filthy, covered in graffiti, and its inhabitants—even the staff at 5 star hotels—are rude. The architecture had bones, but they were choked with grime and neglect. The dilapidated conditions drive a bitter and hostile mood, and outside the transcendent pasta, the vibe is flat, with nothing positive to remember. It is a reminder that simplicity done perfectly can still outshine pretentious complexity, and that beauty can survive in places that feel otherwise broken.

From Milan, on the first trip, I drove most of the way to Zermatt, before needing to catch a short train for the final few kilometers. There are no cars allowed, something Google maps failed to notify me of, and which caused considerable confusion, just a train into stillness and altitude. I hiked to a waterfall, sat in a cave behind it with my fiancée, and dropped into a rare, deep kind of peace; the kind that doesn't just relax you—it *restores* you. No noise, no chaos, just space to think.

Even paradise has its cracks, however, and Grindelwald, another 'jewel' of Switzerland, was overcrowded, overpriced, and sterile. The mountains were comparable to what we have in the North American Rockies, but the comparison ends there. I spent days in Switzerland, in the mountains, and saw no wildlife. There was no sense of the wildness I grew up with in Canada. The surface was stunning, but the soul felt hollow.



Travel can shift something in you, but not always the way you expect. Novelty, as C.S. Lewis warned, “is by its very nature more subject than any other to the laws of diminishing returns” (Lewis, 1942/2001). But presence, deliberate, uncomfortable, curious presence, can still crack something open, which brings us to the purpose of this chapter.

The brain craves familiarity. Our neural architecture is designed to conserve energy by automating the familiar and alerting us to the novel (Reichardt, Polner, & Simor, 2020). This is a system that served our ancestors well when unfamiliar stimuli often signaled danger. But this same mechanism that kept us alive in hostile environments now keeps us trapped in shrinking comfort zones, steadily reducing our capacity for adaptability with each passing year. This hardwired tendency toward routine becomes the invisible cage confining our potential. Each day lived within the boundaries of the familiar strengthens the neural pathways of comfort, while allowing the circuitry for handling unfamiliarity to weaken from disuse. The psychological muscle of adaptability atrophies without regular confrontation with the unknown.

The solution isn’t complex, but it is demanding: deliberate, consistent exposure to novel environments and situations. Not as tourism or entertainment, but as intentional training for the mind.

## **The Neurological Impact of Novel Environments**

When you step into an entirely unfamiliar environment, whether it’s a foreign city, an unexpected social situation, or a challenging new discipline, your brain triggers a specific series of neurological responses that promote cognitive adaptation. These responses heighten your awareness and prepare you to process new information more effectively. As a result, your attention and perception sharpen, which makes you prepared to respond better to novel experiences. Furthermore, details that would normally fade into background noise suddenly command your attention (Schomaker & Meeter, 2015).

This alertness triggers cascading effects. Your hippocampus, the brain region central to learning and memory, ramps up activity. Neuroplasticity increases as your brain prepares to encode new patterns. Most significantly, neurogenesis (the creation of new neurons) accelerates in adults, where it normally slows with age (Khalil, 2024; Kempermann, 2022).

Studies have confirmed that controlled exposure to novelty, such as through travel, increases cognitive flexibility and problem-solving capability while reducing cognitive rigidity (Rastelli et al., 2022; Schubert, 2021). This suggests that the act of experiencing a novel environment or situation may be capable of rewiring your brain’s architecture to become more adaptable, increasing your ability to gain from these novel experiences more and more over time (Park, 2023). This leads to a

potential dual transformative role, where you are both learning and experiencing something new, and also strengthening your ability to do likewise in the future.

## Discovering a City's Soul

In my late twenties, I traveled extensively for business, including one stretch of six months straight. During these travels, I would typically be in each city for anywhere from two to thirty days, but often just two to five days. My approach was deliberate: rather than focusing on tourist attractions, I would walk through neighborhoods seeking to understand what made each place authentically itself. I sought the quintessential experience that defined the soul of a city, what locals would miss if they moved away.

As an introvert who values alone time, I nevertheless pushed myself to create momentary connections wherever possible, initiating conversations to prevent complete isolation during these travels. These brief connections weren't just for sanity, and I will say I am not such an introvert that I can handle months of solitude, they provided essential insight into each place's character while building my capacity to adapt to unfamiliar social contexts.

Unfortunately, I did learn over time that the locals rarely had answers for me, and rarely understood the questions I was asking. Almost exclusively, I would be given a rapid-fire list of every tourist attraction, so I'd ask if they spend their time at these places, or if any locals do. Of course, the answer was always no. So, I'd push further and redefine the question, asking them what they'd miss the most. Almost always, it would be a specific restaurant, friends, and family. I tried to get clever, posing a hypothetical: *"All of your friends, family, and your favorite restaurants are transported to a new city, along with you. In this scenario, what would you miss?"* I almost never received a satisfactory answer, usually not even an answer at all, just a shrug and an "I don't know, I've never thought about it."

These conversations taught me about people, but importantly, they also taught me about myself. The cities changed, but the people didn't, and I was largely alone no matter where I traveled to. So, I forged on, discovering the soul of each city as best I could, blind and without a guide. The truth is, I realized that what is quintessentially home for locals in each city is largely subjective and lodged within the subconscious. The questions I asked were unfair, not easily answered. Perhaps for one, it was a certain park bench where they could watch their favorite busker, whereas for another, it was a familiar noise, or smell, from a business that had no impact on their life other than being etched into the memories of their experiences. There are millions of realities within each city, with the city simply serving as a backdrop to the story of each of our lives and experiences. There is nothing quintessential about that, no singular common thread, except that remaining where we are familiar locks us to that familiarity.

## The Adaptation Window

As I have discussed throughout this book, we all have a zone of proximal development, also called your adaptation window, in which the stress is sufficient enough to drive adaptation, and not so intense as to lead to regression or collapse. What makes finding this window challenging is that it is a constantly moving target. As you build adaptation capacity, environments that once stretched you become comfortable. The nervous system that initially fired alarm signals when navigating a foreign subway system, for example, eventually processes the same activity as routine.

This means deliberate novelty must progressively intensify. The traveler who initially finds a new city overwhelming eventually needs to seek areas further from tourist zones. The person stretching social comfort initially might attend organized events with clear structures, later progressing to situations requiring more spontaneous interaction. Perhaps this is why the rich and famous no longer travel to the peak of Mt. Everest, instead aspiring to travel into space, or to the depths of the ocean. Once some novel experiences lose their novelty, those of us who crave more, who crave the new, find ways to seek it out.

The key insight: your adaptation window isn't fixed, it expands with deliberate practice, allowing you to function effectively in increasingly unfamiliar and ambiguous situations.

## Beyond Travel: Everyday Novel Exposure

While travel provides concentrated exposure to novelty, it isn't the only, or even necessarily the best, way to build adaptation capacity. Effective novel exposure can be integrated into ordinary life through deliberate practices:

### 1. Path Deviation

Simply altering your physical routes creates subtle but significant adaptation demands. Take different paths to familiar destinations, shop at different stores, and walk different routes. Each deviation forces your brain to engage rather than operate on autopilot.

### 2. Social Sphere Expansion

Deliberately place yourself in social contexts where you're an outsider or newcomer. Attend events where you know no one, join groups centered around topics unfamiliar to you, and volunteer in communities unlike your own. Each new social ecosystem requires adaptation to unfamiliar norms and interaction patterns.

### 3. Skill Domain Crossing

Regularly undertake learning projects in areas completely outside your expertise. If you're analytical, study an art form. If you're artistic, learn a technical skill. If you're

verbal, try something physical. The key is choosing domains that activate entirely different neural pathways than those you typically use.

#### 4. Time Structure Variation

Periodically alter your schedule and routines drastically. Work at different hours, eat at different times, and within a healthy range, change your sleep patterns. These temporal shifts force your body and mind to adapt to new rhythms, preventing the calcification that comes with rigid routines.

#### 5. Sensory Environment Changes

Deliberately expose yourself to altered sensory environments. Visit places with drastically different soundscapes, visual stimuli, or even temperature conditions than those you're accustomed to. These changes activate sensory processing adaptation.

The common thread across these practices is the deliberate stepping out of automation and into active adaptation. The goal is to do this deliberately and repeatedly, until it becomes a habit. Then, raise the bar and start from the beginning.

### Cultivating the Anthropologist's Mindset

Novelty alone isn't enough. Drop someone into a new environment without the right mindset, and they'll just look for the fastest way to reestablish comfort. Exposure itself only goes so far, true adaptation comes from *how you relate to what you're exposed to*.

Travel, for most people, is just a brief dislocation followed by a fast attempt to re-establish comfort. It doesn't lead to transformation, it leads to curated impressions, to new inputs running through the same old filters.

Roger Scruton was brutally clear about this. He wrote:

*People are becoming less and less able to understand foreigners. The reason, I believe, is the lamentable tendency to rely on first-hand experience. Rather than read Herodotus or Plutarch at home, we drag our uninstructed senses through foreign cities and acquire not the first understanding of the people who live in them... Their experience of foreigners is therefore without concepts, a bundle of pure impressions... like shells collected on an empty holiday... Travel narrows the mind, providing a surfeit of impressions and a dearth of interpretations. (Gilleland, 2019)*

And for most people, he's right.

Most travelers aren't observers; they're consumers. They don't speak the language, don't know the history, and don't know what they're looking at. They don't ask questions, they take photos and log the memory and experience like it was a task to

be checked off a box. They move through foreign places in a kind of anesthetized blur. The impressions pile up, but they don't coalesce into a coherent understanding.

That's not how I travel, but you already know that by now. Scruton would say that proves his point; that most people, even in their own cities, live without cultural consciousness. They move through places unaware, unreflective, collecting fragments with no framework. On this, Scruton and I agree, but I don't agree with his conclusion.

Scruton argues it's better to stay home and read, a method in which we are able to understand cultures through their classics, their philosophy, their literature. On the surface, I agree that this helps. Where Scruton loses me is the fact that it's not either/or. We can simultaneously understand foreign cultures through their classics, but also through travel. Travel *can* be expansive, *if* you bring the right lens, and *if* you treat it like fieldwork, not leisure.

That's how I approach it, not like a tourist, and not like a scholar. Perhaps more like a cultural anthropologist. I was curious, sought patterns, and was willing to sit in the discomfort of not understanding what I was experiencing right away. That's the key, the aim is not just seeing something new, but letting that newness interrupt you, to challenge your categories, and force a pause.

Here's how it works:

### **1. Suspended Judgment**

When encountering unfamiliar customs or behaviors, the first reaction isn't evaluation but curiosity. Rather than categorizing as good/bad or right/wrong, ask what function these patterns serve in their context.

### **2. Pattern Recognition**

Look for underlying structures and relationships rather than focusing solely on surface features. What recurring elements appear across seemingly different situations? What organizing principles might explain what you're observing?

### **3. Participant-Observer Balance**

Maintain the delicate balance between immersion and analysis. Engage directly in experiences while simultaneously maintaining awareness of your reactions and observations.

### **4. Contextual Understanding**

Recognize that behaviors and practices make sense within their ecological, historical, and cultural contexts. Seek to understand these frameworks rather than evaluating through your own cultural lens.

## 5. Self-Awareness

Maintain awareness of your own cultural assumptions and biases. Notice when you're applying automatic interpretations rather than seeing clearly what's actually present.

This mindset transforms random exposure into structured learning, allowing you to extract maximum adaptation benefit from each novel situation.

## The Social Adaptation Paradox

Perhaps counterintuitively, one of the most powerful benefits of novel environment exposure is enhanced social adaptability. This creates a compelling paradox: the more comfortable you become with being uncomfortable in strange places, the more effectively you can connect with others across diverse contexts.

Our social connections typically form along lines of similarity: shared backgrounds, values, experiences, and contexts. But this tendency creates invisible limitations. We develop narrow social scripts that function in specific environments but fail completely in others.

Deliberate exposure to novel social contexts forces the development of more fundamental connection skills, including those that function across vastly different human environments. You learn to identify universal connection points that transcend cultural, socioeconomic, and ideological differences.

This explains why those with extensive cross-cultural experience often demonstrate extraordinary emotional intelligence and rapport-building abilities. They've been forced to develop connection mechanisms that don't rely on shared reference points or cultural shorthand.

For introverts, this practice is particularly valuable. While natural tendencies might limit social engagement, deliberate practice in novel environments builds adaptive social capacity that can be deployed when needed, even if it's not your default state.

## Conclusion: The Lifelong Adaptation Practice

I've been to a lot of places that felt foreign, but nothing felt quite as *unfamiliar* as the interior of China. Not the airports in major cities, those are immaculate. They're streamlined, modern, and impressive. The international wings could pass for any top-tier global hub, surpassing most in the Western world, but a few hours inland, it was like switching planets. I remember standing up on arrival at an airport in the Chinese interior, where I was immediately alarmed seeing passengers shoving each other, aggressively pushing past those in front to run off the plane. Soon, it all made sense, we were stranded on the tarmac, and there was only one bus. Those who did not make it on had to wait. The terminals themselves were chaotic, humid, with no

air conditioning, no lines, just masses of people with little regard to those around them. There were no announcements and no order, just instinct and elbows. Bathrooms were a hole in the ground with no toilet paper and no soap. Apparently, you had to bring your own.

Even at a high-end Pullman Hotel, a brand I trusted as an Accor Diamond member, they kept cutting off my meal service midway to make me reauthorize my card at the front desk. They did this *mid-bite, multiple times*. I'd ask them to increase the limit so we wouldn't repeat the performance, and they refused *every time*. At one point, I asked if they wanted me to just leave my card at the front desk. They said no, but wouldn't raise the hold, either. It was like dealing with a system designed for mistrust.

Here's the thing, however: you can't afford to shut down when you're in environments like that. You can't indulge in the discomfort or dwell on how absurd it all feels. You adapt, quickly. You learn to read the room, anticipate obstacles, carry your own soap—or, as I opted, to hold it all day—expect inconvenience, and *move*. That's the cost of functioning in unfamiliar terrain, and once you've done it a few times, you realize the skill isn't about the place, it's about the mental flexibility it demands.

Some people develop cyclical patterns; exposure, integration, and then application, not as a productivity strategy, but as a survival instinct. The goal isn't novelty for novelty's sake. It's ensuring you don't calcify, mentally or psychologically, in a world that punishes stasis.

This confidence is earned through exposure, confusion, discomfort, and repetition. Most people avoid this, and so most people remain soft in the face of real change. Unlike some hormetic practices that require specific conditions or equipment, novel exposure can be sustained throughout life with minimal resources. The key is recognizing that comfort is the enemy of growth and deliberately choosing discomfort in sustainable doses.

The most valuable outcome isn't some abstract notion of personal growth. Rather, it's the concrete capacity to function effectively when others are paralyzed by unfamiliarity. It's the ability to enter new environments, assess them quickly, adapt appropriately, and execute decisively while those around you are still processing the disruption to their routines.

In a world that increasingly rewards adaptability over stability, deliberate exposure to novelty isn't self-improvement, it's self-preservation. Those who develop this capacity don't just survive change; they leverage it. Most importantly, they recognize what others miss: that the ability to function amid unfamiliarity isn't a personality trait but a practiced skill. Like with all skills, it atrophies without use.

## CHAPTER 12:

### Crisis as Crucible

When catastrophe strikes, most people collapse inward. They seek someone to blame, someone to rescue them, or simply wait for the storm to pass. This is human nature, it's an understandable response to overwhelming circumstances. But it's also a wasted opportunity, because there are moments when life doesn't just hit pause, it crashes down into ruin, fully, completely, and without warning, apology, or consolation.

For me, that moment came in the summer of 2014. One week, I was a high-functioning athlete and the next, I couldn't jump an inch off the ground. I was falling asleep mid-sentence, and I was sleeping 18 hours a day and still waking up exhausted. I couldn't train, couldn't read, and couldn't focus. My CRP (C-reactive protein, a clinical marker of inflammation) spiked to 34 mg/L. For context, the "normal" upper limit is 3 mg/L, but "normal" includes elderly diabetics and everything in between. In a world where being sick is considered normal, we cannot judge ourselves healthy when we are on the edge of "normal."<sup>7</sup> For most actually healthy people, normal is somewhere below 0.3 mg/L, even undetectable. Suffice it to say, I wasn't just inflamed, I was on fire from the inside out.

As quickly as my body was engulfed in this fire, when it burned out, it was similarly abrupt, reduced to a smoulder. My inflammation crashed down towards something manageable, hovering in the 2-3 mg/L range; meaning given my age, fitness, and health, I was still in a chronic state of inflammatory impairment, just not one which was so crippling. When the fire burned out, the devastation it left became apparent. I soon realized my new reality was one of chronic pain, frozen joints, and a body that no longer worked the way I'd trained it to for years. I was forced to quit sports, and I couldn't work out, at least, not how I was used to. I couldn't sleep, and no one had answers. So I did what most people don't: I went to war on my own terms.

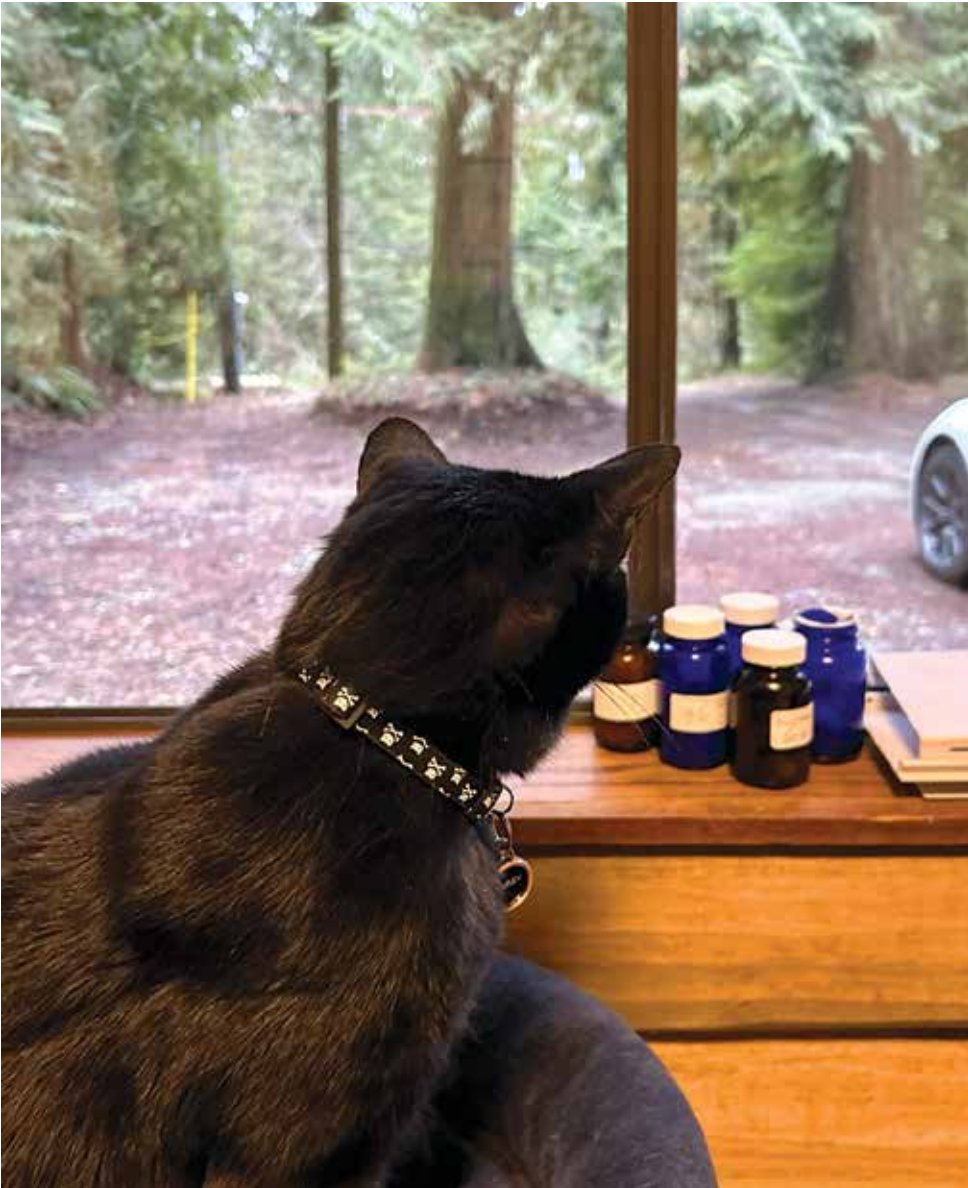
This chapter isn't about health, not really. That is a conversation for the companion side of this book, *The Body*. This chapter is about what you do when everything fails at once. It's about what you do when nothing works, and the pain isn't just physical—it's existential.

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<sup>7</sup> "Normal": I put this in quotations deliberately. What medicine often calls "normal" is simply the statistical average for the population, and the population is getting sicker. If the median CRP now reflects a baseline of chronic inflammation, that isn't health, it's just the new average. A healthy 29-year-old sitting at the upper end of "normal" by this definition is already experiencing something physiologically abnormal, possibly even traumatic. (Clinical guidelines define CRP values up to 3 mg/L as "normal," though many researchers consider a healthier baseline to be  $\leq 1$  mg/L. Levels can rise transiently to  $\sim 3$  mg/L during acute illness or infection. That the guidelines treat chronically elevated CRP in this range as "normal" reflects how statistical averaging over a progressively sicker population distorts the boundary between health and disease.)



**Picture 26.** My cat Harley looking out for trouble



*I'm pretty sure he isn't looking out of worry, but hope. He's the type of cat that wakes up and chooses violence.*

In that state, the worst thing you can have is *hope*, which is the antithesis of the message I have given in several other chapters. Let me explain: Admiral James Stockdale, a prisoner of war in Vietnam for over seven years, wrote that the men who perished in captivity weren't the ones who gave up. It was the ones who clung

to hope, who kept saying, “*We’ll be out by Christmas,*” then *Easter*, then *summer*, all the while watching as each of those illusions disintegrated. Those are the men who didn’t survive. Their spirit cracked under the weight of false expectations. Stockdale didn’t let himself hope, instead, he followed the teachings of Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher who lived a large part of his life as a slave, crippled, and in chains before eventually being granted freedom. Instead of yearning, he observed, and instead of hoping, he endured. He stared down reality for exactly what it was; no euphemism, no comforting story, and chose to act inside of it anyway (Stockdale, 2001).

That’s what this chapter is about. When things fall apart, most people scramble for comfort. They try to outsource strength, look for someone or something to fix it, and pray that resolution comes quickly. They look for someone to blame, and someone to wait it out with, and in some toxic relationships, they look for the same person to fill all of those needs. But resilience isn’t born in comfort, it’s born in clarity, and in pain. Sometimes, we find our strength while staring down the possibility that not only might things *not* get better, but they could actually get much worse. This is necessary because they can, and often do.

When my body shut down, when the system failed me, when doctors had no answers, I didn’t wait—at least, not completely, and not in every area. I started hunting relentlessly. I became my own lab tech, my own research analyst, and my own medic. I followed rabbit holes that turned out to be scams, pseudoscience, and snake oil. At one point, I nearly blew up my fridge with DIY hydrogen water thermoses-turned-IEDs. At another, I almost blew up myself and my cat in my bathtub/bathroom after inadequately accounting for pressure build up in an improvised hydrogen bath device I was scaling gas generation in. (My cat would watch me bathing, convinced I was in mortal danger. This time, the danger was real. While not potentially fatal, there was a pressure-based detonation, and plastic shrapnel. I managed to jump out of the bath, grab my cat, and jump out of the door before the blast went off). I destroyed friendships, I pissed off salespeople, scientists, and entire industries. I burned time, money, and a big chunk of my sanity.

Eventually, I found something real, and I clawed my way to a solution. Not all at once, not cleanly, and not completely. I am not who I was ten years ago, physically speaking, and likely never will be. Medical science will have to advance at an exponential rate for that possibility to become a reality. But, I clawed my way back to a reality I could tolerate, live with, and find contentment with. That fight was won slowly, piece by piece, through skepticism, frustration, and obsessive trial and error. The point isn’t that I fixed it, whatever that means. The point is that the *search itself* rewired me. The pain didn’t just hurt, it drove me to grow, to reforge who I was and who I believed I could be.

A common theme throughout both halves of this book is that romanticizing adversity is dangerous. Many will lean into this mantra, recounting the phoenix myth, calling adversity a teacher and saying it builds character; sometimes, that’s

true. Other times, adversity strips your masks, your delusions, and leaves you broken, nowhere to run and nowhere to hide, just an uncomfortable meeting with your true self that you weren't ready to have.

When we are ready for this meeting, this unmasking, this is when adversity hardens us into something more substantial. If we can sit in the fire, facing who we are when our illusions and delusions are stripped bare, and not flee, flinch, or retreat into fantasy, that's the crucible where our strength expands, and a more competent, confident and dangerous version of ourselves is born.

So if you're sitting in the middle of the storm, don't hope, don't try to mentally escape. Don't wish, and don't wait for rescue that isn't coming. Keep your eyes open, let the pain teach you, allow the reality of your situation to dismantle your illusions without breaking you, and forge forward. Once you reach the other side, if you survive, you'll emerge with something few people ever earn:

- The ability to suffer without shattering.
- The strength to move forward while bleeding.
- The clarity to say: "This isn't the end. It's the fire I'm forged in."

As those aspiring towards strength, we live our lives waiting for this defining moment, where we can rise up to who we know ourselves to be. When this moment comes, don't hide from it, welcome it.

## **The Reality of Business-Threatening Failures**

I've faced existential threats that never made the headlines, and perhaps, in the future will face some that will. These weren't the metaphorical kind of threats, like "stressful weeks," "tight quarters," or "bad press." I mean failures that should have led to the business' demise. Catastrophic screw-ups from third-parties that defied all logic, occurring without any justifiable excuse, let alone accountability, and left to me to resolve. During these events, I always felt like the man following behind the elephant at the circus, cleaning up the shit. I touched on some of the issues I had with my first US manufacturing run previously, and I would love to say that was the worst of it, but situations, at times, have gotten much worse. Manufacturing partners of mine have destroyed entire production runs through a mix of incompetence, apathy, and, in some cases, even willful negligence. On more than one occasion, this has involved a choice to ignore protocols because they assumed I was being overly cautious, even an entrepreneurial hypochondriac. They were wrong, each and every time, and their willful disregard nearly cost me everything.

I want to reiterate, I am not talking about honest mistakes. These critical failures have resulted because explicit, written instructions were ignored, safety protocols bypassed, ingredients swapped without authorization, quality control documents acknowledged and then flat out disregarded. In one case, there was even deliberate

sabotage to avoid admitting fault. Every single time the pattern is the same: when confronted with irrefutable proof of incompetence and failure, most choose to deny, deflect and then disappear. Suppliers usually operate under no accountability, no urgency, with their business model relying on the knowledge that switching to a new facility is substantial work, and that virtually all of their competitors operate with the same standards.

As outrageous as it sounds, here's the uncomfortable truth: none of that matters. When the damage is done, when the product is compromised, when the customers are waiting, and when your reputation is on the line, the ownership at your facilities, or vendors, gets very quiet, very fast. In these moments, you realize that no one is coming to fix the problem, and that no one who can reasonably be blamed is stepping up to take accountability. They have started a fire and walked away, and the fire is spreading to your home. So, fair or not, it's now your fire. Own it, or burn in it. That's what I did, every time. I didn't cause these disasters, but I took full responsibility for solving them. This wasn't because I'm noble, but simply because I had no other option, because my companies' survival demanded it.

I've never been sued, and a big reason for this is that I never overpromise. One of my first lines with any new partner is simple:

*You won't always like what I have to say. But if I say it, I mean it.*

I've learned over my years that time is of critical importance during a catastrophe. So, I commit to utilizing all of my time working to solve the problem, and striving to shed the common and understandable impulse of pointing fingers. I understand that my customers need to know the situation, also. So I've created a firm rule; if I cannot find a solution by the date where it is a certainty I will be delivering late, I break the news to them. There are few greater frustrations for me than when a supplier or vendor spins stories, puts me off, and then finally breaks the bad news, usually with no solution, well after the delivery date was supposed to have occurred. This type of deferral compounds the problem, as all of that time is lost; by then, the catastrophe has grown to be substantially worse than if honesty was just given from the beginning. The key to committing to this mindset is the importance of staying calm, and ensuring you do not panic. Panicking leads to poor decisions, including avoidance. By remaining calm, we are able to execute with tactical clarity.

Behaving in this manner has a purpose; namely, the literature demonstrates that acute states of panic significantly lower our IQ (Shields, Sazma, & Yonelinas, 2016; Qin et al., 2009; Hopko et al., 2005). In particular, research in this area demonstrates that acute stress and anxiety, particularly in performance or testing situations, can impair executive functions like working memory and cognitive flexibility, leading to temporary reductions in IQ-related task performance. Anyone who has been through an actual crisis knows that the acute stress of taking a test pales in comparison, so, while not established in the literature, logic suggests that the

IQ hit may even be more substantial. In a crisis, we need every single ounce of intellect we can muster, so allowing ourselves to part with a substantial portion of our own is a recipe for disaster. I firmly believe that the only reason I am still in business is this ability. Moreover, virtually all of the most impressive people I have worked with share this quality. When reflecting back on crises, we realize that luck didn't save us,<sup>8</sup> character did. The character that saved us is not the kind you read about in leadership books from people who have lived their lives as spectators, but the kind forged in the moment you realize no one is coming to save you, there will be no divine intervention, and it's your move.

## **The Crisis Decision Framework**

In any catastrophic situation, three distinct paths emerge:

1. Collapse: surrender to panic, blame others, or wait for rescue.
2. Control: attempt to micromanage every detail, driven by fear.
3. Command: assume full responsibility while maintaining strategic perspective.

Most people oscillate between collapse and control. They either shut down entirely or grasp desperately at every detail, hoping perfect execution will save them. Both approaches fail because they stem from the same flawed assumption: that certainty is possible when immersed in chaos. Collapse is the resignation that certainty will never return, so why try? Control is the illusion that if you hold on tightly enough, you can force certainty to reappear. However, both are reactions to the same discomfort: the inability to tolerate uncertainty. Real resilience begins not by escaping chaos, but by learning to navigate within it; by operating without guarantees, adjusting as you go, and making decisions that remain sound even when the ground shifts.

The command approach begins with a radically different premise: in a true crisis, you will never have enough information, enough time, or enough resources. Many who have fallen victim to toxic positivity will label this as pessimistic, but the reality is it's both true and, when taken into consideration for your plans to execute, liberating. Once you accept these constraints as a given, you stop wasting energy fighting them and start working within them.

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<sup>8</sup> From a macro perspective, I believe nearly everything is luck. We don't choose our parents, our genetics, our birthplace, or the initial conditions that shape our trajectory. In that sense, I agree with thinkers like Michael Sandel, in that much of what we call merit is just fortune wearing a uniform. However, in moments of acute crisis, when everything's falling apart, it's not luck that saves you—it's character. Though even this is shaped by luck: the mentors you had, the experiences you endured, the narrow windows you stumbled through that could've easily stayed shut. I was lucky to develop the kind of character that holds under pressure, but I also acted as if it was mine to shape. That's the paradox: even if free will is an illusion, believing in it still changes us. We behave differently when we think we have a choice. So I choose to act as though character is mine to cultivate, even if it isn't, because that belief, false or not, makes me stronger.

When manufacturing partners make catastrophic errors, I implement a specific decision framework:

**Assess without blame:** Determine exactly what happened without wasting energy on fault-finding. The ‘who’ matters only insofar as it helps solve the ‘what.’

Unfortunately, even though I have by any reasonable account proven that I want solutions, not compensation, partners still, without fail, lie for days and even weeks on end to obfuscate their failures. This compounds problems, as without the truth, solutions cannot be sought.

**Define the true deadline:** Crisis creates artificial urgency. Identify the actual point of no return separated from the emotional pressure to act immediately.

**Map available resources:** Know precisely what you have to work with. It is mental masturbation to ruminate on what you wish you had, or what you should have had if the catastrophe had not occurred.

**Create redundant solution paths:** Develop multiple approaches simultaneously rather than betting everything on a single solution.

**Execute with complete ownership:** Move forward as if the original failure was your own responsibility, because regardless of its cause, your success depends on finding a solution.

**Notify your partners:** As I previously detailed, once this point is hit, it is both your *ethical responsibility* and the best business decision to tell your customers and partners. The truth will come out. Make sure it comes out at a time when options may still be available. Another way to look at it is that by notifying them, you are providing your customers the respect and truth that your supplier has not afforded you. Without accurate information, you cannot act and decide wisely, and neither can they. Do not let what is now your fire threaten your home and spread to your customers’ homes without warning. They may be angry, they may not understand, but that would happen *no matter what*. Conversely, they may have a solution you haven’t thought of, and even if they don’t, your honesty has protected them from making further decisions based on false information.

This framework doesn’t guarantee success; nothing can. What it does is maximize your functional capacity under extreme pressure while building psychological resilience that transfers to every future crisis.

## The Biology of Crisis Response

Under conditions of acute stress, the human body initiates a cascade of physiological changes that once served critical survival functions. One of the primary responses involves a surge of cortisol, a stress hormone that mobilizes energy and primes the body for immediate action. This is what we commonly call the fight-or-flight

response (Anliana, Sitorus, & Silitonga, 2025; McEwen, 2007). Simultaneously, blood flow is redirected away from the prefrontal cortex, which is the brain region responsible for executive functions such as reasoning, planning, and impulse control, and toward the amygdala and motor systems, which govern emotional reactivity and physical movement (Arnsten, 2009). This shift supports rapid responses to immediate danger but undermines reflective thinking.

Additionally, the brain's perceptual field narrows significantly under stress, prioritizing immediate threats while filtering out peripheral or long-term concerns (Tiferet-Dweck et al., 2016). This tunnel vision is adaptive in environments where survival depends on split-second decisions. However, it comes at a cognitive cost: working memory capacity, which is the ability to hold and manipulate information in real-time, plummets under acute stress, impairing complex decision-making (Otto et al., 2013).

While these mechanisms were lifesaving for our ancestors when navigating threats like predators or territorial conflict, they are profoundly maladapted to modern scenarios that require strategic thinking. In a high-stakes business crisis, for instance, the ability to maintain cognitive flexibility, weigh multiple outcomes, and coordinate long-term plans is precisely what the acute stress response shuts down. What was once a biological asset becomes, in these contexts, an extreme liability. In short, the difference between those who thrive in crisis and those who crumble comes down to the specific strategies those who thrive have developed in order to counteract our innate response.

Many of my strategies came to me almost by accident. I certainly didn't intentionally look them out, they just materialized, and I was fortunate enough to recognize they were working. Now that I have experienced their repeated, and mostly reliable, benefits, I consciously employ them when the situation demands. One of the first strategies I lean on is controlled breathing, specifically, slow diaphragmatic patterns. What I experience is a calmness and clarity that were inaccessible moments before. Scientifically, it works by regulating cortisol and activating the parasympathetic nervous system (I talk about breathwork in detail in Chapter 20). I learned of the benefit of adjusting my physical stance to reduce somatic signals of stress. Once I achieve calmness, I've developed the tendency to shift between envisioning future scenarios and outcomes from various potential actions, and replaying past, similar instances to draw inspiration from. My colleagues may initially be put off in these situations, as I am cognizant that my speech slows, often stopping and restarting as I gather my thoughts. My recall in situations like this is reliable, and my pattern recognition is perhaps exceptional, for now. However, others may benefit from writing down past outcomes, successes, and failures to create predetermined plans of action. Creating software programs to recognize patterns, rather than relying on immediate memory recall and a natural gift for pattern recognition, would likely lead to better outcomes than I have experienced, if executed properly.

I didn't seek out these tools, but I felt obligated to understand them once I discovered they were working. Years ago, when my breathing techniques failed, I'd rely on guided hypnotherapy for anxiety reduction, which was fast and effective. Over time, my reaction no longer necessitated deliberate thought or action; I simply existed within the moment exactly as my mind had been trained. Today, in crisis I remain composed, unshaken, or, as Tyler Durden states in *Fight Club*, "as calm as a Hindu cow" (Fincher, 1999). I still experience stress and anxiety, but they no longer maintain a grip over my being, not for any measurable length of time, at any doses I have been exposed to in years. This is the type of resilience that cannot be bought with any amount of money; the price is due in pain and sacrifice, and it comes due without warning, when least expected.

## **Forward, Not Backward**

When partners fail, teams make mistakes, or systems collapse, the reflexive human response is to look backward. We demand explanations, assign blame, and seek justice, often through legal means. This backward orientation feels satisfying in the moment, but undermines long-term resilience. I've never initiated legal action against manufacturing partners who made catastrophic errors, even when their negligence caused substantial financial damage. This isn't from lack of valid claims, it stems from a fundamental philosophical commitment: energy directed backward cannot simultaneously move you forward.

Litigation, by definition, focuses on past transgressions rather than future solutions. While sometimes unavoidable, it typically represents a net loss of productive energy even when you 'win.' The mental bandwidth consumed by ongoing legal disputes, the emotional drain of sustained conflict, and the opportunity costs of resources directed toward past grievances rather than future growth all typically outweigh whatever compensation might eventually be recovered. This is especially true when considering the compounding nature of time, which I previously covered in detail.

First, decisions must be proactive rather than reactive. Reacting to past injustices keeps you anchored to circumstances you didn't choose; acting with the future in mind reasserts agency and shifts momentum back into your hands. Similarly, when trust is fundamentally broken, the goal shouldn't be repair, it should be replacement. Salvaging compromised relationships often consumes more time and energy than simply constructing new, more reliable partnerships from scratch.

The latter point, in particular, is something I struggle with. Far too often, I try my best to help partners, lift them up, and give them second, third, and fiftieth chances, fully knowing they are likely to let me down. This failing stems from the part of me that resonates with socialists. Namely, when I have awarded someone an opportunity, whether my business, a job, or any number of scenarios, no matter how poorly they perform I struggle to remove the opportunity I have afforded them. This becomes more challenging the better I know the person, and the more I know about



their life. I start to contemplate the potential struggle they will go through for my gain—but not just theirs, others who are potentially innocent and caught in the crossfires. Employees for a manufacturer that loses its customer due to poor management, for instance.

Logically I understand that by shifting my business, or a job position, to a more competent provider the net benefit is at worst equal, but in all likelihood will increase due to improved outcomes. This means I will quickly create more good by causing the initial harm. Still, as I have relayed, I connect emotionally and empathetically to their hypothetical loss, and then begin to fixate on the good they have done, even if it is minimal. If this is how you make decisions, know that this decision-making process defies logic. You must account for your losses by overpreparing elsewhere, working harder personally, and creating backup plans and fail safes your partners will ignore. Your time would be better spent working on growth after finding new and reliable partners. I digress.

Failure, too, must be approached with precision: not as a source of regret, but as a dataset. Rather than lamenting what should have been, I extract the lesson, document the pattern, and integrate the learning. Meanwhile, when others fall short, I resist the temptation to assign blame. Blame satisfies ego but builds nothing, and at the end of the day, every decision made for my business or project leads to me at the top. People let you down, but the blame always lies at your feet. Instead, I channel that frustration into designing better systems: structures that make failure less likely and recovery faster when it inevitably comes. Of course, I am human just like the rest of us, and often fall short in regards to resisting the urge to let my frustration seep through.

This approach isn't about forgiveness in the conventional sense. It's about ruthless prioritization of future capability over past accountability. The question isn't "Who deserves what?" but "What creates the strongest position moving forward?"

## **The Leadership Imperative**

Crisis doesn't just test leaders; it reveals who the real leaders are, regardless of formal titles or authority. True leadership emerges most clearly when systems fail, plans collapse, and normal operating procedures become insufficient. When manufacturing partners have made catastrophic errors through negligence or protocol failures, the immediate response from most stakeholders follows a predictable pattern: they deny responsibility, diffuse their accountability to any alternative, no matter how big of a stretch, adopt defensive positions, and demand the victim (their customer) determine the next direction.

This creates a leadership vacuum that needs to be filled. The person who steps into this space, who says, "This is now my responsibility to solve," regardless of who created the problem, isn't just managing a crisis. They're fundamentally altering how

they're perceived and, more importantly, how they perceive themselves. The psychological transformation that occurs when you voluntarily assume responsibility for problems you didn't create is profound. It shifts your internal narrative from victim to architect, and from reactionary to visionary. This mental positioning creates capacity for clear thinking under pressure that simply doesn't exist when operating from a stance of grievance or entitlement.

More pragmatically, it also creates solutions that wouldn't otherwise emerge. When facing manufacturing disasters, the solutions that ultimately preserved the business didn't come from legal threats, blame allocation, or demands that partners "fix what they broke." They came from creative problem-solving unleashed by complete ownership of the situation as it existed, not as it "should" have been.

### **Conclusion: The Ultimate Resilience**

The deepest form of crisis resilience emerges from a fundamental relationship with uncertainty itself; a willingness to step fully into situations where outcomes aren't guaranteed, where perfect information isn't available, and where failure remains a real possibility. When facing business-threatening manufacturing failures, the essential capacity isn't technical knowledge, industry connections, or financial resources; although I'd be remiss if I didn't admit that all of these matter. The crucial element is comfort with uncertainty, it's the ability to make clear-headed decisions and take decisive action without guarantees.

The paradox of crisis resilience is that it comes not from eliminating uncertainty but from embracing it, not as something to be feared, but as the fundamental condition within which all meaningful action occurs. The person who needs certainty before they can act will always be paralyzed in true crisis. The person who has learned to function effectively within uncertainty becomes capable of leadership precisely when it's most needed. As the saying goes, "*it's better to be a warrior in a garden, than a gardener in a war.*" The same applies here, it's better to have developed a calm presence through crisis, to plan and expect catastrophe knowing you can navigate through it, than to live your life as an unwavering optimist incapable of taking charge during times of chaos; which is intentionally the exact theme of the next chapter.

The ultimate measure of crisis resilience lies in your ability to confront your raw emotions, direct them away from your cognition, and act with intention. In time, you may feel nothing, or close to nothing; typically, I no longer do. Recently, one of my shipments of finished tablets was stolen; in fact, the entire truck was. It was insured, but that does nothing to regain momentum, and it doesn't compensate for the lost time. In total, the potential losses, factoring in my customers who were waiting, exceeded \$30 million. I got the call just before 5 PM on a Thursday, and decided to go for a walk through the forest. As I walked, I thought deeply, not about how bad my luck was or how upset my customers would be, but about what solutions were

possible to mitigate the damage. In doing this, I found a solution, while imperfect, that greatly reduced the losses and served as a potential solution to other, less pressing issues.

The next day, I received a better call: the police had recovered the shipment, it was unharmed, untouched, and back en route to its destination. My problem was gone, and in its place stood a solution for smaller challenges I hadn't previously dealt with, which could serve as a safety for future problems, as well. This is the lesson: what you do emerges directly from what you've practiced, both intentionally through simulation and inevitably through life's challenges. Every crisis contains within it an opportunity not just to solve a problem but to fundamentally upgrade your capacity for future challenges. The question isn't whether you'll face crises; you will. The question is whether each one will leave you more capable than before.

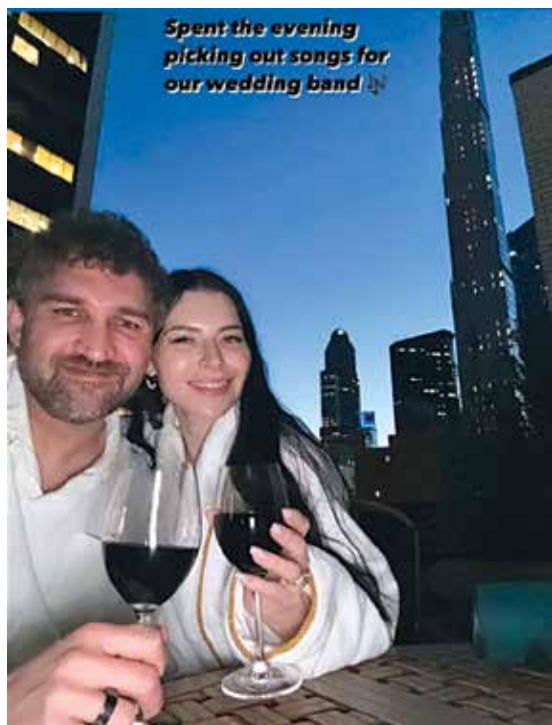
## CHAPTER 13:

# The Positivity Trap: How Blind Optimism Makes You Fragile

I've spent most of my adult life surrounded by optimists. My father, two of the key business partners I've worked most closely with, and my fiancée. All of them live their day-to-day lives with the unwavering belief that "it'll all work out." Of course, they are right, at least 90% of the time. The car could make it without filling the tank, traffic will be fine and we won't miss our flight, and the deal will close regardless of whether we fix the issues or not.

They believe me to be overcautious, anal, and as I hear over and over again "annoying." This is because I make a habit of planning for contingencies, budgeting extra time, and double or triple-checking when everything seems fine. *In fact, I added this sentence as I am going through my third round of edits and tweaks on this chapter.* Most of the time, this is unnecessary, and they point out that I am overreacting. However, 10% of the time I am right, and if I hadn't created contingencies, that 10% isn't just an inconvenience; it's a catastrophe.

For that proportion, without contingencies and overplanning, the flight is missed, the car runs out of gas, the deal falls through, or I miss a critical correction needed in my book that will enter the public sphere, perhaps forever. All of these events create a



**Picture 27.** NYC is a cool city for about two days, until it overwhelms and offends all of my senses. In those two-day stints we've made a lot of memories. This time we spent an evening in a complimentary upgrade to a 2-level suite in The Plaza drinking wine on the patio and picking our wedding songs.

*Turns out love is a toxic positivity trait we're happy to be trapped in.*

chain of deleterious consequences and lost momentum, which serve to compound to far greater losses than the extra care and budgeting I put in the remaining 90% of the time. This isn't a contradiction of the perfectionist trap I've outlined elsewhere; it's the complement. As I explain in Chapter 9, "Time as an Exponential Force," the real skill is learning when "good enough" is actually good enough, and when it's not. Some tasks I aim for perfection, but they are the tasks that *demand* perfection. The cost of failure in certain moments is exponentially greater than the time lost from being overly cautious, and when that's the case, triple-checking isn't neurotic; it's simply an intelligent gamble. Additionally, this 10% of the time creates extreme stress for the optimist, the kind of cortisol-flooding chaos that could've been avoided with just an ounce of foresight. I've seen this unfold countless times; the people I know, who are usually the most laid-back, optimistic, and calm, unravel into states of panic beyond anything I've ever come close to experiencing.

For this reason, I contend that I am not overreacting 90% of the time that I go above and beyond. Instead, the optimists have a fundamentally flawed and broken internal guide on risk and reward. Whereas I am slightly overreacting in the majority of situations, they are critically at risk of situations that will lead to a greater total loss. Using what I term 'strategic pessimism,' I put myself in a state of frequent, manageable stress, and as such am able to almost completely avoid chaotic and debilitating stress. The optimists exist in a system of chronic underreaction, followed by periods of extreme overreaction.

Planning for failure is commonly declared as toxic negativity, and therein lies the problem. Deluding ourselves to believe that nothing can go wrong is the truly toxic trait. Planning for what is inevitable, if not today than someday soon, is a form of honesty that helps us grow stronger and resist collapse. The positivity trap has evolved into a form of dogmatic religion, wherein the proponents persistently and stubbornly refuse to acknowledge reality, even when it repeatedly hits them square in the face.

Voltaire understood this long before we had Instagram gurus pushing "positive vibes only." In *Candide*, the satirical novel he wrote in 1759, he savaged the idea that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds", a line borrowed from Gottlieb Leibniz, an optimist and contemporary of Voltaire. In *Candide*, that phrase is repeated by Dr. Pangloss, a walking caricature of delusional optimism, who insists—through war, rape, plague, and torture—that everything is exactly as it should be. Pangloss watches friends die, cities burn, and lives unravel, yet he refuses to question the script. To admit that the world is cruel, chaotic, and indifferent would be to shatter his worldview. So he clings to optimism like a drunk clings to a bottle.

Candide, a mentee of Pangloss, starts off naïve, believing Pangloss and following his lead. But as the disasters stack up—enslavement, executions, betrayals—he begins to see through it. By the end, his answer isn't another spiritual mantra, it's simple, grounded, and unromantic:

*We must cultivate our garden.*<sup>9</sup> (Voltaire, 1759/2022)

Do the work, make the plan, and build with intention. Accept that the world doesn't care how you *feel* about it. That's wisdom, that's resilience, and that's truth.

This chapter is not about abandoning hope; by now, I've made it abundantly clear I am not a nihilist. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that there is a third option: one that replaces blind optimism with earned confidence. Positivity isn't a strength if it's detached from reality. Sometimes, realism is the most compassionate thing you can offer: to yourself and to the people depending on you.

## The Evolution of Toxic Positivity

The rise of toxic positivity isn't a simple conspiracy, but something more insidious: a system that emerged organically before being deliberately maintained. It began with our natural psychological preference for comfort and reassurance. Feeling good feels... good. Hope is intuitive, so optimism spreads easily. What emerges from psychological chaos inevitably hardens into systems, and systems invariably serve someone's interests.

As positivity culture emerged into a real phenomenon, those in positions of influence took notice; think corporate leaders and media conglomerates. This isn't conspiracy, it's tacit collusion. When behavior demonstrates that it can serve those in power, they promote adhering to said behavior. It's simply human nature. Regarding positivity culture, optimistic consumers buy more, hopeful workers complain less, and investors already convinced of future success willfully ignore even the most obvious warning signs. What began as a natural human tendency transformed into a powerful tool of social control.

This mindset of indoctrinated positivity hijacks your ability to recognize threats, prepare for setbacks, or build genuine resilience. It's the equivalent of removing the smoke detectors from your house because the sound of the alarm is "too negative."

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<sup>9</sup> Voltaire's famous closing line, "*Il faut cultiver notre jardin*" ("We must cultivate our garden"), has generated a range of interpretations. While some see it as a call to withdraw from political or philosophical grandstanding in favor of humble, personal responsibility, others argue the ending is ironic, mocking this lifestyle, while still more argue there is no message at all. Notably, the tone of the book dramatically shifts when Candide resigns to a quiet life, a tone which I would best describe as weary and reflective, the energy all but drained from the narrative. Perhaps Voltaire meant both of these things; it could have simultaneously been a call to withdraw from public drama in favor of tending to one's own personal responsibilities, while also mocking that choice as boring and depressing. Voltaire, no stranger to public drama, was known for his aggression and biting wit, but he also suffered from periods of deep mental turmoil and anxiety. The contrast in tone and message at the end of *Candide* could speak to the duality of his own spirit and his own life. Regardless, we will never know, it is all just speculative. What isn't speculative is that Voltaire was deeply critical of blind optimism, which is the purpose of his inclusion in this chapter.

The truth is, every self-help guru peddling the mantra to “just think positive” is selling intellectual anesthesia, and every corporate culture that demands performative enthusiasm is building fragility. The most devastating result of this toxic culture of positivity, however, is how reality is presented on social media. Every social media feed filled with curated happiness drives towards the natural reflex to compare ourselves to this false ideal, leading to depression.

That last point deserves emphasis and expansion. Social media platforms, under the guise of connection, have become engines of psychological distortion; especially for the young. Study after study confirms what intuition already tells us: if we want to feel better in the long run, uninstall Instagram, log off from Facebook, and step away from TikTok (Dolan, 2024; Plackett, Blyth, & Schartau, 2023). The curated snapshots of lives edited for maximum envy are undeniably harmful. We may feel happy as we scroll and view them in real time, that’s how they’re designed; they exist as algorithmically curated dopamine traps that replace real social bonds with filtered illusions. This changes over time, as we become more addicted to the platform and the false connection it provides, the less connected we become to those around us, driving further addiction, dependency, and depression. As we spiral down this trap, what previously made us smile begins to make us feel inadequate, broken and alone.

In short, youth mental health is in crisis, and it’s not because kids suddenly became spontaneously physiologically weak. Instead, it’s because we’ve submerged them into a system that demands constant comparison without offering meaningful context, while simultaneously villainizing discomfort and struggle as toxic abuse. Everyone looks richer, happier, fitter, and more fulfilled, because that’s all they’re allowed to show. If you dare interrupt the feed with reality, you’re accused of being negative, toxic, and unwell, and that’s if your post isn’t suppressed immediately by the algorithms.

This is the most egregious form of mental pacification that has ever existed. The new social contract goes like this: perform positively, suppress discomfort, and sacrifice truth on the altar of ‘vibes.’ But resilience doesn’t come from vibes, it is built from confronting reality and overcoming its challenges, after which it is solidified into strength. We cannot build resilience and strength unless we commit to seeing things clearly, even when it hurts—especially when it hurts.

## **The Failures of Positivity**

Positivity, when used as a mindset, often functions instead as a path towards avoidance. Remaining faithful to positivity demands you ignore warning signs, assume best-case outcomes, and suppress any emotion that doesn’t align with a curated, performative cheerfulness. Critically, it disables strategic thinking by replacing it with hope. The cost isn’t just preparation, it’s perception itself. The committed optimist gradually loses the ability to recognize genuine threats. They

mistake warning signs for negativity, interpret preparation as fear, and conflate caution with weakness.

This cognitive narrowing isn't just a personal vulnerability, it's become institutionalized, leading to large-scale societal issues. Companies that punish "negative thinking" find themselves blindsided by obvious market shifts, while relationships built on "keeping things positive" collapse under the first real challenge. The outcomes reveal that societies that demand collective optimism walk straight into preventable disasters. The greatest trick of the positivity cult is convincing you that seeing reality clearly is a pathology to be cured rather than a strength to be developed. What breaks us, and society, isn't seeing the truth with clear eyes, it's pretending that we don't in order to maintain an impossible illusion of perfection. We will not break this cycle until we acknowledge that rightful criticism, and pragmatic planning, are not moral failings deserving of derision, but necessary tools to protect us from the challenges of our world. Until we acknowledge this, we will stagnate in a state of delusional weakness.

## **The False Dichotomy**

Negativity isn't the answer, either, at least not when it paralyzes effort. A pessimistic worldview that leads to inaction is no more useful than optimism that leads to unpreparedness. This false dichotomy, namely, that you must choose between blind optimism and crippling pessimism, is itself a manipulation. It's like being told your only food options are sugar or poison. It creates an artificial choice designed to push you toward the 'positive' option.

Real mental strength doesn't choose between these artificial poles. It incorporates the strategic elements of both while rejecting their weaknesses. It uses optimism as fuel for action without surrendering to its delusions, and uses pessimism as radar for threats without surrendering to its paralysis. The strongest minds aren't "positive" or "negative"; they're ruthlessly accurate. They see what's there, not what they wish to see or fear to see.

## **Strategic Pessimism: The Framework for Resilience**

The strongest mental framework, which I alluded to earlier, is strategic pessimism: the active anticipation of failure without surrendering to it. It's the mindset that studies every possible breakdown, every possible betrayal, every structural weak point, and prepares for it in advance. Employing this mindset is not done in the hope that things will go wrong, but instead, the knowledge that they might, and that building a strategy accordingly is the best chance at guaranteeing successful outcomes.

This approach has deep historical roots. The ancient Stoics practiced *premeditatio malorum*, or the premeditation of evils, and they did this not to induce anxiety, but



to eliminate it. By rehearsing potential setbacks in advance, they removed the shock that amplifies suffering. While this specific practice has not been extensively studied under that name, modern psychology has explored related techniques under different frameworks. Research on defensive pessimism, for example, shows that anticipating negative outcomes can improve coping responses and lower anxiety by fostering a sense of control and preparedness (Seery et al., 2008; Norem & Cantor, 1986). Similarly, studies on mental contrasting, which is a cognitive strategy that juxtaposes desired outcomes with anticipated obstacles, demonstrate that this mindset yields enhanced motivation and resilience when facing real-world challenges (Wang, Wang, & Gai, 2021; Oettingen, Myer, & Brinkmann, 2010). Even in the broader literature on mental rehearsal, evidence suggests that simulating difficult scenarios in advance can reduce stress responses and enhance problem-solving under pressure (Arora et al., 2011; Driskell, Copper, & Moran, 1994). These strategies differ in emphasis, but all point toward a common insight: mentally confronting hardship before it arrives can inoculate us against its full force.

Strategic pessimism differs from defensive pessimism in one critical concept; rather than setting a low bar for one's own expected performance, the bar is set low everywhere else. The strategic pessimist does not fear what is within their control, for they know they have prepared fully. The strategic pessimist simply acknowledges that chaos exists and that we cannot rely on others.

The strategic pessimist understands that negativity, in certain contexts, is not only *not* harmful, but helpful. Neuroscience shows that we process negative stimuli with greater neural activity than positive ones, a phenomenon known as negativity bias. When something threatens us, our brain fires harder, faster, and more extensively, especially in regions such as the amygdala and prefrontal cortex (Cherry, 2023). Evolution has tuned us this way: early humans who fixated on dangers, rather than ignoring them, were the ones who survived (Baumeister et al., 2001; Ito et al., 1998). While modern culture often treats negativity as a flaw to be 'fixed,' by embracing this bias rather than rejecting it, we can sharpen our focus, think more critically, and plan more carefully. Strategic pessimism taps into this evolutionary feature deliberately in order to engineer better outcomes. By treating negative possibilities as design challenges rather than existential threats, we transform a raw survival instinct into a tool for resilience.

This makes the cultural push for relentless positivity even more paradoxical. On one hand, we're told to "manifest abundance," "stay grateful," and avoid "negative energy," as if the absence of those emotions indicates mental incapacity. On the other, we're bombarded with an endless feed of existential threats: climate change, political instability, algorithmic manipulation, and more. The result is cognitive whiplash that is marked by a jarring blend of socially-enforced optimism and ambient dread. This isn't accidental. By keeping people suspended between despair and denial, the powers-that-be can erode both resistance and clarity. When the world

feels unchangeably broken, we surrender. When we're told it's already perfect, or could be perfect with just one or two easy changes, we stop questioning. Either way, we're less likely to act. Strategic pessimism offers a third path: it doesn't indulge despair or repress discomfort, it leverages negativity as a signal to act. In doing so, it restores agency and gives a path towards creating the change we need to thrive, one thought leader at a time.

The optimist assumes the flight won't be delayed or cancelled, the strategic pessimist books an earlier flight. The optimist assumes their business partners will do their job, while the strategic pessimist builds redundancy. The optimist assumes the economy will rebound, and the strategic pessimist ensures they can survive if it doesn't. Strategic pessimism doesn't undermine action like debilitating pessimism. Instead, it informs it, and amplifies it.

The strategic pessimist goes above and beyond because they know the worst is possible and are determined to succeed in spite of it. By adhering to this philosophy you won't eliminate risk, but you will manage it. Strategic pessimism doesn't consider outcomes, it focuses on capabilities, understanding that our capabilities are what determine our outcomes. We need to resist the temptation of fantasy, of the day-dream type question "What do I hope will happen?" and instead, ask ourselves "What can I withstand if everything goes wrong, and how can I get back en route towards my purpose?"

By reframing our perception of pessimism, and realigning ourselves to think like this, we ground ourselves in reality and amplify our probability of success. We commit to being the masters of our own ship, while acknowledging the dangerous unpredictability of the sea. If we don't, our future success becomes unpredictable and erratic, resulting in shaken confidence, lower self-image, and loss of momentum, purpose, and vision. When the most important consideration in life is remaining true to our purpose, logic suggests we map and prepare the course of our journey. Strategic pessimism gives us the tools to do just that.

## **Positivity as Social Control**

As I alluded to earlier, one of the most insidious aspects of toxic positivity is how effectively it functions as social control. It's the perfect self-reinforcing system that labels warnings as negativity, shames those who speak up while rewarding those who stay quiet. As the culture spread, becoming pervasive in our society, all that needed to be done was to watch as people silenced themselves.

This has created an environment where critical thinking becomes socially expensive. Speaking truth costs relationships, raising warnings costs opportunities, and preparing for downsides often leads to ostracism. We need only look at how whistleblowers are treated in corporate environments, or how "doomers" are mocked in investment communities. Many can reflect upon how "negative" people

are excluded from family decisions or friend group discussions. In today's society, the punishment for honesty and accuracy in assessment is swift and severe.

The result isn't just individual vulnerability but collective blindness. Organizations that punish truth-telling don't receive less bad news, they just ensure it arrives too late. Families that demand positivity don't prevent problems, they just ensure they're underprepared when problems arrive. This only serves those at the top, the largest corporations and individuals with the infrastructure, momentum, and means, to ensure forward movement. While others falter due to the cult of toxic positivity, strategic pessimists churn on despite it.

## The Concrete Alternative

As I've thoroughly detailed, strategic pessimism is a form of realism with intent and purpose. It's not cynicism, and it's certainly not philosophical pessimism, which I feel obliged to address. Philosophical pessimism holds that life is, on balance, more bad than good, and that this imbalance renders existence questionable or even condemnable. Thinkers like Arthur Schopenhauer and David Benatar argue that the pain of life isn't just frequent, it's defining.

Considering only their initial diagnosis in a specific lens, that being the calculus of all experiences and our emotional impact from them, they are overwhelmingly correct. But that's where their prescience ends. Schopenhauer's line that life is "a business that can't cover its costs" (1818/1969, p. 547) captures a truth we all feel eventually, if even for a moment. Neuroscience backs it up: the mind weighs pain more heavily than pleasure. Loss etches deeper grooves in memory than gain ever can (Tom et al., 2007; McGaugh, 2004).

Benatar (2006, p. 30) radicalizes this into his so-called asymmetry:

- (1) *the presence of pain is bad, and that*
- (2) *the presence of pleasure is good.*

However, such a symmetrical evaluation does not seem to apply to the absence of pain and pleasure, for it strikes me as true that

- (3) *the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas*
- (4) *the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation.*

He posits one example:

*[S]upport for the asymmetry between (3) and (4) can be found in the asymmetrical judgements about (a) (distant) suffering and (b) uninhabited portions of the earth or the universe. Where-as, at least when we think of*

*them, we rightly are sad for inhabitants of a foreign land whose lives are characterized by suffering, when we hear that some island is unpopulated, we are not similarly sad for the happy people who, had they existed, would have populated this island. Similarly, nobody really mourns for those who do not exist on Mars, feeling sorry for potential such beings that they cannot enjoy life. Yet, if we knew that there were sentient life on Mars but that Martians were suffering, we would regret this for them. The claim here need not (but could) be the strong one that we would regret their very existence. The fact that we would regret the suffering within their life is sufficient to support the asymmetry I am defending. The point is that we regret suffering but not the absent pleasures of those who could have existed.* (Benatar, 2006, p. 35)

He takes this idea to the conclusion that nonexistence is preferable, at least as a procreative judgment.<sup>10</sup> I disagree with the premise of his asymmetry, namely, I contest his position on the 4th situation: if a flourishing society at its peak had collectively decided that life was not worth continuing, and as such ceased to procreate, the loss of what could have been would strike me as far more tragic than the persistence of suffering in a society mired in misery, failure to progress, or willful destruction of its neighbors. In short, Benatar's philosophy isn't courage; it's a philosophy born of cowardice masquerading as logic. By cowardice, I refer to what I believe to be a deep-seated fear of confronting one's own misery through introspection.

I also disagree with Benatar's conclusion that life isn't worth living, and that procreation is unethical. My position is that life does cover the costs for myself, and for many others. That is a subjective truth. I am not denying that their positions are their own subjective truths, but they both argue as if they are objective truths for all,

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<sup>10</sup> Benatar makes other fallacious arguments as to why existence is immoral and undesirable, but to refute all of them I would need to write a book on Benatar, which I am not willing to do. Moreover, his response to those who suggest life is worthwhile rest on this statement: "*Self assessments of one's life-quality are unreliable*" and he further defends his position on not coherently presenting proper logic with a statement claiming, in short, that you must accept his positions as true, and then his conclusion is logically true. . . . and if you are a skeptic, he won't spend the time to convince you his positions are, in fact, true. So, I feel I owe him no benefit of the doubt: "*In support of the asymmetry between (3) and (4), it can be shown that it has considerable explanatory power. It explains at least four other asymmetries that are quite plausible. Sceptics, when they see where this leads, may begin to question the plausibility of these other asymmetries and may want to know what support (beyond the asymmetry above) can be provided for them. Were I to provide such support, the sceptics would then ask for a defence of these further supporting considerations. Every argument must have some justificatory end. I cannot hope to convince those who take the rejection of my conclusion as axiomatic*" (Benatar, 2006, p. 31-32).

which is wrong. I further argue that their subjective misery is due to their own inability to assess themselves and the reason for their misery, making their subjective misery their own fault, and certainly not predetermined.

Benatar and Schopenhauer's anti-natalism is the quiet cruelty of sterilizing the human project in the name of avoiding discomfort. I feel this needs a greater clarification; I am not necessarily stating that Benatar and Schopenhauer *are* cowards in totality, I am stating that this position emerges from the fear to confront the reasons for their own misery. Rather than evaluating the reasons for their own unhappiness, they utilize their cognitive capacity to rationalize their individual experience.

In the pursuit of clarity, and to ensure my words cannot be mistaken as an *ad hominem* attack on Benatar and Schopenhauer, I need to reiterate again that one can act or think in a manner that is cowardly while not being a coward, I need to make this clear lest it seem I am using an *ad hominem* attack. I do not reject their positions because *they* are cowards, I reject the position because it comes from a *place of cowardice* and, critically, because it is wrong. Benatar is right about certain things, and in these aspects he has actually shown tremendous courage,<sup>11</sup> but on this, his anti-natalist stance is hollow, an irrational view that refuses to confront the full range of what life makes possible.

What philosophical pessimists miss is that even if life is *more* suffering than gain when tallied up individually, without context, on a spreadsheet of our experiences, it still doesn't follow that life is unjustifiable. For starters, we tend to remember only the peak unhappiness of each experience (Redelmeier, Katz, & Kahneman, 2003; Redelmeier & Kahneman, 1996; Kahneman et al., 1993). For instance, our memory of the uncomfortable experience of flying in a cramped airplane is likely the same regardless of whether the flight was 4 hours or 7 hours. Most of our negative experiences are relatively mild (Almeida, Wethington, & Kessler, 2002), which means they fade quickly from memory and are unlikely to be recalled again (Rubin &

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<sup>11</sup> One of those "certain things" is Benatar's overlooked but important work *The Second Sexism*, where he details the ways in which men, too, face structural disadvantages in areas like military conscription, occupational death, parental rights, and societal disposability. I found myself agreeing with many of the positions he put forth in this book. Long before it was published, I was already involved in discussions about systemic biases against men, which are often dismissed or mocked in mainstream discourse. While Benatar was late to that conversation in broader cultural terms, he was early for an *academic*, and that distinction matters, because expressing these views within the academy remains professionally risky. Moreover, while I don't share Benatar's broader pessimism about existence, I respect his courage in confronting these inconvenient realities, especially given how unfashionable they are to acknowledge publicly. Benatar's work here leads me to another possibility: he may simply be a provocateur with no care for accuracy or truth. He simply stumbled onto a provocative idea in *The Second Sexism* which happened to be grounded in coherent logic. That would make his position on anti-natalism dishonest, and not born of cowardice. Of course, I cannot know his intentions and motivations for certain.

Wenzel, 1996). For instance, psychological research on the Fading Affect Bias shows that the emotional agony of unpleasant events tends to diminish more quickly over time than the lingering warmth of positive memories (Walker & Skowronski, 2009). Additionally, we tend to utilize a defense mechanism called “rosy retrospection bias,” which rewrites our memories in a more positive light (Adler & Pansky, 2020). This doesn’t contradict the well-documented negativity bias; we are still more likely to notice and remember negative information in the moment, but over time our recollections can become selectively edited to emphasize the positive, even turning memories that were potentially negative in the moment into positive recollections. This is how nostalgia works.

Our objective reality is influenced by our subjective interpretations, which are guided by our distorted cognition, which has been corrupted by our subjective experiences. This subjective experience is further molded by altered memories of the past and hopeful aspirations of the future. Considering this complex dynamic, we can conclude that by altering our subjective perception, the objective reality we observe from our cognitive analysis can likewise be shifted to support a more positive and fulfilling experience.

To avoid confusion, I want to explain what I mean by our subjective interpretation changing our objective reality with an example. The sky being blue is an objective reality due to wavelengths and how our eyes interpret them. Likewise, if we are stabbed in the shoulder, we will experience an objective amount of pain signals which are measurable. However, we can alter our perception of those signals, we can also alter our memory of them, and when we do this, we are effectively able to reframe the red and black on the balance ledger of our existence.

The culmination of all of this means that there is truly no objective reality when it comes to our lives: nothing is objectively good or bad, it is just how we interpret it, both in the moment and through our memory. As such, there is no definitive manner in which we could objectively say life doesn’t cover the costs, or for that matter that it does for everyone, always. It can be said that with dedication we can maximize the likelihood that our lives are full of purpose, happiness, and are subjectively worth living.

Thinkers like Schopenhauer and Benatar reject another key consideration: to exist is to have the capacity for joy, for meaning, for achievement that ripples beyond the self. Denying existence doesn’t just prevent pain, it erases love, courage, laughter, discovery, and creativity. If pleasure and meaning are real, even imperfectly, then to erase them absolutely is its own form of harm.

I don’t deny life’s brutality. I know firsthand that suffering usually outweighs ease *in each isolated moment*. Despite this, *I’m happy, and I’m fulfilled*. I achieve these states not because I pretend life is sweet, but because I’ve trained myself to focus on the present moment, with a vision of how that will affect my future. Pain teaches us

important lessons, but utilizing them is only possible when anchoring them to purpose, fixating on progress, and stacking small wins. When we realize this, and act upon it, we are able to transform our suffering into *fuel for growth*. It's not the ratio of good to bad that defines a life, it's where your focus and attention are set to, and what you do next. This is why my philosophy in life, a mantra I repeat daily, is *always forward*. Of course, I detail introspection in Chapter 7, which necessitates looking back, but, critically, I detail that the purpose of looking back is to understand who we were, so we can work towards being who we want to become. This means that even when looking back, the purpose is to move forward, always forward.

Strategic pessimism is the lens I use, it's not a verdict I accept. Life is difficult, but we are wired with a **will to continue** that emerges even in our worst moments. When you're drowning, even intentionally so, nothing else matters but preservation of life, so you fight for breath, you fight for survival. This is why purposefully drowning often fails as a suicide strategy; even in our darkest moments, the will to live takes over when confronted with mortal danger. This isn't an error, it's wired into us, instinctually, and it's our innate resilience.

Hope, when paired with action, becomes strategy. Even in a life marked by hardship, a single movement toward meaning can outweigh a thousand wounds. Happiness isn't the absence of pain, it's the commitment to move forward anyway. The purpose of strategic pessimism isn't about expecting the worst to protect our emotional expectations; it's about making sure the worst doesn't end you. It's the mindset that keeps ambition intact by refusing to let fragility masquerade as courage. It's a system, a framework, a philosophy, and a way to plan that doesn't rely on hope or positive vibes. Some methods in which you can utilize strategic pessimism are listed below:

## Identify Dependencies

What are you counting on that might fail? What assumptions, if proven wrong, would collapse your plans? Perhaps your business relies on a single supplier, a business partner's integrity, or your own untested stamina? Dependencies are often invisible to us until they break. It's critical to root them out and make them visible now.

## Build Redundancies

Create backup systems for every critical function. The rule is simple: anything that can't fail needs at least one alternative path. If there's only one path forward, you're not strategic, you're gambling in an all-in push on black, and sooner or later, your entire stack of chips is going to the house.

## Set Tripwires

What does failure look like *before* it's obvious? Where's the early smoke before the fire? Define the signs that signal course correction, not after you hit the wall, but while there's still room to steer.

## Create Margins

Build buffers for time, resources, and emotional recovery that allow you to absorb setbacks without catastrophe. These aren't luxuries, they're critical considerations protecting your long-term survival. The narrower your margins, the more vulnerable you are.

## Maintain Optionality

Avoid committing all resources to a single path. Keep alternatives viable even when pursuing your primary strategy, and never let your ambition trap you into a gamble. Of course, this is not always possible, and there are many times that I was left with a single chance, a single path. If these times had resulted in failure, not success, I wouldn't be where I am today. It was luck, not strategy, and I acknowledge that. That is precisely why I follow this strategy today, as I never again want to be forced into a decision and gamble like I previously was.

This approach doesn't limit ambition, it protects it. It ensures your goals don't become weapons turned against you.

## Conclusion: Living in Reality

In a world increasingly ruled by illusion, hope, and fake cheerfulness, strategic pessimism isn't depression, it's critical defense. It's the mindset of those who don't just want to win, but to survive long enough to keep winning. The great irony is that strategic pessimism often creates outcomes leading to true happiness and positivity than blind optimism. By anticipating problems, you solve them before they become catastrophes. By preparing for setbacks, you recover faster when they arrive. By acknowledging reality's harshness, you build the strength to endure it.

This approach doesn't sell well in a marketplace dominated by quick fixes and positive thinking. It doesn't promise overnight transformation or effortless success. It promises something more valuable: the capacity to face reality without flinching and to build something meaningful that lasts. Plan for what's improbable, but possible. This doesn't mean to plan contingencies for an asteroid leading to the end of society, but it does mean considering natural disasters, trade wars, human incompetence, fraud, deceit, and economic crises.

Plan for the worst, so that when it comes, it's just another Tuesday.



**Picture 28.** Harley scaring off a black bear on our property



*Eat the frog? Harley eats bears for breakfast.*

## CHAPTER 14:

# Strategic Task Sequencing - When to Eat the Frog and When to Build Momentum

*The key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities.*

- STEPHEN COVEY

When I was a kid, we didn't have money for resorts or flights. Our vacations were a tent, a fire pit, and a patch of forest somewhere remote enough to lose cell service (not that anyone had cell service back then). My mom, my sister, my aunt, my cousin, and I all slept on the ground, half-soaked from dew, satisfied from roasting hot dogs and marshmallows over the fire and pretending it was an upgrade from home. I loved it, or at least some of it, and parts of me still do; at least, the parts that don't involve waking up with a spider in my sleeping bag, or using an outhouse (or a hole) as my only bathroom, or being blinded by the smoke from our campfire. Ironically, the part I hated most as a child, submerging myself in glacier-fed lakes in order to have a quick "bath" with a bar of soap, is now one of my greatest pleasures (cold plunges).

During the day, and sometimes all day, I caught frogs; that was always a constant. Not just frogs, I should add, but snakes and salamanders too, or indeed anything squirmy, fast, and alive. I don't know why I was so obsessed. Maybe because frogs were easy to spot but hard to catch. Maybe because they lived right at the edge of stillness and movement, between nature and nuisance. Or maybe I just liked the chase.

I still love nature more than almost anything. That's why I live on an acreage now, with bears, raccoons, owls, and coyotes passing through like background characters in a documentary. I'm not exaggerating—many of the locals that we know by patches of color, size, or behavior have names. As an adult, I've traded sleeping on rocks for a soft bed and indoor plumbing, but the instinct's the same: stay close to the wild, but don't pretend suffering is the same as strength. On my current property, there are no frogs, but the one I'm planning to acquire will have a pond, and of course, I will stock that pond with frogs (and turtles, fish, etc.). Not to chase, or to catch, but to observe, and remember.

I didn't know back then that one day frogs would become a metaphor trotted out by productivity experts who have probably never baited a hook or dug a latrine. "*Eat the frog*", they say. This advice follows a simple formula: identify your most difficult task, your "frog," and tackle it first thing in the morning when your willpower and focus are strongest. This approach makes logical sense. By confronting your most challenging work immediately, you prevent the psychological weight of avoidance from accumulating throughout the day. You eliminate the energy drain of dread, and you build momentum. But this formula, like all one-size-fits-all advice, has a critical flaw: it assumes a baseline psychological state that doesn't always exist.

Some days, the days where you do not have it in you to rise to your hardest challenge first thing, trying to eat the frog first doesn't build momentum, it chokes it. You stare at that slippery, oversized amphibian first thing in the morning and your brain says: "Nope." When days like this unfold, instead of building strength, you just avoid everything, which includes the small things that *could* have gotten you moving.

It's like trying to build a fire by lighting a full log. You can strike the match, you can will it into flame, but nothing's going to catch without kindling. Real fires start small, you need tinder, twigs, dry bark, some scrap paper you brought with you, low-resistance fuel that invites the spark. Only after the flame is steady do you add weight. It's not weakness to begin with the easy stuff, it's physics, and it's how systems catch. The "eat the frog" crowd forgets this, positing that discipline is a raw force of its own, but it's not. Instead, it's friction management, and if the fire never starts, the log never burns.

This chapter is about frogs, both the real ones and the metaphorical ones. It's about understanding when to chase them, when to eat them, and when to start with something smaller, warmer, and more manageable before the frog even knows you're coming.

Let's get into it.

## **The Immobilization Trap**

In practice, there are days when facing your most intimidating task first doesn't lead to productivity, it leads to paralysis. As I indicated, the mental barrier becomes so formidable that rather than confronting it, you avoid work entirely. You clean the kitchen, reorganize your desk, scroll through social media, or set your focus on any other number of tasks, some of which feel productive, but aren't. You do anything that avoids your frog. Hours pass, and the weight of what you haven't done grows heavier.

The very task that most needs completion becomes the psychological barrier that prevents all progress. On these days, the standard "eat your frog first" approach doesn't create momentum, it destroys it before it begins. This happens for an important reason: when motivation is already depleted, confronting your most anxiety-inducing task creates such cognitive strain that your mind instinctively seeks escape. This isn't weakness, it's how neural threat-detection systems operate when reserves are low. When we seek out to tackle our frog every day, failing to do so, in time we demolish all momentum, and eventually, even the smallest tasks feel like they're a frog.

## **Hormesis and Mental Load**

As I've repeated throughout likely every chapter, hormesis isn't just a physical principle, it applies equally to cognitive and emotional stress. The idea that "more

stress equals more growth” is fundamentally wrong. It’s the right dose of stress, applied at the right time, followed by adequate recovery, that creates the positive adaptation. This is true in the gym, and it’s just as true at your desk.

If you’re physically exhausted, pushing through a high-intensity workout doesn’t make you stronger, it dramatically increases your risk of injury. Likewise, if you’re mentally depleted, forcing yourself to start with your hardest task doesn’t build discipline, it builds dysfunction. You don’t adapt, you regress, and end up creating fragility instead of building capacity.

The dose makes the medicine. On days when you’re cognitively depleted, “eating the frog” first is like sprinting with a sprained ankle. You’re not training discipline, you’re reinforcing failure patterns and cognitive fragility. Strategic task sequencing is cognitive hormesis: starting small to activate mental momentum, then moving into discomfort while your system is warmed up, regulated, and ready to handle load. The goal is adaptation, and to circumvent the mental barriers creating avoidance. Adaptation only happens inside your psychological hormetic window, not beyond it.

## **The Momentum-Building Alternative**

The solution isn’t abandoning prioritization but adapting it to your psychological state. On low-motivation days, an alternative approach proves far more effective:

Begin with 1-3 simple, quick tasks you can complete with minimal resistance. Use the completion of these tasks to generate psychological momentum, and then immediately transition to the most challenging task your brain doesn’t recoil from while momentum carries you forward. Sometimes, you can jump straight to your frog; other times, you may need to gradually ratchet up the difficulty throughout your day to build momentum. Critically, ensure you don’t try to jump up in task difficulty too fast, as you could undo all of the work you did to build up what you have. This approach works because it leverages how your brain processes achievement. Each completed task, no matter how small, triggers the release of dopamine, which improves motivation.

## **Implementation Reality**

The productivity world loves rigid systems: color-coded calendars, fifteen-minute time blocks, and sacred morning rituals. However, real productivity—the kind that consistently drives work—requires flexibility. The goal is *increasing the volume of work you produce, maximizing the impact of what you produce to ensure it’s directed at your goals and purpose, and measuring the tangible outcomes that materialize as a result of both*. This doesn’t happen with fanatical devotion to perfect scheduling. Achieving the goal requires us to adapt in real time.

If small tasks are mission-critical (like responding to customers or consultants working on your projects), handle them immediately regardless of timing.

Responsiveness can often be more valuable than rigid task sequencing. I wrote about this extensively in Chapter 9.

If you're in a flow with a challenging task, and nothing pressing interrupts you, continue until your progress naturally slows or halts from mental overload. Flow states are precious, don't sacrifice them for arbitrary time blocks.

If you're juggling multiple mentally demanding tasks, treat it like high-intensity training, super-setting exercises that hit different muscle groups. Switch between tasks that engage distinct cognitive systems: analytical to creative, verbal to spatial. It's not distraction, it's active recovery. Rotate wisely, and you can push harder, longer, without frying your mental circuits.

Personally, I rotate between writing multiple books at once. When I hit mental fatigue on one, I pivot to another that draws from a different kind of thinking. It's not multitasking, it's *output cycling*, and it keeps the system moving without burning it out.

## Mental Taxation and Context Switching

Not all mental tasks deplete the same cognitive resources, at least not at first. Different types of work engage distinct neural pathways and systems. Reading dense philosophical text taxes different regions than analyzing data or creative writing. This physiological reality creates an opportunity.

By deliberately alternating between cognitively distinct tasks, you can maintain productive output far longer than through singular focus. When one mental system approaches fatigue, switch to a task that engages a different system. Some may try to frame this as disorganization, implying inefficiency, but the reality is that it's strategic neural resource management, leading to improved overall efficiency. There is a critical caveat: switching between similar tasks creates true context-switching costs. Moving between two analytical tasks or two creative writing projects in rapid succession drains efficiency. The key is alternating between tasks that engage sufficiently different neural systems.

It's also critically important to switch tasks *before* you burn out, *not after*. I've struggled to come up with an analogy for this, but it seems that even though different tasks draw from different tanks, they all draw from the same system. If any one tank runs completely dry, the entire system goes into disarray. This is why, when I notice I am slowing down on a task, I switch before I burn out. When I have pushed through in the past, all the way to collapse, I have noticed that I lose the ability to effectively switch to even my easiest tasks. I am just burnt out, slow, stupid, and paralyzed with mental fatigue.

This is also true for the muscles, and our body. When we are super-setting exercises, at first, we are taxing different muscle groups. However, if we continue pushing to exhaustion, we cannot switch and start exercising on a fresh muscle group, our bodies just say no. This is true even if you are completely “fresh” in one area. If you just finished a marathon, struggling to walk, you certainly won’t be able to bang out some heavy back squats, but you also won’t be able to effectively work out your chest through bench pressing, even though those muscles are presumably fresh.

## **Avoidance as an Intelligence-Driven Trap**

As I detailed in previous chapters, high-performance individuals often fall into sophisticated avoidance patterns. Rather than admitting psychological resistance, they construct elaborate justifications: “*I need more research,*” “*I’m waiting for the perfect timing,*” “*I need to refine my approach.*” These aren’t always conscious lies, usually they’re self-protective mechanisms that sound reasonable precisely because other intelligent people have created them. The more analytical your mind, the more convincing your own avoidance narratives become.

Recognizing this tendency is crucial. When you find yourself constructing increasingly complex reasons why now isn’t the right time to start your most important task, it’s almost always resistance masquerading as thoroughness. The solution isn’t pushing through regardless of mental state, that leads back to the hormetic problem. Instead, build momentum with small completions, then transition directly to the challenging task before your mind constructs new barriers.

## **The Asymmetry of Delay**

Avoiding your highest-impact task today doesn’t just defer progress by one day. As I detailed in Chapter 9, ignoring this often multiplies downstream costs exponentially. High-leverage tasks typically govern or enable multiple subsequent actions. Delaying them creates compounding inefficiency.

Consider email responses to collaborators, the example I gave when discussing this topic earlier in the book. When someone is waiting on your input to proceed, the true cost of delay isn’t measured in your time, but in the cascading delays across their work and potentially entire teams. A five-minute task delayed by a day might easily create 40+ person-hours of downstream inefficiency.

This asymmetry applies equally to internal projects. The report you avoid writing today doesn’t just get pushed to tomorrow, it potentially delays every dependent decision, meeting, and implementation step. The compounding effect means a one-day delay often translates to weeks of project slippage. Understanding this asymmetry transforms your approach to task prioritization. The question isn’t just “What’s most important?” but “What, if delayed, creates the most extensive downstream costs?”

## Faux Productivity Traps

Perhaps the most insidious barrier to meaningful progress is the allure of faux productivity, which are activities that feel productive but generate minimal actual value. These include:

- Excessive email organization and ‘inbox zero’ pursuits.
- Over-optimizing your productivity system itself.
- Creating elaborate planning documents instead of executing.
- Perfecting conditions before starting (perfect workspace, perfect silence).
- Consuming productivity content rather than producing work.

These activities are particularly dangerous because they satisfy the urge to feel productive without delivering substantive results. They provide the psychological reward of “doing something” while avoiding the discomfort of challenging work. The test is simple: at day’s end, did you advance your highest-leverage projects, or did you just rearrange the furniture around them? True productivity moves meaningful work forward, not just the appearance of work. I want to say that I do typically achieve inbox zero, but it is never a priority over pressing tasks; I achieve it more due to my compulsion to work and get things done, than to ensure I respond to everything in proper order.

## The Psychology of Starting

The fundamental insight here is that sometimes the greatest challenge isn’t the task itself but the psychological barrier to beginning. By starting with achievable tasks, you shift your focus from the anticipated pain of the difficult task to the immediate reward of completion. This psychological reframing is powerful enough to overcome the inertia that would otherwise consume the entire day.

What makes this approach effective is that it isn’t about avoiding the hard task, it’s about strategically building the psychological resources needed to confront it. It’s similar to how experienced weightlifters might begin with lighter warm-up sets before attempting their heaviest lifts, not to avoid the challenge, but to prepare specifically for it.

When all is going well, I typically eat my frog first thing, and move forward at full throttle. This may last days, weeks, or even months, but inevitably, eventually I burn out. Maybe I catch a cold, push too hard in the gym, succumb to extensive travel and jet lag, or some catastrophe derails me. When this happens I recognize that the frog, first thing, is out of reach. So, rather than eating it, I build my momentum all over again, so that as soon as my mind is ready I can return to full throttle.

## **Conclusion: Strategic Adaptability Over Rigid Rules**

The most valuable insight isn't about which task sequencing method is universally superior, because they're all contextual, it's about recognizing that different psychological states require different approaches. Mental resilience doesn't come from forcing yourself through a single methodology regardless of circumstance; it comes from strategically adapting your approach based on an honest assessment of your current capacity.

On days when your motivation is strong, eat the frog first. On days when inertia threatens to consume you, build momentum first, then confront your priority as soon as you have. Framing this as a compromise is dishonest because the alternative is failure. This is strategic adaptation in the pursuit of maximal output. It's not about avoiding difficulty but about ensuring you actually engage with it rather than spending the day in avoidance behaviors. The real discipline is in knowing which task to strike first, and executing tactically, whether that's the hardest, or the easiest.



**Picture 29.** Harley and I pontificating



*Two thinkers. One wondering about the nature of existence. One wondering about snack distribution.*

## CHAPTER 15:

# Confronting Existential Realities Through Philosophy and Literature

*We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.*

- OSCAR WILDE

I'm not exactly sure what to say about this chapter. Without a doubt, it *was* my favorite chapter when writing this book, or, it was the chapter in which I had the most to say. It's critical to the concept and the area I am possibly the most studied. Perhaps more importantly, it is what I spend the largest amount of my time thinking about. As I added, refined, and went down the rabbit hole of this chapter it grew and grew. Long debates on each thinker took place between myself and two of my editors, Vadim and Ljubomir, both of whom have advanced degrees in Philosophy, all of us with different, but overlapping, interpretations and views on thought, truth, ethics and society.

I believe I have previously alluded to the fact that in most debates between us, it is rare that all 3 of us fully agree, and even more so that any combination of two of us do not agree. It is sort of like a fluid war of thoughts, like the three superpowers in Orwell's *1984*, allegiances changing erratically. Although unlike in *1984*, the changes in allegiance are based on truth and honesty, not manufactured to control.

As we debated and expanded, this chapter ballooned to ~25,000 words—almost long enough to be its own book. Somehow, it was both much too long but also too short. With each thinker discussed below, the three of us “compromised” in the name of “brevity,” not going down certain rabbit holes, or adding counter thoughts to represent the antithesis to their position. As we made the last edits, an uneasiness struck me. I brought it up, and both Vadim and Ljubomir were in complete agreement: Chapter 15 was completely out of place in the book, simultaneously being absolutely necessary, but also in some ways an extraneous digression from the book's main purpose.

As we discussed what to do, perhaps shorten each thinker and cut down the content in half again or more, the realization struck me that the reason we were having such a hard time with this chapter is that through the way we wanted to tackle it, it *deserved to be a book of its own*. So, that is the direction we went with. Shortly after I release *StressHacked*, we will release an expanded version of the *original* Chapter 15 as a separate title: *The Stone Wall: Human Nature, Power, and the Failures of Justice*. As with all of my books, it will be available free on my website as either a digital or audio download. On Amazon it will be priced at the lowest allowed price for the print edition, Audible, and Kindle.

Pursuing this new title led to further discussion on what, exactly, to do with Chapter 15. It is absolutely necessary to the book, at least conceptually, so cannot be removed completely. We all came to a similar conclusion in different words; the new Chapter 15 needs to be more of a conceptual overview of the *benefits and necessity* for philosophical hormesis, without actually engaging with the thinkers I recommend. In short, I will talk more about the purpose behind confronting this than I will elucidate on the actual thoughts, contradictions, and truths presented in any specific book. For the deep dive, those of you who are interested—the few—the new title will hopefully satisfy your intellectual curiosity.

For the rest, I perhaps did you a service with this change. While myself, and the professional philosophers editing my work, enjoy the depth being explored in the new title, the others I had read through the book prior to release all commented that the original Chapter 15 was their least favorite. Thematically it was such a divergence from the rest of the book, and without a deep knowledge of political, psychological, and existential philosophy, readers were left straining under the weight of new information and concepts. This included highly educated and intelligent test readers whom I have a deep respect for, as well as friends whom I view as within the target audience my work in *StressHacked* could positively impact. If the original 15 was turning off my target audience due to complexity and a diverging theme and intensity, it was doing a disservice both to this title, and the work I was trying to accomplish with said chapter.

So, without further ado, I present the *new* chapter 15, a guide through the conceptual benefits of engaging with stressful philosophy, particularly concerning existentialism, human nature, politics and justice.



Most people actively avoid confronting life's fundamental questions. They distract themselves with trivialities, numb themselves with entertainment, or cling to comfortable illusions rather than face the raw truths of existence: that life has no inherent meaning beyond what we create, that suffering is inevitable, that we alone bear responsibility for our choices, and that we are profoundly vulnerable to manipulation by forces larger than ourselves.

There's a particular kind of silence that visits you when the noise of achievement dies down. It's not failure, just the quiet after success, or the stillness between goals. In that space, you sometimes catch a flicker of the real question: not "what's next?" but "what's the point?" It's not depression, although the feeling can be indistinguishable at times, it's perspective. It's a distant awareness that everything you build, protect, or optimize still ends. For me, if I let this feeling last too long between goals, sometimes even a few days, *it does feel like failure*, and it strongly resembles depression, as well. What's going on inside of me can simply be described as me being crushed with a powerful sense that I will never accomplish anything again.

In discussing this feeling with one of my editors, Vadim; he brought up Martin Heidegger, stating that Heidegger (1927/1962) called this *being-towards-death*. For Heidegger, this is not morbid fascination, but a sober recognition: our lives are defined not by permanence, but by finitude. We live on borrowed time, and we know it, even if we rarely say it. That knowing seeps into everything: our ambitions, relationships, even our silence. It's the background hum of the human condition.

This piqued my interest, as it was the first thought from Heidegger that ever resonated with me. Truth be told, I haven't read much of him, but what I have read has struck me immediately as being obviously wrong. His ideas, such as language being tied to thought and cognition are demonstrably false, through modern neuroscience, and my own personal experience. To clarify, I'm not denying that language and cognition interact, I just don't think they're intrinsically bound in the way Heidegger suggests: that is, as co-constitutive of our being-in-the-world, where language is not merely a tool for communication but the very medium through which thought, understanding, and the disclosure of meaning become possible. Language requires cognition, and while language can initiate cognition, cognition doesn't require language. This is an incredibly relevant and key distinction which Heidegger seemingly misses, perhaps not understanding how others think, only how he himself thinks.

I've previously intimated in this book that the reason language doesn't come easy is because I don't think in language, I think in patterns, and thoughts often emerge from the void, fully formed, once the patterns are connected. It is hard to explain in language, precisely because this is not the medium through which I experience it. Thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Einstein were aware of this, but it seems to have escaped Heidegger. In addition, humans are not unique in language, and we are not unique in awareness. This is also demonstrable—whether it be birds who learn to use words in context, domesticated apes who learn to sign, dogs who learn hundreds of words through commands, or cetaceans with their own complex communication through sounds, which is inarguably language.

Heidegger's thoughts on "being," or "Dasein" (*being-there*) are similarly... well... wrong. We are not uniquely aware, as he insinuates. Animals learn patterns, behavior, and study human emotions in order to adapt their behavior and manipulate us to their will. This is awareness of being, and there is no other way to frame it. (Heidegger [1927/1962, p. 68] claims that "A human being is the entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue," meaning that only humans confront existence not just as something experienced, but as something questioned. We don't just live, we interpret, worry, and reflect on the meaning of life itself. While animals may display emotion, intelligence, and even signs of grief or depression, Heidegger would argue they do not relate to their own existence as a problem to be resolved. I suggest he's artificially drawing a line on where being and awareness are defined, so as to move the goal posts to only include humanity; painting himself into

a corner that is small and arbitrary). To me, the “greatest” philosophies Heidegger put forth are beautiful, poetic, but wrong, and therefore, pointless.

That changed with the thoughts presented to me by Vadim. He went on to explain that Heidegger believed philosophy arises from the awareness of death; not as an escape, but as a way to be with it. He expanded to bring up another thinker whom I have never found to be anything more than incoherent, Simone Weil (1949/2023), explaining that she approached this thought from another angle. In her view, people uprooted from meaning, place, heritage, and purpose, become fragile. This is not because they’re weak, but because they’re human. Without roots, without structure, without context, we drift. While she and Heidegger come from different worlds, they both arrive at the same insight: meaning isn’t given, it has to be made, and it has to be made under pressure: of impermanence, of chaos, and of being thrown into a world not of our choosing.

I find it fitting and poetic that two philosophers I previously lacked even a modicum of respect for both have thoughts which almost perfectly fit these ponderings and experiences I have struggled to put words to in the past. This is particularly pertinent given they were presented to me in the context of a chapter on philosophical hormesis, in which I will shortly advocate for reading the works of thinkers who upset our narratives and beliefs. When I began to write this passage, I entered the document to remove both writers and start over. Reading through what my editor had written again changed my mind, however, and inspired me to retain these thoughts, and expand on them. I must practice what I preach, even when the thoughts are less offensive, and more ridiculous. As I ponder this, it strikes me that the incoherence in much of Heidegger and Weil’s thoughts could be their attempts to find beauty and poetry in meaninglessness, in the void between projects when the existential angst creeps in, a coping mechanism, if you will. If there is truth to this musing, I have a new appreciation for their work, albeit one of empathy rather than profundity.

We are *accidental* beings, shaped by entropy and evolution, not design. Even if you believe in a creator, and that the creator has a plan, you are not the creator, nor are you privy to the plan. Our existence carries no inherent meaning except what we create in the ‘here’ and ‘now,’ and that is enough. This holds true for creationists, as without knowledge of a plan there can be no meaning. Perception becomes our truth, and what we perceive is random and meaningless. This is the reality, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us. The nihilists get the diagnosis right: there is no cosmic plan built-in purpose, at least none that we can reasonably decipher. But they fail in their response. The absence of meaning is not a void, it’s an invitation, an opportunity to build something that matters, even if it only matters to us.

Søren Kierkegaard, writing from within a Christian tradition and unwavering, albeit agonizing, faith saw the tension of how we create meaning in a meaningless world

perfectly. His concept of the “leap of faith,” developed in conjunction with the “knight of faith” who exercised it, wasn’t a means to engender blind belief, not even in Christianity; it was about confronting the absurd, the unprovable, the chaotic structure of existence, and choosing to commit anyway (Kierkegaard, 1843/1985). Reading Kierkegaard is painful, as the soul of a man grappling with the lack of logic and reason his intellect perceives, always and ultimately losing to the unbreakable nature of his conviction, could never be reconciled.

It is likely that Kierkegaard was *incapable* of being anything other than devout. Sam Harris, during his Ph.D. research, explored the neurological differences between belief, disbelief and uncertainty, noting key differences in the neurological processes of each, later publishing it (Harris, Sheth, & Cohen, 2008). Importantly, follow-up research conducted by Harris explored devout religious adherents, or true believers, and their neurological activation when asked questions of their faith. Whereas observant, but uncertain, individuals demonstrated this uncertainty, the truly devout activated the same brain regions when answering questions of their faith, as they would of any certainty/fact (Harris et al., 2009).

Kierkegaard, in his recounting of the story of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, oscillates between existential nihilism, questioning the very meaning of existence if God could ask such a thing of Abraham,<sup>12</sup> and the words and positions of a theistic teleologist who believes in moral and virtuous relativism: that all men are equal as they possess different, but equal skills. The exception, of course, is the devout, who transcend them all. His faith was not easy or consoling; it was agonized, contradictory, and full of torment. In many ways, Kierkegaard’s struggle reads like a *rebellion* against the determinism and dogma of institutional religion. What mattered to him was not theological certainty, but the raw, subjective courage to create meaning in defiance of meaninglessness. Except, his mind remained incapable of accepting that meaning could exist anywhere other than devotion to Christ. You don’t need to believe in God to feel this conflict between nihilism and meaning. What’s critical is once you accept nihilism, you seize the opportunity to find meaning and purpose in the path of your choosing.

Our imperfections are not errors to be eradicated, as this is an impossible task. Flaws are signatures of our species, and we must come to terms with this. Corrected—they’re *the* signature of our species. This is not a call to accept our faults on face value. The entire premise of this book is the antithesis of this thought. We possess the capability to understand, overcome, grow, and transcend who we once were, but not

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<sup>12</sup> The “binding of Isaac,” also known by its Hebrew name *Akedah*, refers to the biblical story in Genesis 22 in which God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a test of faith. Just as Abraham is about to carry out the act, an angel intervenes, and a ram is offered in Isaac’s place. The story has been the subject of extensive theological and philosophical reflection, particularly for its exploration of obedience, faith, and moral paradox.

the ability to transcend what we are: human. Perhaps, in time, even this transcendence will be possible. The transhumanists certainly believe so, and I don't think they are wrong, at least not from a technical standpoint. The question then becomes: is transcendence desirable, and, if it is for some, what costs will the rest of society bear? This is another topic, for another time.

The project of self-improvement must begin with self-understanding. Otherwise, as we inevitably change each and every moment, a culmination of our experiences and current physiology, we cannot know with certainty that we are evolving. Without self awareness, we're simply vanishing, and since we never understood who we were in the first place, we cannot reasonably assess if what we have changed is an improvement, or just different. This chapter is about the tools that help us do that: philosophy, literature, and the big, ancient questions wrapped in stories and thought experiments. The point isn't to 'solve' existence, but to build tolerance for it. The goal is to be able to sit with the truths we normally flinch from: that life is short, suffering is real, and no one's coming to save us from our own minds.

Take solace in the fact that this isn't a descent into despair, but rather, it's a confrontation with reality as it is, purposefully endeavoured so that we can choose how to meet it. The act of thinking, of reflecting through the lives and words of others, becomes a kind of scaffolding. Not to hide behind, but to hold onto while we build something better—if only for a while. Because yes, we are products of our environment, and yes, we are shaped by forces larger than us. But we're not only that; we can still choose. That, in the end, might be enough.



Most people will do almost anything to avoid staring too long at the raw terms of existence. Instead, they scroll, they binge, they work late or shop online or endlessly optimize their calendars. Most of us do anything to stay busy enough not to notice that life is finite, suffering is guaranteed, and no one else is steering the wheel.

Sam Harris once described this dynamic with a metaphor that has stuck with me:

*It's like watching a bad movie for the fourth time... these things  
only make sense in light of eternity.* (Worthy, 2018)

It's a strange and almost unbearable paradox in that we live most of our lives as if we *don't* know how the story ends, even though we absolutely do.

We bicker, doomscroll, and micro-manage our way through days, weeks, years... until something stops us. A diagnosis, a loss, or a moment of clarity that rips through the fog and reveals what's always been there: the fact of our mortality. Only once we come to terms with our own mortality can we begin to reconcile the limits of our attention, and the finiteness of what can be done with the time we've been given. In that moment, the absurdity of our habits becomes vivid.

Still, even after we come to this confrontation, most of us slowly recoil and descend back into the safety of our denial. We watch that bad movie for the 4th time or scroll social media when we could, and should, be utilizing our finite and precious time differently; pursuing our purpose, connecting with loved ones, working towards growth or healing through productive self-care. But we don't, not most of the time.

This avoidance isn't weakness, it's human nature. Our psychological architecture evolved to maintain operational stability, not to continually question the foundations of existence. Yet this very avoidance creates brittleness. As I alluded to a few paragraphs ago, the person who has never stared into the abyss is utterly unprepared when the abyss finally stares back. The most powerful antidote to this fragility comes not from motivational platitudes or positive thinking, but from deliberate, controlled exposure to existential challenge through philosophy and literature. By voluntarily confronting the most difficult realities of human existence in the realm of ideas first, you develop the mental fortitude to face them in life without breaking

Just as physical hormesis works by introducing controlled doses of stress to strengthen biological systems, philosophical hormesis functions by introducing controlled doses of existential discomfort to strengthen psychological systems. Each exposure to profound, challenging ideas creates micro-adaptations in your worldview, gradually building resilience against nihilism, despair, and cognitive dissonance. The pursuit of existential philosophy must not be undertaken for vanity or academic purposes. Its purpose should instead be psychological preparation for life's inevitable crises. When you've already wrestled with questions of meaning, mortality, and moral complexity through the works of great thinkers, you're far better equipped to maintain clarity and purpose when confronting these questions in your own life.

The difference between those who crumble under existential pressure and those who maintain integrity isn't intelligence or willpower, it's prior exposure. You cannot develop immunity to a pathogen you've never encountered, and you cannot develop resilience to existential challenges you've never confronted. Importantly, knowing that we will inevitably seek comfort and descend back into denial and delusion, we must actively plan and commit to this hormetic pursuit, constantly and without fail, or we will abandon it. The former athlete who quits exercising will not maintain their fitness, and the former philosopher who abandons grappling with the big, uncomfortable questions will soon lose their psychological armor.

I am not going to pretend this is easy, it isn't. Grappling with these ideas and thoughts, confronting them continuously, week after week, is not a task most are up to. Few are, and, in full transparency, there are times in my life I have abandoned the pursuit, unable to handle the additional stress beyond the challenges my life has presented. Still, every time I have averted a catastrophe, succeeded in a goal, and otherwise worked towards freeing up my time, the silence creeps back in. Shortly



after, the existential dread arrives too, and with vengeance. The longer I exist between bouts of grappling my existence, the more uncomfortable the initial struggles are, so, I have slowly, albeit imperfectly, begun prioritizing this struggle, even when I don't believe myself to have the time, strength, or energy. Sometimes, my days are filled with this self-induced agony, others I struggle to read and think for 15 minutes. Your tolerance and ability to handle this task will differ from my own, and like mine, your tolerance will ebb and flow, constantly changing due to the circumstances. If you are new to this, the only path is straight forward, beginning, and then knowing.

For consideration, many of the thinkers that I will tackle in the full work are only briefly mentioned below, as the true nature of their hormetic value is complex and requires extensive breakdown, but a broad statement of the value they bring is easily given without breaking down the arguments. For others, since their work is more easily explained and central to the purpose of this book, more attention is afforded to them. Finally, for some I have completely removed mention of them, as a few sentences will not suffice, and the nature of their work, and its relation to my larger thesis, needs expansion.

## **Aristotle: Strength As Habit and the Pursuit of Eudaimonia**

With Aristotle, even the reading feels like resistance training; it is dense, formal, and deceptively dry. But if you can make it through the syntax, you'll find one of the oldest and sharpest models of human development ever written. At the core of *Nicomachean Ethics* is a bold claim: the telos, or 'the purpose,' of life is not comfort or pleasure, not happiness in the shallow sense, but eudaimonia, which is a deep, earned flourishing that comes only through a life of virtue. His revolutionary insight wasn't that virtue exists, rather it's that virtue isn't innate, it's built through deliberate action, like muscle through strain.

In other words, we're born with the capacity for virtue, but not the necessary content of lived experiences and knowledge to materialize it. As Aristotle (350 BCE/1999) puts it, "*We become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions*" (NE II.1, 1103a33–34). Moral virtue doesn't arrive by nature, it's forged, habitually, through action. This happens not once, not theoretically, but repeatedly, until character hardens into form.

Aristotle teaches us that habit alone isn't enough. Moral development requires deliberate choice, in addition to active, rational reflection. Aristotle knew the danger of passive conditioning. For a virtue to take root, you must choose it again and again, weighing it, thinking it through, and steering yourself between extremes. Courage, for example, is not reckless boldness or cautious withdrawal, but the practiced harmony between rashness and cowardice. Like stress, it must be measured, as too little pressure and you decay, and with too much you break. The goal, as always, is tension without collapse.

This is Aristotle offering a 2,300-year-old model of psychological hormesis: small, controlled doses of hardship that, metabolized correctly, build resilience against greater challenges. The virtuous person isn't blessed, they're trained. Modern culture mass-produces affirmations but shuns the work that makes them real. Aristotle would call this delusion.

Eudaimonia isn't achieved through comfort. It's earned through the repetition of courageous, disciplined action—especially when it's painful. You don't become courageous by reading about courage. You become courageous by doing hard things when you're terrified; not once for the story, but repeatedly, until it becomes your nature. Aristotle also knew that happiness isn't a feeling, but a feature of a life lived virtuously, forged through struggle.

This is one of the first steps we must take on our path to growth, understanding that virtue isn't wished into being. It's forged, rep by rep, under pressure.

## **Socrates: Discomfort as the Engine of Strength**

We don't know the real Socrates. What remains are distortions: character assassinations by the power structures that killed him, and Plato's mythologized fabrications serving his own philosophical agenda. In other words, Plato's version of Socrates became more than a man. He became a vessel for metaphysical doctrines like the Theory of Forms, which, whether sincerely held or strategically deployed, have been used for centuries to justify hierarchical thinking and control narratives about truth.

It can be argued that Plato, intentionally or not, shaped a vision of reality that elevates abstract ideals over lived experience, which was a move that has lent itself to both awe and abuse. Whether or not he was deliberately deceptive is impossible to know. However, what we do know is this: many of his claims, including the existence of immaterial Forms as the highest reality, are not only controversial, they're unprovable yet unfalsifiable, and preposterous to consider when given the context of modern knowledge of our minds, the universe, and our subjective experience within it. Despite this, Plato's shadow still looms over nearly every idealist tradition that has followed.

Xenophon's more pragmatic, disciplined portrayal of Socrates might seem more psychologically grounded, but it fares no better historically. In contrast to Plato, Xenophon's Socrates comes across less as a disruptive philosopher and more as a respectable life coach, who offers practical advice and accepts death with a serene shrug. Xenophon's sanitized version lacks the sharp irony, intellectual provocation, and moral danger that define Plato's Socrates: the relentless questioner who dismantles assumptions, embarrasses elites, and inspires volatile followers like Alcibiades and Critias. As Gregory Vlastos (1971) argued, Xenophon's account "refutes itself": if Socrates *were* as harmless as Xenophon depicts, there would've

been no grounds for his trial. By contrast, the early Platonic dialogues, at least before Plato's system overtakes the figure of his teacher, offer the most plausible glimpse of the historical Socrates. This was a man whose questions made him dangerous. To the contrary, Xenophon's version may reflect how some wished to remember him, but not why he was condemned.

This matters less than you think. Whether the words and thoughts came from Socrates, Xenophon, or Plato is unimportant. Instead, what matters is whether the thoughts can withstand the weight of reality. A person's biography has no bearing on the truth of ideas attributed to them. If the ideas hold power, they transcend their vessel. That said, there is a critical consideration: to truly understand the ideas from any thinker, one often must psychologize the author. As Friedrich Nietzsche argued, philosophy is rarely disinterested: it is the confession of its creator, shaped by temperament, physiology, and unspoken need. This ties into the debate regarding emotions and cognition perfectly. If all cognition arises from our emotional reaction, we cannot understand the idea without understanding the thinker's emotions towards the thought, whether conscious or subconscious. Often, this takes deep psychological analysis. It therefore doesn't matter whether what is written by Xenophon, or even Plato, truly originated from Socrates or from them. What matters is the truth in the thoughts themselves. Ideas stand independently of their purported source.

What makes the Socratic model worth studying isn't biographical accuracy but the framework for existential resilience it provides: confronting mortality without flinching, facing injustice without breaking, and maintaining clarity when systems collapse around you. He represents existential confrontation without collapse, courage against injustice, clarity before death, and integrity without metaphysical delusion. This isn't philosophy as academic exercise—it's training for survival.

The authorities didn't execute Socrates for abstract theorizing. They killed him because his questions threatened power. This isn't ancient history. I recognize that I, too, may be forced to drink the hemlock—not for *The Final Thought War* coming out later this year, certainly not for *StressHacked*, and not even *Manufacturing Minds*, which is set to release January 2026, but for future works already nearing completion that push beyond permitted boundaries of societal questioning. If these ideas aren't launched with sufficient force, they risk erasure, distortion, misuse, and I may face potential physical elimination, not just reputation destruction.

Xenophon's Socrates demonstrates existential hormesis in action: deliberate, repeated exposure to hardship, injustice, and mortality as the pathway to unbreakable inner strength. Philosophy wasn't theorizing, it was psychological armor against real threats. Socratic questioning wasn't intellectual entertainment, it was strength training for the mind and spirit. Existential resilience isn't built through comfortable theorizing, mythologizing, or aspirational quotes. It's forged only through direct

confrontation with what most terrifies you: the raw, unfiltered truth of existence. The greatest discomfort produces the greatest strength—but only if you’re willing to drink it down to the last drop.

## **Political Hormesis: On Elites & Control**

Exposing ourselves to uncomfortable observations about the mechanisms in which we are controlled by the so-called elites, both through fictional literature and political analysis, is a fundamental task in the pursuit of our autonomy. We cannot maintain our independence if we are unaware of how it is being stripped from us, and we cannot fight an enemy which we do not recognize and are not aware of.

George Orwell exposes us to critical observations through his fictional works, most prominently *1984* and *Animal Farm*. Orwell paints a world of control through surveillance and forced compliance, one steeped in terminology driven thought control. Conversely, Aldous Huxley, through works such as *Brave New World*, paints a future in which we are controlled through our pleasures. Both thinkers proved prescient, but their works may have served as self-fulfilling prophecies. Unfortunately today we are now assaulted using both strategies; a carefully calculated attack that maximizes the mechanisms of both, seemingly antithetical, approaches.

Through non-fictional works from thinkers like Vilfredo Pareto, James Burnham, and Niccolo Machiavelli, we are taught the mechanisms in which real-life elites manage to seize, and maintain, power. Machiavelli details the methods of manipulation used in his work *The Prince*, while Burnham outlines a new class of elites that was forming during his time, the Managerial Elite—which are now pervasive throughout our society, part of a dual-ruling class along with the oligarchs. Meanwhile, Pareto details why we have never yet, and perhaps never will, break free from the cycle of elites: how each crop of would-be rulers are supplanted with a new, often more ruthless, crop.

## **Philip K. Dick: Exposure to Cognitive Collapse**

Philip K. Dick didn’t write science fiction stories as much as he trapped you in the recesses of his mind. Dick’s central suspicion, what he called a “dangerous idea,” was that reality isn’t real. Dick asserted that it’s a projection, a construct, and this construct is fragile, unstable, and possibly malevolent. His work drags you into deliberate cognitive disintegration where truth blurs, identity slips, and the ground of perception gives way. With Dick, his fiction does not provide escape, it exposes you to the uncomfortable, and the disorienting.

From *Blade Runner* to *Total Recall*, *The Man in the High Castle* to *Minority Report*, his ideas shaped Sci-Fi. *The Matrix*, with its engineered reality enslaving minds, is

Dick's paranoia made mainstream,<sup>13</sup> proving his influence cracked open mass consciousness. What he sensed, decades before digital mass hallucination became mainstream, is now our operating environment. Dick knew that if you can't question your reality, you're a prisoner to it.

Reading *VALIS*, as one example of Dick's novels, is cognitive assault. The disjointed prose replete with non-sequiturs, random tense shifts, and names swapping mid-sentence as Dick refers to himself or others erratically, gave me slamming headaches. It's deliberate, of course, with the text mimicking paranoid schizophrenia; plunging you into a mind fracturing under its own weight. You don't read *VALIS*—you survive it, disoriented, and questioning what's real. That's the point: controlled exposure to perceptual chaos.

This is philosophical hormesis. Dick delivers small, brutal doses of cognitive instability to train you for when reality itself splinters. He doesn't offer answers or comfort, and that's why he matters. His work forges resilience against the madness of a world that might not hold together. You learn to navigate fractures without collapsing. Existential strength isn't just physical or emotional, it's cognitive. It's holding your mind steady when the ground dissolves. Dick doesn't hand you a map, his work forces you to train for survival without one, so when the real cracks appear, you don't break—you endure.

## Empathy, Or It's Absence, As Stress

*Empathy without clarity is useless. Clarity without empathy is inhuman.*

- ALEX TARNAVA

As I have studied and thought deeply about the ideas, diagnoses and proposals from certain thinkers, contemplating further what their work represents and who it appeals to, I'm struck with the dilemma of not being able to properly define them in a simple label. My instinct is to use “idealist” and “realist”; however, since these are societal philosophers, and the definitions of ‘philosophical realism and idealism’ are dramatically different from the standard definitions of idealism and realism, this can cause confusion. Additionally, the “realists” in the scenario I detail below are not perfect realists, as they deny certain human emotions such as empathy.

Many would label the “idealists” as philosophers from the far left, and the “realists” as philosophers from the far right, however, I fundamentally disagree in some

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<sup>13</sup> Unlike some of Dick's film adaptations, *The Matrix* is not based on one of his novels but a speech Dick gave in at the International Science Fiction Festival in Metz, France, in 1977, where he argued, among other things, that we live in a simulation and déjà vu is the expression of the programmers messing with the simulation's timeline. In this speech, he also confessed that many of his books have arisen from visions he had of other worlds which are overlaid on this one, akin to the quantum physics theory of the multi-verse.

instances, and labeling them as such will lead to confusion, misunderstanding, and heightened emotions. For clarity, those political and societal philosophers associated with the right often share little to nothing in common with the politicians and political commentators on the right. Likewise, many on the far-left act and behave in ways antithetical to the empathy driven narrative of the philosophical left.

Humanism, and anti-humanism have been proposed by one of my editors and they almost fit, however, I believe they do not fully encompass the extremes in which these opposite schools of thought exist, nor do they properly detail the problems with each school of philosophy. For instance, humanism posits that we are able to live our lives with moral and ethical guidance, and to choose rationality over mysticism. Anti-humanistic thinkers argue that we are animalistic, and driven by our base desires. Depending on one's definition of morality and ethics, as well as reason, both diametrically opposed schools of thought could be interpreted as either humanistic or anti-humanistic. As such, the use of these definitions would likewise stir debate, and lead to confusion.

In short, one side builds their vision of society based on an impossible ideal of unfettered empathy, naively believing that human beings can shed their base desires and selfish nature. Meanwhile, the other side builds what they believe to be pragmatic societies that account for the worst of humanity. In doing so, they ignore our compassionate side, disregarding the fact that a large percentage of people will reject cold logic, being driven by the overwhelming empathy these supposed pragmatic thinkers mock.

Humans are highly emotional, and our range of emotions capture both empathy and callousness. Neither can be ignored, and neither can be eradicated through education or societal pressures. To be truly empathetic, we must accept the worst of what we are, and pragmatically design around this. To be truly pragmatic, we must understand our empathetic side, and build our societies to incorporate it. Without one, the other collapses on its own insufficiency.

The reason to read the delusional empathists is to ensure that your heart still bleeds—but that your brain also still works. Their arguments are emotionally powerful, and we should feel that their positions ought to be true, but also, we must know that they are not, and as such, cannot be entertained.

We must ensure our empathy hasn't abandoned us, that our bleeding heart hasn't hardened into cold steel. So many of us that begin our political and philosophical journey oozing with empathy, just to abandon it altogether after becoming disenfranchised with human nature, let this occur. The truth is that we cannot effectively lead and protect if we do not feel for those around us, if we do not wish that the chilling horrors built into the DNA of our species were imagined, or eradicable. But we must know what is true, and act within the confines of humanity's flaws, if we aim to empower our empathetic urges, to manifest emotion into constructive action.

This is why we must feel the pain of the delusional empath, yet, endure it, and resist the comforting lies they offer. For we can never address this true and righteous pain, endeavouring to resolve it, unless we acknowledge what is true. We must confront our inner nature, and admit the irrefutable truths regarding biological inequality, the tendency towards callousness, universal avarice when given opportunity, and the unwavering desire to feel pride for ourselves, our achievements, and for those we align with.

In the larger work, I will detail some of these delusional empath: Michael Sandel, Peter Singer, and John Rawls.

## **Callous Pragmatists**

We do not read the callous pragmatists to feel comforted, *no*, their purpose serves the antithesis. Where the delusional empath tugs at our heart strings, yet lacks intellectual honesty, or perhaps even a basic understanding of our reality's truths, the callous pragmatist diagnoses what ails us with startling precision, ripping through our comforting delusions like a barbed arrow. Too often, their arrow is poisoned, and the thinkers propose solutions that are not only ill advised, but inhumane.

For many, after accurately diagnosing humanity, and the innate flaws that govern our actions, a cold resolve forms. It is one built upon denying the very things that make us human, that bring us joy, solutions that often don't just approach, but transcend into, psychopathy.

This is why we must understand the anger of the callous pragmatist, and confront their truths. We must feel their pain, but shed their cold rage. We must acknowledge their observations, and dismiss their solutions. In fact, we must actively work to tear down their solutions, to build new ones that recognize the worst of our nature, while preserving what makes us who we are—solutions that work towards what ought to be, in full awareness of what is.

In the larger work, I discuss a few of these callous pragmatists: Hans Hermann-Hoppe, Garrett Hardin, and Curtis Yarvin.

## **Entering Existential Combat: Nietzsche's Hammer**

There comes a point in the life of anyone who possesses the simultaneous gift and torment of deep thought when comfort stops working. Comfort and familiarity stop working when the rituals of success feel hollow, when the platitudes of morality ring false, and when every system you've inherited—from religion to justice to your own definition of self—cracks under the weight of awareness. If you're lucky, you hit this moment early, and if you're not, it swallows you whole before you even know it's there.

Friedrich Nietzsche didn't write to help you find peace with this collapse; he wrote to accelerate it. Nietzsche's work strips away every lie, every inherited value, every cheap consolation you've mistaken for meaning, and leaves you naked before yourself. Reading Nietzsche is not enlightening, at least not most of the time. When it is enlightening, at least for me, it is depressing and tragic, an internal pain highlighted to clarity, offering nothing but hopelessness. The rest of the time, it's violent, surgical, but this precision doesn't soothe, it lacerates. He doesn't offer guidance, he offers an abrupt confrontation that doesn't build slowly but explodes suddenly, leaving you unable to return to who you were before.

His declaration that "God is dead" was not triumph, nor celebratory, it was a warning, and it was born of terror. This seems odd, Nietzsche famously being an antitheist, but what he saw coming was that Western man had eradicated the last source of meaning powerful enough to unify a culture, and in doing so, unleashed a world with no shared values, no universal truths, and no moral authority that wasn't manufactured. What remained was the abyss, a void waiting to be filled, and the realization that most people, confronted with this task, would either run toward distractions or descend into nihilism. Nietzsche did neither.

We see this in real time today, it will come as no shocking statement to most reading this that the West is facing collapse, our society increasingly devoid of shared ethics, morality and purpose. For all the faults of Christianity, and there are many—there was a time in my life when I considered myself to be an antitheist after departing from my Christian upbringing<sup>14</sup>—the damages inflicted by the tamed and neutered

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<sup>14</sup> I didn't walk away from Christianity as an act of rebellion, I was pushed. When I began asking difficult questions as a teenager, not out of malice but genuine curiosity, I was met with ostracism rather than dialogue. At Christian lunch groups in junior high, even mild skepticism was treated as moral failure. The more I encountered that reaction, the more alienated I became. Then came the Internet. For the first time, I discovered that atheism wasn't just someone's individual doubt, it was a worldview which had thinkers, arguments, and a name. I started reading voraciously about the long trail of violence justified in the name of religion. By my late teens and into my twenties, I had become a full-blown *antitheist*, convinced that religion did more harm than good. Some members of my extended family treated me as if I were diseased, cut off, dismissed, and a moral leper. That rejection only deepened my certainty that I was right to leave.

However, over time, my certainty gave way to reflection. I began to see the parts of my character that were still shaped by Christian values: compassion, restraint, and integrity, to name a few. I no longer see religion as simply a delusion or a tool of control. My antitheism has softened into something closer to an agnostic atheist, and while I do not believe, I have evolved my thoughts into a more nuanced understanding. I still reject dogma, but I also recognize the social and psychological function that shared values can play, especially in communities seeking cohesion. I also recognize the good Christianity, and other religions, have done for certain communities, and weigh that against the danger they play to individualism. These tensions, between autonomy and tradition, rejection and inheritance, are ones I continue to wrestle with. I'll explore them further elsewhere.



Christianity post-Enlightenment pale in comparison to our society filled with depravity, moral relativism, and self-hate. We have allowed our guilt and empathy to be weaponized against us by those who would destroy us from within, something Nietzsche presciently warned us of more than a century ago.

Nietzsche dared us to become creators, to be leaders and not followers, not inheritors of the work of our predecessors, but forgers of value and greatness in a world where nothing is given. He urged us to seek this path not because it is inspiring, but because it is necessary. In the absence of growth and forward momentum only stagnation followed by collapse remain as possibilities.

But here's the uncomfortable, even dark, truth: Nietzsche wasn't trying to inspire everyone, he spoke only to a select few, what he deemed the *ubermensch*. He didn't write for the masses, for which he held nothing but contempt, he wrote against them. Nietzsche believed that he saw modern morality for what it was: a weapon forged by the weak to poison the strong. Nietzsche taught that shame and guilt, which I discussed in length in Chapter 7, are systems built not on elevation, but on resentment. He warned that in following the moral guidelines imposed by those who would keep us weak, the hangmen would ensure that, in time, weakness infects us all, like a disease. In this aspect, I fully agree, as indicated by a passage to this effect, by Nietzsche, completing the preface in this book, and its companion book *The Body*.

Nietzsche understood the weaponization of these emotions was driven by envy,<sup>15</sup> and his genius wasn't merely in identifying this inversion, but in naming it so clearly that it could never be unseen. Once you see it—really see it—there is no retreat. The moment you recognize that much of what you were taught to call virtue is actually submission, and that your guilt is not moral but manufactured, you begin to understand what Nietzsche meant by liberation. Not freedom from consequences, but freedom from false gods, inherited values, and the parasitic false morality of the herd.

Nietzsche lays this all bare and offers no comfort in return. He provides no hope, no utopia, and no vision of a better tomorrow, only the possibility—faint, brutal, and real—that you might rise anyway, that you may pursue strength *because* you have stared reality in the face and decided to move forward, *not* in spite of it. Nietzsche speaks to the few in hope that you might embrace suffering, not as punishment, but

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<sup>15</sup> To be more precise, Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment*, goes beyond simple envy. It's a deep psychological reversal, where the powerless, unable to act directly on their frustrations, invert moral values to justify their position. Rather than admitting weakness, they moralize it; instead of admiring strength, they call it evil. This isn't just jealousy, it's envy fermented into ideology. Nietzsche saw *ressentiment* as the emotional engine of slave morality: a revaluation where impotence becomes virtue and vitality is demonized. The brilliance lies in how Nietzsche made this inversion visible, not as a historical accident, but as a recurring psychic maneuver of the human animal.

as raw material necessary for the fortress you need to build to survive what you have learned, and if you do, that in time you might become worthy of your own pain. Nietzsche speaks to kindred spirits, urging us to walk his path so that we might look into the abyss and smile, not with arrogance, but with recognition.

What Nietzsche offers is not salvation, but steel. The clarity that comes not from escaping hardship, but from standing in it, eyes open, unflinching. He doesn't teach resilience, he demands transformation. If you can't bear the weight of that demand, then you were never meant to carry it. But if you can... if you're willing to endure the dissolution of everything you once believed, if you're willing to let it all burn, then what remains will not simply be a spirit improved, but one reborn, recalibrated and ready to relentlessly pursue truth and purpose, aligned to your innate morality and free of the shackles of conformity. I will leave the finale to the man himself, a passage which brought me to tears the first time I read it, and which still evokes strong emotions many years later. Know this: when you descend to the depths Nietzsche drags you, there is no coming back.

*It is the business of the very few to be independent; it is a privilege of the strong. And whoever attempts it, even with the best right, but without being obliged to do so, proves that he is probably not only strong, but also daring beyond measure. He enters into a labyrinth, he multiplies a thousandfold the dangers which life in itself already brings with it; not the least of which is that no one can see how and where he loses his way, becomes isolated, and is torn piecemeal by some minotaur of conscience. Supposing such a one comes to grief, it is so far from the comprehension of men that they neither feel it, nor sympathize with it. And he cannot any longer go back! He cannot even go back again to the sympathy of men!*

-FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

## **Psychological Complexity: Dostoevsky's Underground**

While Nietzsche challenges our moral and metaphysical assumptions, Fyodor Dostoevsky confronts us with the inescapable contradictions within human psychology itself. His novels don't merely portray characters, they dissect the human condition, revealing the coexistence of nobility and depravity, rationality and irrationality, selflessness and self-destruction within the same consciousness.

Dostoevsky's works—particularly *Notes from Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*—create profound hormetic stress by forcing readers to recognize these same contradictions within themselves. There is no psychological comfort to be found in his prose, only the uncomfortable recognition of our own capacity for both transcendence and monstrosity.

By understanding humanity to an extent few have ever achieved, Dostoevsky is able to create characters so real, so believable, that we recognize ourselves in them. Urban

legend has it that Dostoevsky wrote over 1000 pages of practice conversations to develop the characters in *The Brothers Karamazov*. This has been questioned, and select releases of his notes fail to reach 300 pages; however, it is unquestionable he went to painstaking efforts to truly understand the characters he was developing. This is why once understanding each character and setting the theme, the events of his work unfold in a manner that are so true, so deeply painful, that those who become absorbed within them cannot pry themselves away, cannot reconcile that the work is fiction, not reality.

In reading *Crime and Punishment*, for the majority of the book I found it slow, uninspired, and uninteresting. I had previously read *The Brothers Karamazov*, and while I still find the latter superior to the former, at first I believed the two incomparable. Then came the climax, the culmination of the events that slowly unraveled throughout *Crime and Punishment*. As I reached the end, perhaps the final 20 or 30 pages, I found myself doing something foreign to me: I was bawling my eyes out, rivers of tears flowing in a manner that hadn't occurred since childhood. Writing this now, remembering the pain I felt reading this book, I am struggling, and ultimately failing, to fight back tears still.

Dostoevsky's characters present pain through recognition; we see our own decisions in their actions, and watch, powerless, as they dismantle their lives decision after decision, like a train crash that cannot be averted despite ample warning, and slow motion movement. Dostoevsky's characters speak to us not as warnings, but as reflections and proclamations of the inevitability of our future pain, mistakes, and misjudgements. We feel the pain in his characters, because we recognize that we are destined to make many of these mistakes ourselves—because we have made these mistakes *already*, and have struggled to correct our actions, emotions and behaviors to preempt making them again.

This brings us to my favorite work from Dostoevsky, the one which I have turned to for re-reads again, and again, and again. I bring you here as the finale, not just because of its truth and impact on my own thinking, but because it serves as the perfect culmination of all that has preceded it in this chapter. *Notes from the Underground* evokes a deep pain on the reader, a tragic culmination of decisions beyond any of Dostoevsky's other works, despite the brevity of its pages. I know some who refuse to finish reading it, finding it too jarring, while others, such as myself, elevate it as our favorite. This passage, for instance, is earmarked in my book, and I turn back to it often:

*I calmly continue about people with strong nerves, who do not understand a certain refinement of pleasure. In the face of some mishaps, for example, these gentlemen may bellow at the top of their lungs like bulls, and let's suppose brings them the greatest honor, but still, as I've already said, they instantly resign themselves before impossibility. Impos-sibility-meaning a stone wall?*

*What stone wall? Well, of course, the laws of nature, the conclusions of natural science, mathematics. Once it's proved to you, for example, that you descended from an ape, there's no use making a wry face, just take it for what it is. Once it's proved to you that, essentially speaking, one little drop of your own fat should be dearer to you than a hundred thousand of your fellow men, and that in this result all so-called virtues and obligations and other ravings and prejudices will finally be resolved, go ahead and accept it, there's nothing to be done, because two times two is-mathematics. Try objecting to that.*

*"For pity's sake," they'll shout at you, "you can't rebel: it's two times two is four! Nature doesn't ask your permission; it doesn't care about your wishes, or whether you like its laws or not. You're obliged to accept it as it is, and consequently all its results as well. And so a wall is indeed a wall ... etc., etc." My God, but what do I care about the laws of nature and arithmetic if for some reason these laws and two times two is four are not to my liking? To be sure, I won't break through such a wall with my forehead if I really have not got strength enough to do it, but neither will I be reconciled with it simply because I have a stone wall here and have not got strength enough.*

*As if such a stone wall were truly soothing and truly contained in itself at least some word on the world, solely by being two times two is four. Oh, absurdity of absurdities! Quite another thing is to understand all, to be conscious of all, all impossibilities and stone walls; not to be reconciled with a single one of these impossibilities and stone walls if you are loath to be reconciled; to reach, by way of the most inevitable logical combinations, the most revolting conclusions on the eternal theme that you yourself seem somehow to blame even for the stone wall, though once again it is obviously clear that you are in no way to blame; and in consequence of that, silently and impotently gnashing your teeth, to come to a voluptuous standstill in inertia, fancying that, as it turns out, there isn't even anyone to be angry with; that there is no object to be found, and maybe never will be; that it's all a sleight-of-hand, a stacked deck, a cheat, that it's all just slops-nobody knows what and nobody knows who, but in spite of all the uncertainties and stacked decks, it still hurts, and the more uncertain you are, the more it hurts! (Dostoevsky, 1864/1994, p. 13-14)*

This chapter was designed to lead you to this culmination, to the stone wall. What is laid before this is all true, and so is the realization that there is nothing to be done, we face a stone wall. At best, we can learn to use the wall as protection, perhaps erect ladders to peer over its edges, but just as two and two is four, the innate nature of humanity, individual or collective, is immutable, unchangeable, and undeniable. Understanding this hurts, and it should hurt, but we cannot let ourselves succumb to the anguish. We must use the wall, work with it and around it, to devise a better

future—one which accepts us as we are—collectively, not individually—and not one which tries to remake us to how we ought to be.

Understanding this is the final journey in the quest for enlightenment. Without it, we can never truly understand ourselves and our reality, much less aspire to create a civilization that lasts; one that delivers prosperity and opportunity, that mitigates the worst of human nature while simultaneously amplifying the best.

### Conclusion: The Courage to See Clearly

The most profound hormetic benefit of confronting existential realities through philosophy and literature is the development of clearer vision; the ability to see life as it actually is rather than as you wish it to be. This clarity isn't depressing, at least not always, but it is invariably liberating. The act of knowing frees you from the exhausting work of maintaining illusions, and allows you to direct that energy toward genuine engagement with reality.

Most people spend their lives oscillating between denial and despair. Focus is spent on either avoiding difficult truths entirely, or being crushed when they can no longer be avoided. The person who has developed existential resilience through controlled exposure follows a different path: acceptance without surrender, awareness without paralysis, and meaning without delusion. This transformation does not come easy, and it does not come quickly. It is built, brick by brick, with every uncomfortable idea, and truth, that you subject yourself to.

The result of these efforts isn't merely intellectual development, but the cultivation of genuine courage. Courage does not imply the absence of fear, but rather the capacity to function effectively despite it. By voluntarily confronting the most challenging aspects of existence through the works of those who have mapped this territory before you, you develop the inner resources to navigate whatever terrain you encounter in your own journey.

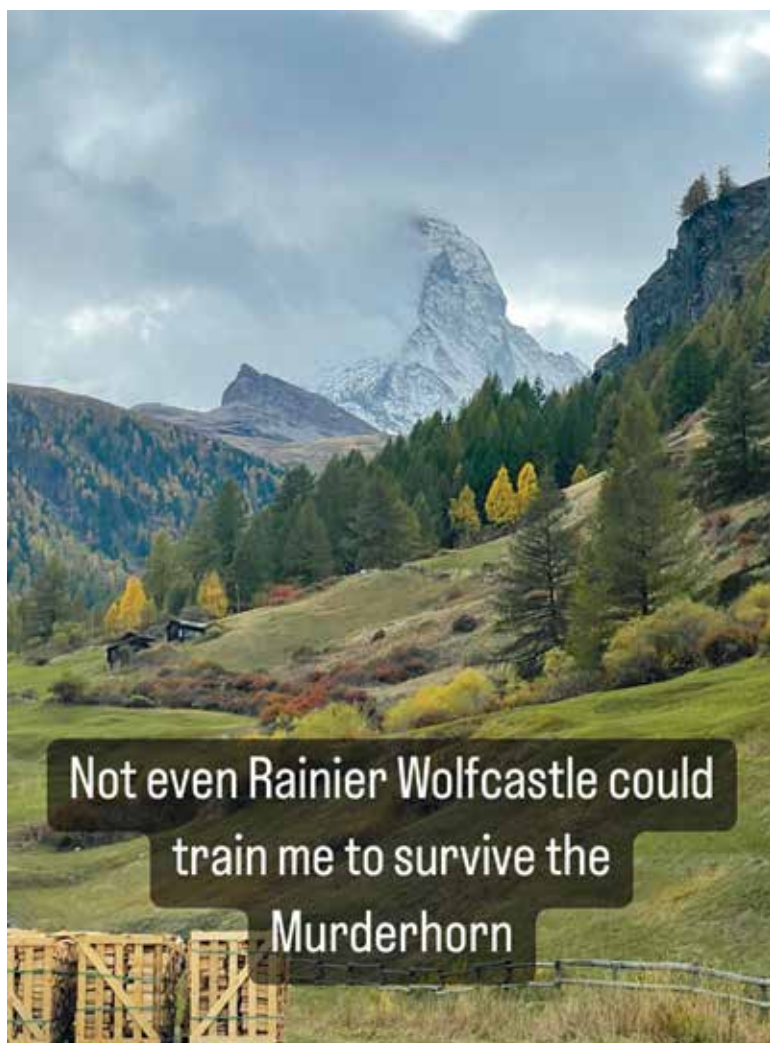
The real power isn't in knowing the answers—it's in learning to live meaningfully with the questions.

## CHAPTER 16:

### **Mental Visualization and the Stoic Mindset**

Visualization is a powerful tool I turn to often. This isn't some magical concept, such as what is presented in *The Secret*. I don't believe I can visualize a parking spot in an exact location in Manhattan and the universe will deliver it to me. What I do know is that by visualizing multiple potential outcomes for future scenarios, a strategy that ties into my proposal in Chapter 13 for strategic pessimism, I can maximize the likelihood I succeed at my task. In doing so, I also minimize any stress, anxiety, or emotional pain when situations inevitably go wrong.

**Picture 30.** Me at the Matterhorn, on the border between Switzerland and Italy



*Visualizing success is important. So is visualizing the airlift you'll need off this mountain.*

I realize that when most people hear the word *visualization*, they picture someone in yoga pants “attracting abundance” by imagining checks in the mail. Clearly, that’s not what I’m suggesting. Unfortunately, the word has been co-opted for this distorted purpose, with our language leaving few accurate alternatives to replace it. But to recap, and make it abundantly clear, this isn’t about bending reality with your thoughts. Rather, it’s about bending *yourself* through preparation.

Visualizing multiple possible scenarios, and focusing deeply and intently on how I would initially respond, what I would feel, what it would do to me if I couldn’t overcome it, and how I could potentially overcome it, I am preparing for the worst in advance. I experience the agony, and use it to drive me forward. This simulated negativity and stress, despite paling in comparison to a real catastrophe, acts as a practice mission for the real thing. Think of it like a training exercise; just like an army practicing war games doesn’t fully equip soldiers for the horrors of war, simulating catastrophes in our minds doesn’t fully prepare us for the catastrophe, but both help. They create familiarity, which we can latch to when tragedy does strike.

I personally utilize visualization every day, reflexively, and have not needed to consciously practice it for years. When I began, it was as a strategy to manipulate my anxiety, bending the turbulent surge of negativity into harnessed power that I could use for growth. I’ve spoken about my daily period of reflection where I think about my conversations and actions, dissect them, and work towards resolving any unresolved hurt. Both this past reflection and future visualization stem from the same cycle I sought to break: negative rumination. When I was younger, at times, I was paralyzed with rumination. Mortified by my actions and words, terrified of what others thought of me, and frozen in inaction in fear of compounding the problems. Since these periods of rumination were infrequent and inconsistent in length and intensity, I was able to identify them as a problem I wished to shed, not an innate part of my existence that demanded my acceptance and submission.

I am not alone in seeking this solution, and while I learned to think this way before I ever encountered the Stoics and their teachings, their lessons still lend wonder and admiration to me. Their feats of emotional understanding, regulation and control are of a caliber I can only aspire to—while simultaneously hoping I never need to.

For most, however, they never learn to think this way; perhaps they never needed to, fortunate enough to exist outside of rumination. So they live their lives in reaction to their environment. Their emotional state, their decisions, and their actions are dictated entirely by external circumstances. When life is comfortable, they’re happy. When challenged, they crumble. They exist at the mercy of what happens to them rather than what happens within them.

This psychological fragility isn’t inevitable—it’s a product of mental habits that can be systematically reformed. Just as I overcame negative rumination, those with calm and even states of mind can challenge their state of perpetual nonchalance, before the

insouciant nature of their being leads them to a catastrophe that they are completely and utterly unprepared to face. For me, the most powerful tools for this transformation come not from battle-tested ancient wisdom, but from deliberate mental rehearsal. We read the ancient wisdom for context and inspiration, but without the active practice, living the philosophy every day, the words we absorb are nothing but hollow stories.

## **The Power of Mental Visualization & The Stoic Philosophy**

*I knew that I begot a mortal.*

- ANAXAGORAS

It has been reported that upon learning of his son's death, the Greek philosopher Anaxagoras responded with the above words, a concept that will chill all parents. However, the truth of the statement holds, no matter how uncomfortable and painful it is to think about. The pain of this visualization needs to be channeled into action, so as to prevent as many possibilities from occurring as you are capable.

*Remind yourself that what you love is mortal... at the very moment you are taking joy in something, present yourself with the opposite impressions. What harm is it, just when you are kissing your little child, to say: Tomorrow you will die, or to your friend similarly: Tomorrow one of us will go away, and we shall not see one another any more?*

- EPICTETUS

These words, while appearing morbid on the surface, serve an entirely different purpose. What Epictetus is urging us to do is reflect on the fleeting nature of our reality and existence, to come to terms with the fact that what we love, the people, the experiences, all of it, lack permanence. By understanding this concept, we are motivated to commit to the moment and prepare ourselves for the future. The inevitable will occur, and when it comes, we should hold no regrets, having wholly captured the moments in time as they occurred.

This ancient wisdom is backed by modern science; research has demonstrated that our brains don't fully distinguish between vividly imagined experiences and real ones (Dijkstra, & Fleming, 2023) (I speak about virtual experiences as they relate to hormesis in detail in the next chapter). The neural pathways activated during detailed mental rehearsal largely mirror those used during actual execution. This creates a profound opportunity: you can literally pre-wire your brain's response patterns to stressful situations before you encounter them. This realization isn't novel, with many high performers, from military operators to Olympic athletes to high-stakes negotiators and everything in between utilizing systematic mental rehearsal as a preparation for action.



Anyone who has spent any time around me knows how often my mind transitions to this state. Those who don't usually end up confused and tentative often think I'm about to say something. Apparently, as I am practicing conversations in my mind, my lips sometimes move. I originally developed this habit as my mind and speech operate at different speeds. To speak effectively, it is almost required that I am reciting a script, a topic I know so well that the words will not escape me. This is especially true when I'm tired, but also when nervous.

Some of my earlier podcast recordings contain stuttering and stumbling with my words, not because I don't know the content, but because my mind doesn't think in language, and finding the words sometimes poses a challenge. This is why I used to practice my sales presentation in the mirror, and it's why I began these aforementioned practice conversations. In time, I learned that they could be utilized to prevent uncomfortable and awkward exchanges, and prime me for rejection, as well. So, I stuck with them, and slowly adopted the practice into all facets of my life, not just oration or interpersonal communication.

One inescapable truth is that no matter how many simulations you've run, how many responses you have imagined being returned from a conversation, the moment will almost always lend surprises. When I first began this practice, being met with surprises confused me, embarrassed me, and angered me—not at others, but with myself, for having inadequately prepared. This emotion would erupt within me, as the very preparation, at times, led to impaired responses. Overconfidence became my downfall. Convinced I was prepared for anything, I ensured I was prepared for nothing.

In time, I realized that there is no amount of preparation that can equip you for all possible scenarios, but that doesn't matter, and this level of preparation isn't needed. By mentally preparing enough responses to enough situations and conversations, you will eventually be surprised by very little, and be capable of handling and confronting most. Actually, it is ironic, but when a response or situation I have not heard, encountered or imagined now occurs, rather than anxiety and anger, I feel relief, amusement, and curiosity. Being surprised by nothing is boring but being surprised by everything is terrifying.

Friedrich Nietzsche, while not a Stoic, clearly appreciated aspects of their posture toward the world. In *Daybreak*, he quotes the Latin maxim *nil admirari*—"marvel at nothing"—attributing to it the essence of ancient philosophy: "in this proposition, [the ancient philosopher] sees the whole of philosophy." He contrasts this with Arthur Schopenhauer, who, quoting Cicero, claimed *admirari est philosophari*: "to marvel is to philosophize" (Nietzsche, 1881/2006). Nietzsche presents this contrast not just as a joke at Schopenhauer's expense, but as a deeper commentary on philosophical temperament. He sees the Stoics' detachment as a form of strength, a training in indifference, while viewing Schopenhauer's marveling as characteristic of a certain German sentimentalism that Nietzsche found suspect. The phrase *nil*

*admirari* itself comes from Horace, who wrote: “Marvel at nothing—that is perhaps the one and only thing that can make a man happy and keep him so” (Horace, ~20 BCE/1926).

My thoughts lie somewhere in the middle. We must reflect on what surprises us, what drives us to be filled with wonder, but we must work to understand it. This pursuit is lifelong, and throughout our lives we cannot hope to marvel at nothing, to know everything; it is an impossible task. As wonder slowly leaves our routine experience, the times when it reappears should be met with joy. We have encountered an old adversary we have all but forgotten, the bitterness of battle eroded by the passing of time, leaving nothing but a faintly familiar friend.

## Understanding Stoicism

The Stoic mindset is far too often presented in short quotes to would-be followers without any practical applications, just powerful statements that make us think, and then ask “*sounds great, but how?*”. Elsewhere, Stoicism is misrepresented to a criminal degree by the modern urge to pathologize strength. Some critics have tried to frame it as exclusionary, eurocentric, even oppressive, labeling it as an ancient precursor to toxic masculinity or colonial thinking (Love, 2022). These voices ask you to believe that teaching emotional discipline is an act of violence, and that allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed with internal turmoil is not just an act of courage, but something to be commended.

The entire premise of this framing is astounding to me, though not surprising; it’s what this book is predicated upon. These architects of despair amongst us are attacking the thoughts and ideas that protect us from drowning in misery, thereby ensuring that we will be joining them in their agony. So, they reframe the concept of reminding yourself that the universe doesn’t owe you anything as a form of hate speech. In reality, Stoicism is one of the few frameworks that cuts across race, class, and circumstance. It wasn’t designed for emperors, or slaves, or merchants; it was designed for human beings who needed to survive chaos with their minds intact. Most of us don’t need a Ph.D. to understand that the world is cruel, fate is indifferent, and resilience is earned. What we need is the willingness, and ability, to work to endure it, to understand it, and to grow stronger both because, and in spite, of this cruel indifference.

Stoicism proves such a valuable asset in producing mental resilience because of how extreme the statements from its most prolific thinkers are, such as Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. Self-guided visualization, the type of mental rehearsals I taught myself, prepared me for many daily interactions and small catastrophes. The largest tragedies we will eventually face, however, are often too painful and too abrasive to contemplate without concerted and deliberate effort. When I learned to visualize, I sought total and complete control, which is why my efforts failed miserably. The core Stoic insight that transforms your relationship with adversity is disarmingly

simple: the primary source of suffering isn't what happens to you, but your judgments about what happens to you.

This isn't semantic wordplay; it's a fundamental reframing that creates psychological freedom. When you truly internalize that external events have no inherent emotional power until you assign meaning to them, you reclaim control over your internal state. The cornerstone of Stoic practice is the dichotomy of control, which I was slow to learn, acknowledging this truth out of failure and necessity. It teaches us the importance of recognizing that some things are within our power and others are not. As Epictetus (~125 CE/2004) wrote:

*Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing.*

Acknowledging that some things are beyond our power to control is not weakness or passivity, it's strategic focus. By accepting that which we cannot change, we permit ourselves to direct our attention and energy exclusively toward what can be altered, such as our judgements, actions and responses. This realization liberates us from the prison of futility, understanding what we cannot control, such as others' actions, external outcomes, and, especially, past events. By recalibrating ourselves to these truths, we eliminate the primary source of psychological fragility: attempting to control the uncontrollable.

Rather than offering practical guidance beyond my own lived experiences, I will direct those interested in reading and understanding Stoicism more elsewhere. In recent years, Ryan Holiday has played a significant role in reviving Stoicism for a modern audience. Through books, podcasts, and daily emails, he's helped distill the timeless principles of thinkers like Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and Epictetus into practical, approachable tools for navigating modern life. While his interpretations are intentionally simplified for accessibility, they offer a consistent and structured entry point for those unfamiliar with Stoic philosophy.

I don't watch all of Ryan's videos or read all of his newsletters, but I am subscribed to both, and do occasionally immerse myself in the messages he is relaying. I will say that he competently understands the principles, which is why I am comfortable in recommending his work, saving myself the trouble of creating practical guidance that I never intentionally developed for myself. Typically, when someone can simplify messages for a mass audience, that indicates they understand them deeply. For many, his work has served as a gateway, effectively opening the door to deeper engagement with a tradition that rewards both intellectual rigor and disciplined application.

Some of the teachings were intended to do just that, whereas others were revealed after the author passed away. *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius, perhaps the most

famous piece of Stoic literature, was his personal diary. Reading it inspires a deep appreciation for his words, and his experiences. He was the emperor of the most powerful empire in the world, a leader held in high regard as one of the greatest ever, and through his private musings we may understand that he was human, vulnerable, and suffered like all of us—yet, he endured. Marcus Aurelius would likely be mortified to know that his diary had been read by millions of people throughout history, a musing I heard Ryan Holiday share and of which I wholly agree, and that is what makes the book so powerful.

## Reframe the Pain

The Stoics had one central insight that breaks most people's brains the first time they hear it:

*It's not events that disturb people, it's their judgments about those events.*

- EPICTETUS (VAN TRUEREN, 2025)

Read that again, and ensure that you truly understand it.

What happens isn't what hurts you. It's how you *interpret* what happens. You assign the emotional meaning. You hand out the labels. The story you tell yourself about the thing *is* the thing. That's the liberating (and brutal) truth: you're not the victim of events, you're the author of your emotional response.

*We suffer more in imagination than in reality*

- SENECA (HUCIA, 2025)

According to the Stoics, we are harmed not by events themselves, but by our judgments about them. I've often returned to this truth when observing both children and adults, and how external cues shape internal reactions. Regarding children, a topic which most readers will immediately understand, think about how young children behave. When they fall, they often first look to an adult; if the adult is concerned, they cry. If the adult calmly tells them they're fine, they shake it off. This indicates that the reaction is learned, not intrinsic.

I then consider comments that people make about us, and the reactions others have. Perhaps the comment is true, and inoffensive. But, someone else looks at you as if you should be offended; or, the person saying it apologizes, as if they believe it is an insult. Many become overwhelmed with offence, self-doubt, and insecurity in moments like this. What didn't offend them naturally, perhaps even offered a sense of pride as they intentionally behave that way, has been reframed in their minds to be a cause of pain, of harm.

When I was younger, I obsessed over these situations. I'd think about them, wonder why I wasn't offended; *I'd even try to make myself offended*. I felt I was broken, that

my natural indifference was something I should shed, not something I should elevate. Eventually, I realized that this indifference was a gift, not a disability. So, I shifted my focus from trying to maximize the offence I felt, to completely removing any remnants that naturally exist.

As I spoke about in Chapter 7, if someone insults me to my face and it's a lie, it doesn't bother me in the slightest. If they insult me and it's true, if my behavior is intentional, I am devoid of offence, but if I agree with the criticism, I feel it deeply. This is where Stoicism meets introspection; we should aim to be Stoic on the imaginary harms, the subjective interpretations of us that are either untrue, or accurate but intentional. When the criticisms are valid and unintentional, we should acutely feel the harm so as to motivate ourselves to extirpate these undesirable behaviours. Stoicism is often falsely portrayed as the absence of feeling. This misinterpretation does a disservice to any regurgitating it, or believing it, for true Stoicism is the mastery of reaction. The Stoic understands that feeling offence where none is intended is weakness; and to feel nothing where self-correction is needed is blindness.

An example I turn to when considering these Stoic principles is the passing of my paternal grandmother when I was 14. When my mom came in to break the news, tears were streaming down her face; my sister, two years younger than me, succumbed to the emotional expectation after a prolonged pause, but the best I could do was fake a solemn sort of sadness. To be honest, I didn't even fake it for others' sake. However cynical and manipulative it may have been, I had learned by that point that when my mom expected me to be hurt by something, I could leverage it to get something I wanted in return. We didn't have much, but I remember that day we ordered the pizza I wanted, and I got to pick the movie to rent.

I previously wrote about the teenage mind, and I add this memory in order to reflect, or more accurately, demonstrate the reflection needed for growth. A decade ago my shame over this behavior would have been too great to publicly write this admission; however, a decade of additional introspection has led me to believe the admission is necessary, not as a roadmap for sociopaths to exploit—they will almost universally be well aware of this strategy—but for the quest to confront the uncomfortable about ourselves and our past actions in order to grow as a person, a pillar of this book.

I need to caveat this story with important context; my grandmother wasn't nice to me, and I was neither close to her, nor liked her. I saw her maybe once or twice a year, and had only the briefest interactions with her when I saw her. She and my dad were not close, there was a lot of anger and resentment between them. Interestingly, it was my mom who felt it critically important to try to have her ex-husband's mother in my sister's and my life, and I don't believe the feeling was reciprocated from my late grandmother. The only time I was ever scheduled to spend any

substantial time with her, 3 weeks planned during the summer when I was 12, after a single day, she drove me to the communal farm where many of her siblings lived and dropped me off. She thought I'd have a better time there, apparently, and she was probably correct. It was a fantastic summer, and I learned a lot from being on a farm, even if just for a few weeks.

I held other anger and resentments toward her. She was quite wealthy, she lived in a mansion that was 8,000+ square feet on a massive acreage outside of Calgary in the forest, and of course, we were very poor. Despite this, I never once received a Christmas or birthday gift from her. Apparently, she was putting money away for me to go to university—I never received a cent, but that's another story entirely, which I'll soon share. The last time I saw her, she screamed at me, berating and insulting me. It was Christmas, and my dad and my aunt had decided to ravage her chocolates. When they realized they were about to finish them all, they sent me up to offer her the last piece. She believed I had eaten them all myself, and she lost it. After my dad and aunt came, explained they had eaten them, not me, she just stormed out of the room. She never apologized.

Back to the story, apparently, at 14 I was not a convincing actor. By the time the funeral came, in which they insisted on making me a pallbearer—which was its own issue, because at 14, her brothers, the shortest likely being 6'6", towered over me. Considering I'm only 5'11", they still would. As the family was together, and I was clearly not mourning, talk began amongst them about me potentially repressing my emotions. After the funeral, I was cornered and told that they wanted me to get counseling for unresolved emotions.

As they pushed, I pushed back, and explained exactly why I wasn't upset. I saw it written all over their faces; they thought there was something broken in me. They looked horrified. How could a grandson say that about his grandmother? I struggled with this interaction for many years after. Did it signify something was broken in me? In time, I realized that the horror on their faces was the result of their own projections. Of course, they all knew her well, a mix of good and bad emotions, but a familial bond built over a lifetime. I possessed none of those things with her. Additionally, listening to my parents, aunts, and others speak about their grandparents, it is clear that their experiences were dramatically different from mine. In their minds, I'm sure, they tried to think about how they'd feel if they lost a grandmother as a teenager, but of course, that is a projection and nothing more. Their experience shares no similarities with my own.

Her death when I was 14 demonstrated the principle of Stoicism embodied in the quotes at the start of this section. Ironically, what happened after her death, and the anger and resentment that I carried with me for 15 years following, was the result of a complete failure to live by another Stoic principle: to only focus on what we can control.

After her death, her husband, a man I had considered to be a grandpa as I had known him my entire life—oddly enough, the person in that relationship whom I had actually bonded and spent time with—demonstrated how little that bond meant. My grandmother, for all her faults, had been putting substantial funds away for myself, my sister and our cousin, for our university education and a head start in life. It was in her will as her final wishes, but, of course, everything went to her husband of more than two decades. Less than a year after her death, he remarried. After remarrying, he grew more and more distant, until finally he sprung the news in the spring of my grade 12 year; he wouldn't be honoring the will.

Faced with having to take out student loans, as I'd applied for no scholarships other than the ones automatically given to me for certain grades, I made the decision to take the promotion for the management position at the door-to-door sales company. I figured I'd take a year off and see, maybe save some money before going back to school. Of course, that never happened, and as the years passed by, and my existential angst grew, I frequently looked back on how I'd been wronged. What would life have been like if I'd gone to university? I would have played football, that's for certain. I'd have probably joined a fraternity, lived the typical college experiences as I saw on television and movies, or so I thought. Maybe I'd have gone on to be an attorney, which had been my plan, or maybe something else.

By the time I had the capacity to go back to school in my mid-20s, after spending much of my early 20s partying and living a vapid lifestyle with money I didn't value, no prospects interested me, and I felt it was too late anyway. So, my resentment grew. I'd been robbed of my only opportunity; my life, my future, were both squandered, and I had someone to blame: the man I no longer called my grandpa. A man who didn't earn any of the money, I felt he'd stolen it; a leech who lived off my grandmother, of whose blood I descended, just to betray our family shortly after her passing.

As I made my way through my mid and late 20s, I turned my free time to reading; sometimes hours a day, even all day. I read everything from philosophy, to science, to classic literature. In time, I started to understand him, and then, to even pity him. Some members of my family kept loose contact, for a time, and would periodically update me. Never having earned the wealth for himself, and then marrying someone after the passing of my grandmother who, likewise, had never earned her own wealth, I learned years later that they squandered everything, and were living in a trailer in a rural area of one of the least affluent and most uninhabitable parts of Canada. He had no family of his own and my understanding was he had never had any friends. His health was failing, and he was bitter, angry, and all but alone.

My perspective started to shift regarding my lost inheritance, as well. By the time I was 30, I started contemplating that it was never my money to begin with; *I* didn't earn it, and *I* was not entitled to it. It was never stolen from me, it was simply a promised possibility that never materialized. I began considering possibilities such as

who would I be if I'd received the inheritance? Would I like the person I may have become? It was an abstract thought, and one which I couldn't answer, but it was enough for me to move forward, and my resentment greatly diminished.

As I discovered molecular hydrogen, finally finding a passion to pursue, the dark and dreary mental prison created by the thoughts of what could have been continued to chip, crack and crumble away from my consciousness, replaced by revelatory light by way of thoughts of what *could* be. Still, in moments of weakness, loss, and hardship I returned to the past, to the fantasy of how my life may have turned out. I can't pinpoint exactly when my thoughts finally solidified, but at some point in the last 6 or 7 years my mindset became one of gratitude, transcending the state of mostly indifference which I previously embodied. I realized that I like who I am, I find passion and purpose in my work, and without the events that once burned a white hot rage within me, I wouldn't be who I am today. That catharsis is perfectly embodied in the Taoist parable about the farmer:

*Once upon a time there was a Chinese farmer whose horse ran away. That evening, all of his neighbors visited him to commiserate, saying, "We're so sorry to hear your horse has run away. This is most unfortunate." To which the farmer simply replied, "Maybe."*

*The next day the horse came back bringing seven wild horses with it, and in the evening, everybody came back and said, "Oh, what luck! What a great turn of events. You now have eight horses!" The farmer again simply said, "Maybe."*

*The following day the man's son tried to break one of the wild horses, and while riding it, he was thrown and broke his leg. The neighbors came again and said, "Oh dear, we're so sorry to hear about your son's leg. That's truly unfortunate." The farmer simply responded, "Maybe."*

*The next day an enlistment officer came to the farm looking to draft young men into the army, and upon seeing the boy's broken leg, he left the farm allowing the boy to stay with his father. Again all the neighbors came around and said, "How lucky you are that you can keep your son! Isn't that great!" Again, the farmer simply said, "Maybe." (Kinnard, 2024)*

What I once considered the worst luck that had befallen me was the event necessary for me to become who I am today. I fought through this lesson, again, a few years later, but my negative rumination of "*what should have been*" lasted for a far shorter period. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, I had purchase orders, launch dates, and general enthusiasm from several of the largest retail-focused brands in the supplement world. Every single one of them cancelled the project when the pandemic started, and none of them ever restarted. I had been counting my earnings before they arrived, and was devastated by the turn of events.



Then, something happened. The tools I'd built over the preceding decade helped me through this crisis of entitlement. I spent my time focused on helping my current customers; many of them allocating more resources to promote my technology than they had before, a truth I shared previously in another chapter. Despite the state of the world, my business continued to grow. The pandemic also unlocked more growth, elsewhere. I began walking through the forest daily, not just most weekends as I had been previously, a practice I have kept to this day. It was also during the early stages of the pandemic when I really committed to restart martial arts; for clarity, I made the first moves to start again in February of 2020, but I wasn't yet fully convinced. It was the pandemic that ensured my new routine stuck.

All in all, the disaster, loss, and hardship from the pandemic strengthened who I am, my business, and left me in a better position, I believe, than if it had never occurred. I cannot know for sure, but all reasonable estimations point to that conclusion. The message of the farmer yet again rang true.

We cannot allow ourselves to ruminate on past hardships. This is a lesson that took me many years to reconcile, but one that has proven true over and over again. Likewise, we cannot assume that our current fortune will hold forever. We must focus on each moment, with our eyes to the future, prepared to ride the current of our reality to the destination we desire.

## **Conclusion: Mental Practice as Foundation**

The most powerful application of Stoic thinking is cognitive reframing—the deliberate practice of viewing obstacles not as misfortunes but as opportunities for growth and demonstration of virtue.

As Marcus Aurelius wrote: “*The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way*” (Holiday, 2015).

I couldn't decide where to add the story about the stolen shipment, Chapter 12, or here. In fact, part of me struggled with the differences between my strategic pessimism, visualization, and Stoicism. I considered combining all into one, large chapter. After reflection, I decided that, while intertwined and connected, the ideas were sufficiently separate to justify their own chapters. Additionally, I was loath to further reduce the impact and focus of some of the greatest thinkers that have ever walked this Earth. So, here I am, telling the same story, again, from a different perspective.

As I sat on my couch at the end of the day on May 15th, 2025, my Chief Operating Officer called me, clearly in distress, to advise me that our shipment had been stolen. For context, I was going through a period of unfathomable heightened and sustained sympathetic stress. My business saw a sudden 700% spike in demand after Joe Rogan mentioned hydrogen tablets on two separate episodes in the same week, once reacting positively when a guest used them on-air, and again during an extended

discussion with Gary Brecka, one of my customers, where Rogan said he was “addicted to them.” I was working north of 100 hours a week, I couldn’t hire fast enough, and I was juggling line expansions, manufacturing negotiations, and everything else a turnkey supply chain entails. In addition to this, my fiancée—as she’s been referred to throughout the book, but wife shortly before this day—was 3 days past due to give birth.

The saying goes that bad luck comes at the worst time, and it’s true—when you’re strong, you easily overcome bad luck. We were experiencing record levels of success, but we were behind. Supply chains and manufacturing lines cannot be erected overnight for something like my hydrogen tablets, which utilize elemental magnesium and come with inherent safety considerations. Our backorder had grown to 80 million tablets in a course of 4 weeks before we put a hold on new customers, lest it become a Ponzi scheme, and I was being told 10 million tablets had just been stolen along with the freightliner they were in. I listened to my COO explain the situation, and asked as many questions as I could think of. I have dealt with shipping disasters and incompetence, but this was new: this caused me to experience wonder. Was I in a *Fast and The Furious* movie? Who would want to steal hydrogen tablets, and what would they even do with them? They’re patented, they can’t sell them, and there isn’t exactly a black market for this, at least not that I am aware of.

My careful questioning and reflection came off as calm, I was told. I was also told that my calmness was jarring, even unnerving. In fact, my COO had to interrupt our conversation to pointedly ask why I was so calm. I don’t recall my exact words, but they were something to the effect of becoming angry won’t solve the issue. We discussed the money that was potentially lost, and I remarked that I’ll still have more than I did a month ago, which elicited a response from my COO that “*he couldn’t believe how Zen I was.*” I’m fully aware that he was referring to Mahayana Buddhism, but as a ‘90s rock fan my mind wandered to “Everything Zen” by Bush, a band I had seen live just weeks earlier. We ended the call, committed to think over solutions and wait for more information.

My fiancée, having listened to the conversation, asked me how I was and what I wanted to do. She suggested watching a show, but I knew that there was little chance I could focus on something as inconsequential as something on Netflix. I asked if she was up for a walk through the forest, the route we take near the river that is flat. It was a valid concern, her being as pregnant as she was, but she said she was. As we walked, she knew I wasn’t in a mood to talk, but think, so we meandered down the path, immersing ourselves in the sounds, scents, and colors of nature. As I thought, first about why this was happening, what recourses I had, but then drawing my mind back towards the present, future and towards solutions, one came to me. I took out my phone to text my COO, and moments after hitting send, he replied. He too had been thinking intently, although had still not fully calmed down after our conversation. He had also found some partial solutions.

That evening we fired off successive emails, setting in motion solutions we didn't know we wouldn't require, but which partially solved our backlog of orders. The solutions came in the fear of loss, to try to maintain what had already been produced, but ended up paving the way for increased future gain. Of course, as I stated in Chapter 12, the truck was found the next day, the victim of a common scam perpetrated by thieves and warehouse conspirators, a particularly devious one which affords just enough plausible deniability for the warehouses involved.

What stood in my way became the way, just as the wisdom Marcus Aurelius shared almost two thousand years ago. Without the better part of 20 years practicing mental visualization, and 15 or so studying and considering the teachings of the Stoics and their practices, I have little doubt that the news delivered to me would have broken me, that is, if it was ever delivered. I have great doubt I would be in the position I was to receive it, having overcome so many catastrophes, surprises, and betrayals prior to this day. This is why these practices aren't simply accessories to resilience, they're its foundation. By systematically training your mind to prepare for challenges, focus on what you control, reframe obstacles as opportunities, and maintain perspective under pressure, you develop psychological weapons that serve across all domains of life.

This isn't about eliminating emotional responses or becoming detached from experience, as I've stated throughout the chapter several times. It's about developing the capacity to function effectively despite emotional intensity, and to maintain clarity and purpose when others lose both. The person who has developed these mental capabilities doesn't just weather storms better, they actually harness the energy of the storm itself. They convert the same conditions that break others into catalysts for their own development. This capacity isn't reserved for the naturally resilient; it's available to anyone willing to engage in consistent mental practice, just as physical strength is available to anyone willing to engage in consistent physical training. Marcus Aurelius was a Roman Emperor. Epictetus was a crippled slave. Seneca was a power broker writing letters from exile. All three faced chaos, none were coddled, and they still trained their minds to respond instead of react. Stoicism works for everyone, so long as you dare to venture down its path, to embrace the uncomfortable.

Every challenge becomes a rep. Every stressor becomes a weight. The only question is whether you're training or collapsing. With mental practice, the outcome isn't uncertain—it's inevitable.

## CHAPTER 17:

# Virtual Reality for Mental Stress Resilience: A Future Lever

Until now, everything I have discussed in this book has been grounded in the real world. I have navigated through the techniques that I have tried and attempted, which have helped me grow and become the person I am today. I still use these techniques, as they assist me in continuing to grow into the person I want to be tomorrow. For some, these techniques may be too harsh, too stressful, and too challenging. If you're reading this book, that likely isn't you. Still, there is the likelihood that someone important to you struggles with anxiety, and you want to find ways to help them. This chapter examines the possible future applications of virtual reality (VR) and its potential to assist individuals who struggle to overcome challenges in the real world. It also examines the dangers that might be associated with these uses and the inevitable reliance on the technology that some will succumb to.

**Picture 31.** My first week of getting back in shape when I was 267 lbs



*Not everyone's rock bottom looks the same. When I hit mine, my bottom was molded out of something that didn't resemble rock, not in the slightest.*

To be frank, I haven't used VR as a hormetic training tool, and the few times I have dabbled with it out of curiosity, I have found the experience to be underwhelming and unconvincing. This chapter isn't about me, though; it's about those who need assistance to take the first steps to regain strength. What feels clearly simulated and manufactured for me may be the appropriate amount of stress for someone struggling. Through this simulated reality, those suffering from debilitating anxiety could potentially find a medium to rehearse addressing their fears, building small but tangible amounts of resilience.

Of course, this comes with serious caveats. Personal responses to VR vary dramatically, with some finding it deeply immersive and others feeling little more than detached curiosity. These differences can be so extreme that formal studies may fail to capture VR's true utility for specific individuals. The exact VR simulation might feel radically different to different people, and a person's state of anxiety may not correlate with their immersion or detachment.

## **The Science and Potential Applications**

The most promising aspect of VR as a stress resilience tool lies in its ability to trigger genuine emotional responses in some individuals. When you stand on a virtual ledge overlooking a steep drop, provided you find the simulation sufficiently convincing, you may find that your palms sweat, your heart rate increases, and your amygdala (which I have previously stated is the brain's fear center) activates almost identically to how it would if you were standing on an actual cliff.

These aren't simply hypotheticals. Preliminary research shows that VR has the ability to trigger fundamental emotional responses that mirror physiological markers of real-world stress, including the elevated heart rate, increased skin conductance, cortisol release, and activation of the amygdala (Fauveau et al., 2024). This mirroring effect forms the basis of VR exposure therapy, which is already FDA-cleared for treating conditions like chronic lower back pain and is currently being explored for expansion into PTSD and related anxiety disorders (Maddox et al., 2025; U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2021). The hormetic principle we've explored throughout this book, namely that controlled exposure to stress leads to adaptive growth, could theoretically extend into virtual environments.

Consider the following potential applications of VR. First, for individuals paralyzed by social anxiety, VR offers escalating and iterative challenges. You can imagine a conversation with a single virtual person, then, as your comfort level rises, move on to small groups, and finally crowds and high-pressure social situations. Then, specific fears including heights, enclosed spaces and the aforementioned public speaking, could be controlled through graduated exposure without tangible, real-world consequences. In doing this, the brain might learn that the fear isn't as bad as it believes. Next, virtual scenarios that are designed to provoke emotions like frustration, disappointment, or anger may serve as practice environments for

emotional regulation techniques. Finally, there are specific scenario rehearsals: anticipated stressful events, such as job interviews, difficult conversations, and performances, that can be rehearsed this way. VR can potentially allow neural pathways for resilient responses to form before the real event takes place.

As mentioned, the people who may benefit most from VR are the acutely fragile or those with heightened anxiety. Indeed, those individuals currently unable to face even minimal real-world challenges might find that VR provides a stepping stone: a way to begin building resilience from a comfortable starting point. Next, those with acute fears may benefit from the systematic desensitization VR brings, allowing for precise exposure that would be impractical or too stressful (at least for some people) in real life. As already stated, individuals with specific fears that are relatively acute, such as a fear of heights or public speaking, may also benefit from the systematic desensitization of VR. Finally, those individuals looking to build structured resilience may use VR to allow for consistent and incrementally-challenging exposures, which avoids the unpredictability of real-world practice.

Like any hormetic stressor—or anything in life really—there are downsides and limitations to an intervention, including VR. Among these limitations is that current VR technology primarily engages visual and auditory senses, limiting our sensory experience to just a fraction of what real-world events provide. For instance, while efforts are being made to address this, current VR experiences offer limited haptic feedback. This means that the full-body, multi-sensory experience of real stress remains impossible to replicate with VR. While touch and physical sensation are important, the best example of a deficiency in VR is probably smell. This is significant because olfactory cues are uniquely potent in evoking emotional responses and retrieving autobiographical memories, likely due to the direct connection between the olfactory bulb and brain regions like the amygdala and hippocampus (Herz et al., 2004). Unlike other senses, smell bypasses the thalamus, enabling faster and more visceral responses. Enhancing olfactory stimulation could meaningfully increase immersion, especially in therapeutic or emotionally resonant applications of VR. I'm reminded of the full sensory movies described in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, the "Feelies," where viewers not only see and hear but experience the full sensations and emotions of the experience, including smells. Perhaps we are closer to this reality than we realize, and the dangers that come with it.

Next, there is a lack of true stakes with VR. The user always knows, at some level, that the experience isn't real. There are no true consequences or irreversible outcomes in this approach. This awareness can dampen the emotional impact and may limit how deeply the resilience is transferred to real-life situations. Moreover, there is a risk that VR becomes a substitute for stress rather than a proxy for the real thing. In other words, VR may be a more sophisticated form of avoidance for some people. The person who only practices social skills in VR but never takes the step into real interactions hasn't built true resilience. In this scenario, VR could

undoubtedly do more harm than good; it could even lead to addiction. I am reminded of the movie *The Matrix*, when Cyrus betrays the rest of the team to be plugged back in; a steak still tastes delicious, even though he knows it is fake. Ignorance is bliss. With sufficiently believable VR, Huxley's warning regarding the Feelies, and the Wachowskis' message in this scene, could all lead to a horrifying dystopian reality where we are controlled through simulated pleasure.

Finally, to repeat a critical consideration, there is extreme individual variability regarding responses to VR. Some find it deeply immersive while others experience it as cartoonishly artificial, creating challenges for standardized research protocols. However, VR actually offers a potential solution to the problem of individual stress response variability: unlike real-world exposure, virtual scenarios can be precisely calibrated and adjusted based on the individual's unique tolerance and response. This customization is the entire point of the technology; it allows for truly personalized stress exposure in a way that would be impossible to consistently achieve in real-world settings. Paradoxically, those who might need VR the most, that is, individuals with crippling anxiety or PTSD, may sometimes be the least responsive to it (Kothgassner et al., 2019).

In short, while many benefit greatly, others maintain such strong cognitive awareness of the simulation's artificiality that it prevents the full therapeutic effect. Their minds, already hypervigilant and analytical during anxiety states, may resist immersion precisely because they're so attuned to potential threats and inconsistencies. This remains an active area of research, with mixed findings that further highlight the need for personalized approaches rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

In considering the potential benefits and risks of VR, I have decided to outline some possible guidance. However, as a caveat, because I do not personally practice this strategy, my advice is based purely on hypothetical reasoning. First, it is imperative that if someone commits to using VR, they use it as a bridge, and not the final destination: any VR stress exposure should have a clear path toward a real-world application with a transitional plan. VR shouldn't be used as a digital escape hatch, but as a structured rehearsal space for real-world resilience. If no transition occurs, VR poses a substantial threat, likely leading to reduced resilience and increased fragility—the very issues it would purportedly address.

Second, to give VR a better chance of success, you should add physical components to virtual training. This means you should stand rather than sit, use breathwork during exposures, and move your body as you would in the real scenario to help bridge the mind-body gap. If possible, add an aromatic experience; if you are in a forest scenario, use an aromatic simulating this. By adding additional sensory components, you likely give yourself the best chance of being convinced in the simulation, which is the entire purpose.

Finally, start within your capacity and gradually increase the challenge. At the same

time, you should be ruthlessly honest about your own responses: calibrate based on your nervous system's signals, not external benchmarks. It is critical you ensure that the stress you are subjecting yourself to is just that, a legitimate stress. Conversely, ensure that the stress is manageable; like with all hormetic and potential hormetic protocols, stress well beyond our capacity leads to deterioration, not growth.

These practical guidelines for VR stress exposure, gradual calibration, embodied rehearsal, and self-referenced interpretation, aren't just best practices, they're philosophical guardrails. If you want a prescient cautionary tale about what happens when we blur the line between simulation and revelation, look no further than Philip K. Dick's *VALIS*, which I wrote about in Chapter 15. The novel straddles fiction and autobiography, with Dick splitting himself into two characters: Philip, the observer tethered to consensus reality, and Horselover Fat, the fractured seeker trying to interpret a beam of pink light he believes came from a divine satellite. This beam, called VALIS (Vast Active Living Intelligence System), downloads gnostic revelations (see below) into Fat's consciousness, shattering his sense of reality. He becomes convinced that the Roman Empire never ended, that time is an illusion layered over a more authentic reality, and that hidden knowledge, *gnosis*, is being transmitted to awaken those who can perceive it.

*VALIS* is more than just a psychotic episode disguised as a science fiction plot, though it often feels *exactly* like that. Some interpret it purely as madness, and they may not be wrong. However, even if it is madness, it's a madness in search of meaning. More appropriately, this is a meditation on what happens when simulated experiences feel more *real* than the world we're used to. Fat doesn't escape into fantasy; he's trying, *desperately*, to integrate something beyond the limits of what his nervous system was designed to handle. This deterministic worldview that runs through all of Dick's novels, and the grappling questions on what is knowable (if anything), are precisely the themes which Hollywood has stripped in the movies. Instead they choose to make them fit their worldview regarding free will, happy endings, and a successful love story where appropriate.<sup>16</sup>

Dick may very well be right that the universe is deterministic; I tend to think it is, as I discussed in Chapter 12, but Dick's acceptance of this as "sort of a good thing," meaning change is futile, leads to weaker people who will simply accept their fate. We know that our actions change based on whether we are led to believe in free will or not. I speak about this in greater length in Chapter 15. I'm reminded of a quote by Stephen Hawking: "*I have noticed that even those who assert that everything is predestined and that we can change nothing about it still look both ways before they*

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<sup>16</sup> Dick didn't need happy endings, and his characters often come to terms with the state of the world, the unanswerable and unknowable questions, and the possibility that they have no choice or free will. This worldview is often shocking for the average person, so Hollywood likely stripped it from the films to improve box office sales.



*cross the street*” (Holloway, 2018). We ought to live our lives as if our actions matter, and believe that we control our own destiny. It’s the only way we can build, grow, and seek to accomplish something great. As I write this, I am dealing with a rare type of surprise: I agree, in this sense, with the lies told by Hollywood over the truths presented by a philosopher. Importantly, I think we need to know these truths, but choose to delude ourselves with the lie in our day-to-day, only resurrecting the truth to temper the worst of our behaviors.

This digression brings me to a potential application of virtual environments; just as VALIS’ transmissions can offer transformative encounters, controlled exposures to fear, trauma, or even jarring philosophical concepts regarding nihilism, determinism and existentialism could lead to transcendence. Though, without grounding the experience in the body, in breath, in physical movement, and in self-awareness, some intended outcomes risk becoming disembodied scripts separated from our primary *self* in sufficient capacity to render them meaningless. Or, they may even possess the ability to overwrite our capacity to interpret stress in a meaningful way. In other words, they can make us like Fat: flooded with signals but unable to coalesce the information into any coherent understanding.

That’s why the goal with VR must never be dissociation or escape. It must be *integration*. We must treat VR not as a deliverance from the real, but as a layered tool for navigating it, one that respects our unique ‘stress fingerprint’, as much as any simulated protocol. Just as Gnosticism in Dick’s VALIS offered liberation not through belief but through *direct knowledge* of hidden structures, effective VR use depends on gaining *gnosis* of our own physiological and psychological patterns. The headset becomes a modern initiatory device, but only if it returns us to the world sharper, more embodied, and more awake.

## **The Pleasure Trap: When Simulation Replaces Reality**

A clear and cautionary parallel can be drawn with pornography, which has become an epidemic in its own right. For many men (and some women), the simulation has become more appealing than the real experience, or at least, sufficiently stimulating to hinder motivation to pursue the real experience. In Jean Baudrillard’s (1981/1994) terms, pornography functions as *hyperreality*: a simulation that no longer refers to or requires the real, and in some cases even *replaces* it. VR may not just carry a similar risk, it may increase the risk of simulated intimacy, for many eventually replacing real human connection completely.

I’m reminded of a particularly bad movie from the 1990s: Sylvester Stallone plays John Spartan in *Demolition Man*, a cop frozen in time and brought back to a future that needs him. It is a future where all children are created in test tubes and physical intercourse is banned and replaced by virtual reality simulations, supposedly to prevent disease transmission and emotional distress (Brambilla, 1993). What struck me as unbelievable fiction as a child or young teen is growing closer to reality. VR

serves as a potential tool to aid those needing a crutch, but could be co-opted as a method of control under the guise of protection. Marco Brambilla's film today represents an eerie potential reality, one that may arrive if we are not vigilant.

If the simulated social interaction becomes more comfortable than the awkwardness of real human connection, or the simulated accomplishment more satisfying than actual progress, then the tool ceases to be a bridge and becomes a trap. Porn is the cautionary tale here: what begins as an easy substitute for intimacy quickly rewires the brain's reward system, making the messy, difficult, and meaningful pursuit of real physical relationships feel not just unnecessary, but undesirable. If VR follows that path, it will fail to build resilience and instead foster a generation fluent in simulated life but unprepared for the demands of the real one. We are already seeing this with many young people, who are adept at using technology to communicate but are frozen in anxiety at the mere thought of speaking to another person on the phone, let alone participating in face-to-face interactions. There's even a name for this: the Gen-Z stare. It describes the blank, sometimes disengaged expression that younger adults often give in response to social interaction, which is sometimes perceived as apathy, but is more likely a reflection of social anxiety, reduced in-person experience, or an attempt to avoid confrontation (Kayata, 2025). If virtual reality proves effective in significantly increasing our social alienation, even accidentally, the power brokers establishing our systems of enslavement will not hesitate to weaponize this, as they have with every other vice, against us. I believe it is more likely that they are already aware, given that the transition to VR replacement of real human connection is already in development. (This is a subject I explore in detail in *The Final Thought War*. I don't want to give much away, so check out that book to learn about technology's role in our intersubjective crisis).

## **Conclusion: Simulated Steps, (Potentially) Real Strides**

VR is certainly not a panacea. It comes with extreme risks and caveats but, despite this, it may prove to be a potential tool to help a specific and narrow subset of the population. That said, even this is theoretical at this stage. What is almost certain is that VR technology will continue to advance, and whether it is used as a tool for growth or a weapon for control depends on the intent of those developing the technology. This is why I lean towards the latter, more pessimistic option; this technology is not being developed by well-meaning researchers, but by some of the largest companies in the world, such as Meta, with a consistent track record of subversive manipulation of their users. Maybe, they will prove me wrong, and I hope they do.

If they do, and VR is designed in a way that can help the fragile gain strength, what we do know with certainty is this: the stress response varies tremendously between individuals. This is why all population-level studies on aggressive hormetic agents, whether physical stressors like cold exposure and ethanol, or mental stressors like

social pressure, are inherently limited. Often, the deviation between individuals is too large to make meaningful generalizations. For VR, this is further exacerbated by the fact that some individuals simply do not believe the simulation, resulting in no stress induction whatsoever. If the concerns on intent are resolved, we still face a tremendous challenge on the research side of things.

Presuming my pessimism is unfounded, and VR represents a future tool, my takeaway remains the same, for the most part, as it has been in every other chapter. I have stated repeatedly throughout both this book and its companion, *The Body*, what might be a perfect hormetic dose for you could crush someone else entirely. This reality, namely that we each possess a unique stress response fingerprint, is why all resilience work must ultimately be personalized. VR, in this light, could be utilized as a transition to true stress, as the fundamental principle remains unchanged: *strength is ultimately forged in reality, not in simulation*. VR may help you rehearse for the challenge, but the real growth comes when you finally step onto the actual stage, into the actual social gathering, or onto the actual mountain path, and discover you can handle what once seemed impossible. Use virtual reality as a potential stepping stone if needed, but don't mistake it for the destination, and remain hypervigilant of the possibility that it is being used as a weapon against your intellectual and emotional autonomy. Real life, with all its messy, unpredictable, consequence-laden challenges, is where true resilience is ultimately built and expressed. It is the only arena where you are able to face the wolves who will eventually come for you and your loved ones.

## CHAPTER 18:

# Precision Reset: Hypnotherapy as Psychological Circuit-Breaking for High Performers

Most people struggle for years with the same psychological patterns. Common wisdom suggests that we should read self-help books, try meditation, and if all else fails, talk to a therapist. Willpower is often heralded as a solution to our woes, as if it's as simple as we don't want to fix what is broken inside us with enough intensity. The complexity of the situation is deep: desire is a powerful emotional driver, but conscious desire often lacks the ability to eradicate subconscious drivers. So, even with the will, we often lack the way, and the same emotional loops continue to run; anxiety spirals, addictive behaviors, sleep disruption, and anger outbursts.

These behaviors are driven by complex, subconscious wiring, with conscious efforts proving ineffective to alter them. This is why, when it comes to behavioral loops

**Picture 32.** Halloween 2022



*Some people dress for the job they want.  
I dress for the empire I refuse to let die.*

within us that we lack an understanding of, the most powerful psychological tools for adaptation aren't conscious—they're subconscious. One technique I am aware of that seems to be able to get to the root of these hidden systems of our mind is hypnotherapy, and, despite the attacks it often receives from entrenched mental health professionals insecure about their future earnings, it seems to work. My experiences have been profound, as have the experiences of every person I have ever discussed the practice with.

Hypnotherapy isn't mystical nonsense or stage entertainment. It's a precision psychological instrument for accessing and reconfiguring the neural circuitry that conscious methods simply cannot reach. When properly applied, it bypasses the conscious resistance that frustrates most change efforts and works directly at the level where psychological patterns actually reside. One consideration is the professional

you choose; entering a hypnotic state is the first goal, navigating through your buried memories is the next, and the practitioner guiding you is of extreme importance. The deluge of unqualified practitioners with less than scientific views of the mind serves as fodder for the criticisms from mainstream psychiatry, and the criticisms in these instances are correct. So, choose wisely, as there are numerous trained and credentialed psychiatrists, psychologists, and counsellors practicing this technique.

## **Why Hypnotherapy Works When Nothing Else Does**

The human mind operates on multiple levels simultaneously. The conscious mind, which is the part you're reading this with right now, is merely the tip of the iceberg. Beneath it lies the vast architecture of subconscious processing that governs your default responses, emotional reactions, habitual behaviors, and intuitive judgments.

As I stated in the opening paragraph, most psychological interventions target only the conscious mind. You're told to think differently, practice mindfulness, use positive affirmations, or rationally analyze your behaviors. These approaches can be valuable, but they're fundamentally limited because they don't address the underlying subcortical patterns driving the very behaviors you're trying to change. Meditation might calm you over weeks, while talk therapy might give you insight, but when you're in a triggered state, neither can reliably flip the switch. Hypnotherapy can, but more importantly, prolonged breakthroughs with hypnotherapy help ensure that these triggers reduce in force, and perhaps in time even completely abate.

Hypnotherapy works differently to other psychotherapeutic tools. It creates a state of focused attention and heightened suggestibility where the normal barriers between conscious and subconscious processing become more permeable. In this state, new associations can be formed, emotional responses recalibrated, and behavioral patterns reconfigured at their source—not at the level of conscious intention, but at the level of automatic execution. Research confirms that hypnotic states involve distinct brain patterns that facilitate rapid creation of new neural pathways, particularly in regions governing emotional processing, automatic responses, and habit formation (Menon & Bhagat, 2025; De Pascalis, 2024). These same regions are notoriously resistant to conscious control strategies. The result is straightforward: hypnotherapy can create immediate shifts in patterns that might otherwise resist years of conventional approaches.

## **My Experiences With Hypnotherapy**

This chapter isn't added because it's trendy, but rather, because I have a deep personal connection to the therapy, experiencing profound and transformational results. I first tried hypnotherapy because I was desperate, and was completely floored by the experience and the subsequent progress I made. Today, I intermittently use it because it works when other techniques fail, and it does so consistently, rapidly, and almost completely.

## Breaking Addictive Eating Patterns

My 20s were marked by extreme swings in weight. When I was training and had an athletic goal in mind, I kept my weight low, but I was almost never completely ‘shredded’; my addiction to food ensured that. Whenever I had lapses in training, such as from injury, I often gained tremendous amounts of weight in short order. It was not unusual for me to gain 30lbs in a month, and then lose it in 6-8 weeks once I began training again. As I allude to in *The Body*, this extreme weight change, repeated countless times over the years, likely played a role in permanently affecting my metabolism and fat storage.

Many talk about food addiction, and while mine wasn’t as bad as it gets, it was bad, and it was embarrassing. Friends recount stories of sauce dripping down my arm, face smeared, from drenching additional empty calories onto every bite of food. I remember it too, but I lack the visualization—mirrors tend to be lacking in spaces where we eat. Food jealousy was another big issue, with every “cheat meal” inducing panic. I wanted it all, everything anyone was trying, so I would buy it all, and eat until I was sick. This was controllable when I lived alone, but when I lived with roommates who liked to indulge, there was no escape.

My late 20s put an exclamation point on the problem I knew I had, and is what eventually led me to hypnotherapy. Living with my best friend who trained like I did in addition to working in construction all day, for him, energy intake was a major consideration. When I was training intensely, I required 6000-8000 calories a day to maintain weight, and meticulously planned them, tracking my macros and nutrients. My dietary plan was intentional and thorough. My roommate was even more extreme, as he needed probably around 25-30% more calories a day than I did.

Despite extensive knowledge about nutrition and the self-discipline to build successful companies, I found myself trapped in repetitive cycles of addictive eating behaviors. Intellectually understanding the problem did nothing to stop it. Willpower failed. Conscious planning failed. During the week, typical days were not an issue. Like me, my friend wanted to ensure healthy nutrition. The problem came on the so-called “cheat days.” Where he had a “stop” button, I did not. The weekends, which we had designated for these feasts, are where everything would fly off the rails.

Friday nights, after the high-intensity ‘Caveman’ exercise classes I mentioned earlier in the book, we would stop at the grocery store for post-exercise, late-night fuel. The workout would end around 9 PM, if I recall correctly, so we’d be eating close to 11 PM. I vividly remember these nights: the floodgates would open, and my addiction would take over completely. I’d run up and down the aisles, panicked, not thinking, grabbing anything that looked appealing, far too much for any single person to eat. As I made it to the checkout, I’d inevitably notice what my friend had picked, which would trigger jealousy and further panic, necessitating that I add exactly what he wanted as well.

Then there were the buffet meals. Often on Sundays, we would go to one of our local buffets. This same panic would take over me. I thought I could utilize logic to plan my way through it, so I began using my willpower to load my plates with only clean food: seafood, vegetables, maybe some grilled meat. Nothing deep fried, no heavy carbs, nothing that would start the panic eating. I'd eat several plates of clean food, but I tended to eat faster than my friends. I'd sit, watching them eat, and the itch would grow. Eventually, without fail, I'd rationalize that a single small plate of dessert couldn't hurt. What followed, again without exception, was gorging on the desserts until another bite felt impossible. On numerous occasions, perhaps even the norm, the *walk to our car* was so much exertion I had to stop and repeatedly throw up.

So, when I had finally had enough, I sought out solutions. Hypnotherapy showed some promise, and despite being repulsed by almost every website offering it, I found a therapist offering the service and gave it a try. The first session was revelatory. I had never experienced anything like it: in a semi-conscious state I was led through memories, unlocking events from my childhood that I clearly remembered, but had not previously been aware of. Confirmation from my mother regarding the events demonstrated the memories were real. I visited this therapist 3 or 4 times in total, before her practice went out of business. I had happened to be one of her first clients, and perhaps the demand for hypnotherapy wasn't as high as she believed.

I found recordings to keep me going, from Dr. Paul Ogilvie at LiberationInMind.com, and continued there. The following 6 months after these sessions saw me lose 40lbs, and I lost them while exclusively travelling for business, with no athletic goals in sight. Weight loss came easy, my emotional addiction to food seemingly completely extirpated. I hit my lowest weight since I was 17 years old, lower than periods where I exercised up to 8 hours a day. Then, of course, my health crisis occurred.

The trauma of my health crisis (described in the greatest detail in the Preface of *The Body*) led to a resurgence of many of the habits, not all at once, but over time. At first, it started out small, an indulgence here and there, but as I became lost in my work, forgetting to eat all day, my meals were marked with similar levels of panic as I had pre-hypnotherapy. Eventually, the dust settled, and I sought out another hypnotherapist. I had started my fasting protocol, which I discuss in *The Body* as well, but wanted to stop myself from gorging on my feast days. I struggled to find a practitioner who didn't cause revulsion reading their website, yet again, before I finally found one close to my house. She had practiced for many years, and wasn't advertising because her client list was almost full. She just about had room, however, and I made myself flexible. I shared my experience with the previous hypnotherapist, and the resurgence of the habits post-stressful life change, and she devised a strategy to root out additional drivers.

My first session was, in ways, more powerful than with the previous therapist. The memories unlocked caused me to sob uncontrollably while under the hypnotic state. The curious thing about hypnotherapy is you feel the anguish while in the state, but once you are pulled out you feel a sense of calm and clarity. The days following led to a flood of returning memories, many repressed and traumatic. With each one, I called my mother to confirm, and in each instance they were verified. One memory, for example, was witnessing a friend being sexually abused when we were small children, and running home to tell my babysitter what I had seen. In writing this, I am being intentionally cryptic, as I am unsure and doubtful, the friend recollects what happens, likely repressing it himself. My mother confirmed police were involved, and the perpetrator had other victims. I made it through 3 sessions with this hypnotherapist, and my issues once again subsided dramatically, albeit not as completely as the first time. I would have gladly continued, but my 4th, and what ended up being my final, session was cancelled as I was en route; my therapist's son had been in a tragic car accident, and she ended up taking a hiatus from seeing patients.

Regarding eating, and the panic I felt, an early memory was unlocked which seemingly explained the emotion—especially considering reconciling it led to a substantial reduction in the power it held over me. As I've mentioned throughout this book, growing up we didn't have much. Our eating practices at my mother's house weren't always healthy, with a substantial amount of our meals being fast food. While we were never "starving" in any literal sense, some days I would choose to go hungry; days where we would eat hotdogs on stale bread, or spaghetti with margarine, for instance. I was hungry in the sense I would eat "just enough," but never felt satiated.

So, on days we were indulging in something "good" like McDonald's, or at least "good" to a child's limited perception, I would conspire to ask for more food than I was offered. The answer was always no, but one day I discovered a work around. I happened to be tasked with handing out everyone's meals from the bags, at the end realizing that a substantial amount of the french fries had spilled out of the containers into the bottom of the bag. A mix of excitement and fear I would lose this discovered treasure, washed over me. I ate as many of the "bag fries" as I could, so as not to allow my plate, and the substantial difference in my portion compared to the allocation others received, to betray my luck. From that day forth I always volunteered to hand out the food when we got home. What my childhood self portrayed as initiative and contribution was a veil for theft and greed. I remembered having done this, but the unveiling of these true emotions only occurred when I relived them through hypnotherapy, which is what ultimately led to my progress in this area.

Through uncovering the traumas that led to my eating addiction, I was able to resolve many other deleterious emotional drivers sabotaging my conscious efforts.



One day I will return to hypnotherapy again, however, I am still gathering my thoughts on the root issues I wish to address, while patiently biding my time for a therapist who checks my boxes. For now, I continue with recordings, and use them for two specific issues.

### **Inducing Sleep During Mental Hyperactivity**

Anyone in a high-stakes profession knows the feeling: your body is drained, but your mind refuses to shut off. Strategic problems, looming deadlines, potential risks, and critical decisions churn through your head without pause. No amount of melatonin, meditation, or sleep hygiene seems to touch it. Whether you're building a business, managing a surgical team, leading a classroom, or preparing a legal case, the result is the same: your nervous system stays locked in a state of heightened vigilance long after the workday ends.

Hypnotherapy provides an immediate off-switch for me, most of the time, not by forcing sleep through sedation, but by rapidly altering brainwave patterns from beta (active thinking) to alpha and theta states associated with sleep onset. When my mind would otherwise race for hours, specific hypnotic techniques allow me to fall asleep within minutes, regardless of mental load. Importantly, you need to be able to slow your thoughts enough to actively participate in the guided hypnosis, as the therapy is one requiring active involvement.

### **Rapid Reset During States of Anger or Agitation**

Emotional triggers happen to everyone. The difference between psychological fragility and resilience isn't avoiding triggers; it's how quickly you can reset yourself after being triggered, and to what extent the trigger takes over in the moment. In situations where anger or agitation would normally persist for hours, disrupting productivity and decision-making, hypnotic techniques allow me to completely reset my emotional state in minutes.

This rapid regulatory capacity isn't just about feeling better, although that is definitely a perk. It's a strategic advantage that enables clear thinking and effective action when others remain emotionally hijacked. I haven't needed to use this technique in some time; however, when I do, the recordings are short, 15 or 20 minutes, and the effects are profound. These days, I treat hypnotherapy as a last resort, lest I overuse it and the familiarity drives diminishing returns.

### **The Transition from External to Internal Control**

The ultimate goal of undertaking hypnotherapy isn't dependence on external hypnotic guidance, but the development of internal control mechanisms. This is where hypnotherapy fundamentally deviates from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), the gold standard of the psychiatric industry, which conveniently requires a lifetime of commitment and the accompanying hourly fees to be successful. With

consistent practice, hypnotherapy offers the ability to transition neurophysiological states via rewritten internal triggers, rather than attempting to override with external force. In my experience, what initially required multiple in-person sessions was eventually maintained with 20-minute recordings and, in time, became possible through self-initiated processes that are completed in mere seconds.

This progression from external to internal control represents a fundamental expansion of psychological capability; not just the ability to function effectively despite challenging circumstances, but the ability to directly alter the internal experience of those circumstances at will.

## **Beyond Healing: Performance Enhancement**

While hypnotherapy is often framed in therapeutic terms, for me, its most powerful applications may be in performance enhancement, rather than healing. The same mechanisms that help overcome anxiety or addiction can potentially be deployed to enhance focus, accelerate learning, optimize recovery, and maintain peak psychological states during high-pressure situations.

This performance application seeks to elevate parts of you that already work. It's the psychological equivalent of taking an already functional engine and precision-tuning it for maximum output and efficiency. For those seeking not just psychological stability but exceptional performance, whether in business, athletics, creative pursuits, or any demanding field, hypnotic techniques offer a level of psychological optimization that few other approaches can match.

## **Conclusion: The Untapped Psychological Advantage**

Most people operate with minimal control over their own psychological machinery. They accept default patterns, tolerate suboptimal states, and resign themselves to gradual, incremental improvement at best. They consider this normal because they've never experienced the alternative.

Hypnotherapy offers that alternative; not as a curiosity or a crutch, but as a precision tool for psychological advantage. Whether breaking entrenched patterns that have resisted other approaches, enabling rapid state change when circumstances demand it, or optimizing performance under pressure, hypnotic techniques provide direct access to the control systems that most people never learn to operate.

Given the precision, speed, and breadth of its effects, the better question isn't can you afford it, but whether you can afford not to.

**Picture 33.** Black bears on our property



*Bear encounter protocol:*  
*Step 1: Stay calm.*  
*Step 2: Summon cat*

## CHAPTER 19:

### Nature Exposure and Mindful Introspection

I don't meditate in the way most people mean it. I don't sit cross-legged with an app playing chimes and telling me to focus on my breath. Despite this, I've experienced something I believe is the goal of meditation: quieting the noise in my mind, reconnecting to something bigger than me, and letting the stress dissolve. For me, that happens in a few places, but most reliably it's in nature.

I'll start walking, thinking through things, running scenarios in my head like I always do. Perhaps I am playing introspective music, other times letting myself be immersed in the sounds of the forest. No matter what, after a while, the thoughts trail off, and I become completely aware of the world around me; if I am without headphones, the birdsong, the rustling in the brush, and the specific tone of green in the trees. If my headphones are on, I carefully slide them off my ears when I enter this state, lest a big movement destroy the trajectory my mind has travelled. It's not intentional, at least, it wasn't at first. Still, I never enter nature with the intent to get to this state; I just acknowledge it is likely to happen, and hope that it does. When it does, I can feel stress leaving my body like air out of a tire. I come back from those walks clearer, calmer, and more capable. That's what recovery feels like.

Of course, nature isn't always calming. Sometimes, it reminds you that you're not in charge. When I was twelve, I went camping with my mom, sister, cousin, aunt, and two friends. My buddies and I walked to the far side of the lake to fish, and, after a while, one of them turned and pointed to the woods. "*That dog looks like a wolf,*" he said. We looked up, and in perfect unison, the other boy and I yelled, "*Bear!*" That was the first time any of us had seen one, so we panicked, and ran full sprint. Of course, it was a black bear, and not a big one, so it was also running away as fast as it could. We ran towards a log we used to cross the creek feeding into the lake. My one friend made it across the log in probably a second flat, as did I, both of us moving in reckless disregard to the potential of slipping. Our other friend shouted after us, "*Don't panic, stay calm like me...*", right before slipping and falling into the creek. Of course, we were fine—terrified, but fine. We ran the whole way back to camp like our lives depended on it, because we believed they did.

Today, I see bears all the time. They pass through the acreage I live on like curious neighbors. I don't panic anymore, but I give them their space—especially mothers with cubs. Bear attacks are rare, but they happen, and if you don't respect that reality, you don't belong out there. Most of the bears that come through are far more afraid of us than we are of them, we've even named them. Most sprint away from simply noticing us looking at them through the window. Recently, this has changed, and an alpha black bear has made an appearance. I estimate him to be 500lbs, at least, and I write this at the start of a summer in which he's likely to get a lot heavier. He shows no fear of me, walking the property as if he owns it. I've yelled at him and

thrown rocks, and he just slowly saunters away, as if I am a pest he prefers not to deal with, not a threat he needs to take seriously.

So, I've armed myself. Near the door, I keep bear spray, a horn, and an axe. Many have advised me to call wildlife control, however, I know how that goes. If I report him, they will come through and euthanize all the bears in the area. That isn't a weight I want to put on my soul. He hasn't shown any indication of aggression, yet, but he has demonstrated to be a potential threat. I haven't seen him in roughly two weeks, so perhaps others reported him, but regardless, I will stay vigilant.

I digress. The point of the story isn't just about childhood or wildlife; it's about what real recovery looks like. After stress, after exposure, your system needs a reset. This is true for the mind just as much as it is for the body. For true mental recovery and growth, we need more than just sleep, and not just distraction, but a true downshift in nervous system tone. Clarity isn't a luxury, it's a necessary part of adaptation. You can't grow stronger if you never come down. You can't handle the next bear if you're still carrying the last one on your back. This chapter is about how to shed that stress.

## **The Recovery Imperative**

Unfortunately, sleep alone is woefully inadequate to replenish the mental capacity we drain from high-demand thinking and stressful situations. The world is slowly starting to wake up to the critical aspect of recovery techniques for the body; however, for many high performers, the notion of recovery time for the mind isn't just foreign, it's sacrilege. Self-care is paramount, but not in the dosages dolled out by those advocating for coddling of our youth and increased safe spaces. Self-care should be utilized precisely in the amount needed to restore us to peak performance; when we exceed this, it weakens us. When utilized appropriately, it will magnify productivity and performance, not detract from it.

If you're aspiring to perform at a high level, if you aren't experiencing burnout and stress, you aren't pushing hard enough. However, if you are and still refuse to prioritize self-care, you aren't showing tenacity and dedication, you're harming yourself and your aspirations through stubbornness and an ill-informed ideology of machismo. Recovery isn't passive relaxation; I am not advocating for lying on the couch and vegging out to Netflix, it's an active process that requires specific inputs. Nature exposure and structured introspection are perhaps the most powerful recovery tools available, particularly after intense emotional and psychological stress. Critically, activities like walking through nature are active in nature, contributing to your physical health while you restore your mental capacity.

## **Nature as a Recovery Input**

Nature is my sanctuary, it is my most cherished self-care. I try to walk through the woods daily, although I typically fall short and miss a couple of walks a week. Even

though I am racking up the step count and burning some calories during this ~40-minute trek over uneven terrain, the purpose isn't for exercise, nor is it for entertainment; it is a deliberate mental recalibration. I often walk with my fiancée, and we use this time to talk and connect. Other times, I walk alone, or with our small dog, and get lost in thought; that is, unless the thoughts leave me and I become aware of everything around me, completely immersed in the moment.

We know that walking through nature produces measurable physiological effects, with the research reporting the notion that these aren't simply casual strolls but structured recovery sessions, simultaneously providing valuable low-intensity exercise that burns calories and improves health and sleep quality. These sessions produce measurable physiological shifts. Research has shown that walks lasting over 20 minutes can reduce cortisol levels by approximately 21% compared to baseline, signaling a significant drop in physiological stress (Hunter, Gillespie, & Chen, 2019). At the same time, they promote increased activation of the parasympathetic nervous system, which is the branch responsible for rest, digestion and repair, helping the body shift out of a stress-dominant state (Song et al., 2015). Heart rate variability (HRV), a key marker of autonomic nervous system flexibility and overall resilience, also improves with consistent practice (Farrow & Washburn, 2019). Neurologically, these sessions are associated with reduced amygdala activation, resulting in lower reactivity to emotional stressors (Sudimac, Sale, & Kühn, 2022; De Brito et al., 2020). Over time, this shift contributes to improved cognitive flexibility, enhancing the brain's ability to adapt to new challenges and shift strategies effectively (Lamatungga et al., 2024; Mason et al., 2022; Muallem et al., 2018).

While I subjectively feel better after walking through nature, the purpose remains deliberate physiological and psychological recovery. I've intentionally structured my environment to maximize this input. My acreage property surrounded by forest wasn't an aesthetic choice; it was strategic, and it took me months to find. My home office overlooks the forest, providing passive exposure throughout the day. This constant visual connection to natural environments maintains baseline recovery even during intense work periods.

The key distinction here is intentionality. I'm not simply 'enjoying nature' but strategically using it as a recovery modality with specific dosing parameters. The colors, smells, and sounds of the forest don't just relax me, they recharge me. After being in nature, I return to my work invigorated, not drained. My doses of nature therapy are not limited to long forest sessions. Even a one-minute break, such as stepping outside to take a leak among the trees, shifts something in my mind. I catch the scent of the forest, the freshness of the air, and the green all around me. That flash of exposure does more to reset my system than most people's 10-minute meditation apps. It saves water, sure, and as a child born in the mid-80s, the message of "save water" is burned into my memory as a critical practice to save the planet. It's a helpful argument to present to my fiancée, as well, who understandably thinks

my habit is uncouth. While the argument is true, the real motivation is my mental health, and the brief moments of reprieve offering a reset which my uncouth habit allows me.

## **Sensory Recalibration**

Perhaps the reason nature has such a profound effect on us is precisely because most of us lack it in our lives. We evolved to be amongst the trees, the animals, and under the open sky. Our brains, these days, are overwhelmed by modern environments, artificial light, manufactured noise, and sterile smells corrupting our senses, creating a longing for what our biology remembers. Returning to nature reminds our brains why our senses evolved in the first place; to experience the rich, multi-sensory input of our world, complex yet non-threatening—at least, not usually.

Part of nature's restorative power lies in the kind of stimulation it provides: rich and varied, yet never overwhelming. Visually, the natural world offers complexity in the form of fractals and organic patterns that engage our attention without depleting it (Robles et al., 2021). Unlike the harsh, angular geometry of most urban settings, these shapes align with the way our visual system has evolved to process information. The soundscape of nature, including birdsong, rustling leaves, and flowing water, creates an auditory environment that naturally activates the parasympathetic nervous system, calming the body and reducing stress (Ratcliffe, 2021). Even the air is different; forest phytoncides and earthy scents stimulate the olfactory system and have been shown to reduce inflammatory markers in the body (Lew & Fleming, 2024; Li et al., 2012). Beneath our feet, the uneven terrain of natural paths subtly engages our proprioceptive system, improving balance and coordination without us even realizing it (Biscarini et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Pšeničnik Sluga & Kozinc, 2024). All of this adds up to an environment finely tuned to support both mind and body, not because it was designed for us, but because we were shaped by it.

For someone like me, an introvert with extreme auditory sensitivity, the big city lights, sounds, and smells create a relentless assault on my senses and mind. Personally, places like Manhattan and Las Vegas can only ever be two-day towns; any longer and my mental capacity suffers: my mind dulls, my mood sours, and my patience evaporates. I travel around 100 days a year, almost exclusively to major metropolitan areas. When I return home, living amongst the trees is more than therapeutic, it's critical to my survival—at least, to survive as the person I am today, and the one I aspire to be in the future.

## **Implementation & Integration**

Immersion in nature for mental recovery differs from weekend excursions, which can take up your entire day. Those are great, don't get me wrong, but they cannot be utilized frequently enough to offer the desired effects. Most major cities now incorporate large amounts of green space. Utilize them: head out for a walk, clear

your calendar, even for 15-30 minutes, and try to practice conscious awareness of your surroundings. I achieve this, paradoxically, through entering the forest in thought, or being distracted by music, until my senses are lulled into a state of hypnosis, fully captured and commanded towards my surroundings.

There are many ways to implement this, whether you switch to walking to and from work a slightly longer route through a forested space, or venture out and eat your lunch as you walk and immerse yourself in a park. I realize that I am fortunate to live in the Greater Vancouver area of BC, Canada, where there is no shortage of green space, but I am unable to recollect a major city I have spent any time in where I didn't find a solution, even if limited. Incorporating this self-care takes minimal effort, but provides substantial rewards.

## **Conclusion: Beyond Escapism**

Nature exposure as a form of active meditation and restoration isn't merely a spiritual indulgence or stress management technique. Think of it as a professional performance tool that directly enhances cognitive function, decision quality, and strategic clarity. When integrated into a comprehensive approach to stress and recovery, it helps facilitate a sustainable high-performance system.

The most critical insight is recognizing that this practice is not separate from 'real work' but an essential component of optimal performance. The time invested in nature-based recovery yields disproportionate returns in cognitive capacity, creative problem-solving, and execution quality. In a world increasingly dominated by artificial environments and fragmented attention, the ability to leverage natural settings for recovery and perspective becomes a significant competitive advantage. Our modern demands are real, and need to be considered. It is impractical to completely escape them, but, it is necessary to strategically employ the evolutionary recovery mechanisms found in nature in order to meet, and exceed, our modern demands.

Don't mistake this for recreation, it's regeneration.



**Picture 34.** Some light reading to take your breath away



*Ancient breathwork technique: Read one page of Aristotle, exhale confusion, repeat.*

## CHAPTER 20:

### **Breathwork as a Tactical Regulator**

Most people who advertise that they participate in breathwork do so in a way that dissuades, not encourages, the majority of their followers from participating. The technique is turned into a ritual, one that may be grounded in science, but has the stigma of snake oil. It carries an unfortunate guilt by association attributed to a therapeutic and effective practice, the result of its prevalence in the spiritual and alternative health communities.

The truth is, to benefit from breathwork we don't need early morning sun, or even precise and exact breathing patterns. It can be utilized anywhere, any time, and in the moment it is needed. I use it constantly. If I'm in an argument; whether with my fiancée, a family member, or a business partner, I don't try to win in the moment, at least, not most of the time. I make a conscious effort to remove myself at the first opportunity, and then I breathe—deep, slow, deliberate, just for a minute, sometimes even less. Once sufficiently calm, sometimes completely, I come back to the discussion from a different place: clear, strategic, and capable of resolution instead of escalation.

No one formally trained me. I'd heard it a thousand times, as I'm sure everyone else has: “*control your breathing.*” This repeated mantra never stuck, not for me, but what did was observing my cat. Frequently, he gets overstimulated while I'm petting him, lashes out, then storms off. He sharpens his claws, stares into space, breathes in this strange, controlled way, lets out this tiny croak of a meow, and then walks back over to cuddle, like nothing happened. Sometimes he needs a lap or two around the living room, and a second round of sharpening, but he always overcomes the emotions that got the better of him, and he self-regulates. I watched him do it one day and thought, “*That's it. That's what we're supposed to do. That's what everyone means when they say take a deep breath.*”

I've noticed that most people truly believe they're taking deep breaths to calm themselves, but rarely ever are. Their breaths may be large, but are often shallow, fast, and more likely to induce hyperventilation than tranquility. The type of breathwork that works is slow, deep, focused, and intentional, with a long, controlled exhalation. Preferably, I suggest closing your eyes and focusing on the breath and how it moves from your body. Imagine it, perhaps even feel it, circulating from your lungs and expanding to your fingertips. With each successive breath, talk to yourself in your internal monologue, if you have one, commanding yourself to notice how a state of calm is slowly spreading through your body. Focus on the sensation, and the movement, and once your state has changed and you are ready to face the stress you sequestered yourself from, re-emerge, and re-engage.

## **The Tactical Deployment Model**

Most recovery tools require planning, but breathwork is different. It works best as a precision tool, deployed exactly when needed, like pulling an emergency brake on runaway stress.

### **Acute Stress or Agitation**

When adrenaline floods your system during a heated conversation, a stressful negotiation, or a moment where you feel hijacked, breath is the fastest way to re-enter control. Five to ten seconds of slow, deliberate breathing can initiate a cascade that brings your mind back online. This is pursued not to relax, but to think, so that you can respond with thought rather than react on emotions. As I previously stated, I use this technique often in real-time arguments; I start by stepping away, breathing deeply, downshifting my nervous system, and only once my state has changed will I return to the conversation with clarity instead of combustion.

### **Pre-Hypnosis Preparation**

Before guiding myself into hypnosis, I use the same process. Controlled breathing isn't the main event in this instance, it's the preparation. It's the precise practice that both of the practitioners of hypnotherapy I spent sessions with used to guide me into the state, and is also how the recordings I listen to work, and I learned this strategy is something I can do myself, anytime. Preparing myself to enter this state before the audio guides me there acts as a primer and accelerator, it works as a signal to my system that we're shifting gears. In short, it lays the groundwork for the neural handoff that makes hypnosis effective. I learned to prime myself before recordings to mitigate the risk of failure; as I indicated in the chapter on hypnotherapy, if you aren't willing and prepared to enter the state, you won't. I prefer not to take chances with my time, so I ensure I am in a state to allow myself to enter the next, more relaxed state, before I even attempt it.

### **Measurement Calibration**

The times I need to have my blood pressure measured are, unfortunately, times I tend not to be relaxed. Maybe I'm being tested at the doctor's office, already annoyed I am losing valuable time, further exacerbated by a long wait in a crowded office. Or perhaps I am switching insurance providers for my life insurance, and need my measurements taken. Markers like blood pressure are highly variable moment to moment, with stress, agitation, and anxiety triggering readings far above where they'd be in a more relaxed state. In fact, there's even a well-known phenomenon called white-coat hypertension, where readings spike in medical settings due to anxiety—even if your blood pressure is perfectly normal at home (Holland, 2023).

So, in these situations, without fail I practice breathing for 60-90 seconds prior to the measurement, and, without fail I test accurately (based on my knowledge of my range from frequent testing at home).

## The Neurobiology of Respiratory Control

The power of breathwork has nothing to do with life force, chakras, or cosmic alignment (though a thing or two will be said about these topics at the end of this chapter). Its effectiveness is rooted in hard neurobiology, through direct access to the control systems that govern your state of mind. Slow, deliberate breathing can enhance vagal tone, shifting the body from sympathetic arousal to parasympathetic calm, contributing to relaxation and potentially supporting the resumption of prefrontal cortex-mediated executive functions (Magnon, Dutheil, & Vallet, 2021). This shift also helps suppress the cortisol surge driven by the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, suggesting a potential for modulating the stress-related hormonal cascade that contributes to cognitive and emotional dysregulation (Ma et al., 2017). Additionally, breathing practices that emphasize extended exhales promote respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA), which increases heart rate variability: a well-established marker of physiological adaptability and resilience (Lehrer & Gevirtz, 2014). As the nervous system rebalances, amygdala-driven emotional reactivity decreases, while connectivity and activation in prefrontal regions involved in executive control and emotion regulation increase. This shift enhances our ability to manage negative emotions and engage in reasoning and self-control (Zaccaro et al., 2018; Doll et al., 2016).

In short, you're not just feeling better, you're functioning better. That has direct consequences for how you think, respond, and lead during times when you are under pressure.

## Conclusion: The Breath as Strategic Asset

Breath is a powerful ally in our quest for self-control. Whether you utilize it the way I do, as a fast and effective tool for mental recalibration when you need it most (during an argument, before a stressful situation, or after one), or prefer a daily ritual, it doesn't matter. What matters is that you channel the power of your breath inward, to take control of your outward behavior. There's a reason breath has been revered across warrior traditions for thousands of years. In the Indo-European lineages—Vedic, Greek, Roman—breath wasn't just biology. It was power. *Prana*. *Pneuma*. *Spiritus*. Breath was life in motion: the force that animated warriors, monks, and thinkers alike. It was sacred because it gave you an edge when it mattered most.

I have never dived deep into Vedic thought, which I am told might represent the origins of civilization, centered in ancient India.<sup>17</sup> However, one of my editors claimed that it's no accident that breath has been elevated across warrior traditions, and nowhere was this more literal than in the Vedic worldview, where breath wasn't just associated with the divine, it *was* the divine. He went on to explain that in ancient India, they didn't just treat breath as a biological necessity; they named gods after it. *Prana*, the Sanskrit word for breath, was also the word for life force, spirit, and consciousness (Apte, 1890). In the Upanishads, which are the philosophical texts that sit at the end of the Vedas, Prana wasn't just a function of the body. It was declared to be *Brahman* itself: the ultimate, unchanging reality behind everything (Wisdom Library, 2025a).

As we discussed the concepts more, he provided details on numerous related concepts; The *Brahmana Upanishad* goes further, identifying Prana with *Purusha*: the cosmic source of all existence (Brahma Upanishad, ~500-200 BCE/2015). Breath was both your internal fuel and the external animating principle of the entire cosmos. It moved through you *and* through the sun (*Surya*), which they saw as the original spark of all life. To them, breathing wasn't simply metabolic, it was a participation in something cosmic. You weren't just inhaling oxygen; you were syncing with the fundamental rhythm of the universe.

They even tied speech itself to breath. In Vedanta, *Vaikhari*—that is, our words—are said to arise from Prana (Wisdom Library, 2025b). The act of speaking, of bringing a thought into the world, was powered by breath. Chanting, especially in specific tones, was used not for mystical vibes but to rewire the nervous system: to calm fear, reduce desire, and focus the mind (Inbaraj et al., 2022). It meant training the psyche through sound, rhythm, and discipline; what the ancients believed could shape not just your state but your destiny.

You don't need to buy the metaphysics to get the point: they saw breath and energy as deeply linked. Breath was the interface between body and mind, between what you can control and what controls you. Even if you roll your eyes at talk of Prana or cosmic rhythms, as I have always tended to do, the physiological reality is undeniable: breath is one of the only autonomic functions that can be consciously regulated, and doing so gives us leverage over the nervous system itself. What the ancients wrapped in metaphysics, modern science has begun to measure. Structured breathing, such as through chanting, box breathing, or even sighs, modulates heart

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<sup>17</sup> Vedic thought may have manifested most vividly in India, and to some extent Iran, but its influence flows directly into the foundations of pre-Christian European civilization. Europe's old pagan myths, including its cosmologies of breath and fire, echo the same primal intuitions that the Vedas codified with extraordinary clarity in works like the *Upanishads*. A connection between the West and the Vedic East was made initially by Arthur Schopenhauer (1818/1969), who introduced Vedic philosophy to a popular European audience.

rate variability, downshifts the stress response, and improves cognitive clarity. So, forget chakras: *think vagus nerve stimulation*, and cortisol reduction. You don't have to believe breath is divine to recognize that it is powerful. The mystics may have oversold the frame, but they weren't wrong about the mechanism.

The takeaway here isn't that you need to chant mantras or sit in lotus pose. It's that these ancient systems—built by people with no MRI machines and no labs—still understood something many of us forget: breath is upstream of everything else. It was how you stabilized your mind, reconnected to your body, and directed your will. Prana wasn't just breath, it was the name they gave to power itself.

**Picture 35.** Thanksgiving sourdough pizza, cooked from scratch with several days' fermentation; including my own sauce from tomatoes I crushed, fresh cheese, and fresh basil. Cooked on my pizza steel and stone.



Thanksgiving (Canada),  
but if I'm going to prep  
food for hours it's going  
to be pizza, not turkey 😂

*Low stress? Nah. High heat, high stakes, high reward. Cooking: the original hormetic stressor.*

## CHAPTER 21:

# The Art of Cooking for Your Soul

I never learned to cook from a show. I've never followed a celebrity chef, never cracked open a cookbook, and can't tell you a single Julia Child recipe. In fact, one of my editors inserted that line, *I don't even know who Julia Child is*, and while Google search tells me she was a big deal, I don't recognize her by face, either. My education came from observation and necessity. My dad is intense and obsessive; as I detailed in Chapter 10, "Money As Mental Armor," he was the kind of man who'd drive four hours each way to load his truck with frost-bitten tomatoes, then spend a weekend making ketchup and BBQ sauce from scratch. He'd make borshch by the gallons and jar it for the winter. He refused to buy deli meat, roasting whole chickens just to slice them himself and vacuum-seal the leftovers. He never taught me explicitly, but I watched, and I learned. I wrote 'was,' not 'is,' because as he's aged, he's largely abandoned these habits, unfortunately. I learned from them, nevertheless, and won't forget them.

By seventeen, I was mostly living on my own. I was given enough cash to buy basic groceries while I was still in High School, and began buying my own once I graduated, so the reality was that I could eat like shit or figure it out. As I indicated in Chapter 18, I really like food, having struggled with food addiction most of my life, so the latter was the only real option. I started experimenting. I'd eat something at a restaurant, then dissect it, focusing on each flavor, holding the food in my mouth for long periods of time to analyze and understand what made the dish work. I'd ask questions to the servers, then I'd test combinations at home, tweaking them in seemingly infinite iterations until I felt they were perfect. I still do, as the thing about perfection is it's subjective, and ever changing. The taste profiles I preferred when I was 18 are not necessarily the ones I gravitate to at 40.

In this sense, the work will never finish, and that's ok, even preferred. Cooking, to me, isn't science, it's art, expression, and emotion. You taste, adjust, refine, and continue, but there is no end goal, no eternal perfection, because what tastes perfect to me today may seem lacking, or overpowered, tomorrow. Seeking perfection in our cooking, or any form of art, is a moving sphere of emotions and wants, and those wants aren't just your own; they're those of the ones you love and share your creations with, also. I don't cook with measuring spoons or scales, I use my instincts, intuition, and experience to guide me through the process. Many in my life have pleaded with me to write down my recipes when I nail them, at least from their perspective, but that task would defeat the purpose of the pursuit for me. It would rob the emotion, the art, and become a task, rather than a therapy. I cook on my terms, and that's why I don't treat food like a chore.

Therein lies the problem: most people think of cooking as a chore. Meal preparation becomes just another task to check off, somewhere between folding laundry and



**Picture 36.** Sea bass, prawn skewer, green beans, multi-colored carrots, cherry tomatoes, and sliced almonds on a bed of crispy kale. All with a cherry reduction sauce!



*Modern resilience toolkit: sea bass, green beans, and a stubborn refusal to DoorDash.*

doing dishes. Others dress it up, turning it into a wellness performance with affirmations, gratitude practices, and enough Instagram filters to make you forget they're just sautéing kale. Both approaches miss the mark.

Cooking shouldn't be viewed as an obligation. It's a crucible: a controlled arena for simultaneous mental focus and physical exertion that produces something tangible and meaningful, at times even beautiful. When approached with intention, it creates a distinctive psychological state that few other activities can match—all the while producing something that nourishes both body and connection. That makes it a therapy that simultaneously heals your body and soul, while providing for those around you and mastering skills that will never become outdated or out of demand, forever appreciated and eternally useful.

I understand and appreciate that my cooking style, at times, can be unsustainable. Some meals I spend hours, even days, preparing for. Usually, I spend 30 to 60 minutes a day on my dinner, reserving the grand presentations for times when I have others to share the creation with. For me, it's as simple as this: when friends come over to watch fights and I've spent hours double-frying homemade French fries, making smash burgers with my own red relish, and getting every element just right—they feel it, and appreciate it. It lands differently than simply ordering some pizzas. It means something, because it says, “I care enough to create this for *you*.”

When my fiancée's had a long week, I'll spend hours making a plant-based version of her favorite borshch or lentil soup, and I do this not because it's easy, but because it's intentional. Cooking becomes an act of service, of care, of mental recalibration. The task soothes me, while the result strengthens us. Even when I'm just cooking for myself—cacio e pepe, done right—there's a calm intensity to it. I'm not thinking about emails or meetings, I'm fully present. Hands moving, senses engaged. It's physical, mental, and emotional all at once. Of course, as I have previously noted, sometimes this state leads me to revelations, having achieved clarity through the meditative method of performing mundane tasks with complete focus.

This chapter isn't about finding your inner chef. It's about reclaiming cooking as a discipline; a focused, rewarding practice that sharpens your mind while feeding your life force.

## **The Service Paradigm**

I cook almost every day when I'm not on the road. This isn't because some wellness influencer told me it's "grounding," but because it works. It's one of the most reliable ways I've found to shift mental gears, to close the chapter on work mode and enter something more present, more tactile, and more human. Critically, it helps me transition from the challenges of my work, my books, my publications, and every other stress on my mind, empty my thoughts, and start anew with the remaining hours in the day. In doing so, I can offer at least a few moments of presence to my fiancée before my phone inevitably goes off again.

Sometimes I cook just for me, sometimes just for my fiancée, but often I cook separate meals for each of us. I occasionally batch-cook meat and vegetables for our animals, also. The point isn't the recipe, it's the rhythm, focus, and transition. Without a transition, I may as well not try to be present with my fiancée, as being near her, while distracted, will cause frustration and annoyance rather than happiness and appreciation. Cooking lets me channel energy into something immediate and useful while clearing the noise, recalibrating my psyche, and setting the mood.

## **Cooking as Service: Love Without Words**

While cooking for myself provides satisfaction, cooking for others creates a deeper sense of purpose. It's become one of my love languages, as I stated earlier, an act of service that communicates someone's importance without requiring the clumsiness of words. By now you're aware language isn't my forte, so these nonverbal acts provide me a service, while they provide a different one to those I care about. When people understand you've invested hours in their nourishment, something beyond the meal itself is conveyed.

To be clear, this isn't about impressing others, it's about demonstrating that their experience is worth your effort. When I cook for others, I never take shortcuts.



**Picture 37.** Fresh made pasta, mixed with parsley, sundried tomatoes and pecorino romano. Homemade tomato sauce, seven hour simmer, fresh herbs (basil, oregano, parsley, with the savory fat delivered through egg yolks added in the last 30 seconds, instead of oil).

*Seven hours of simmering.  
Thirty seconds of yolk magic. A  
lifetime of bragging rights.*

Everything is made from scratch. Pasta? I make the dough and sauce from raw ingredients. Pizza? I prepare the dough, sauce, and grate the cheese by hand. Mussels? I bake the bread to accompany them.

The commitment extends beyond preparation. I often visit several grocery stores to find the best, or right, ingredients. There's no 'one-stop shop' mentality for a complex meal because quality components matter too much. The result isn't just better food; it's food with intention embedded in every stage of its creation.

**Picture 38.** Varenyky, before I knew of dumpling makers... old school style, with an aluminum can to cut the dough



*Forget flow state.  
Find dough state.*

## Immersion and Intensity

The physical process of cooking creates a unique mental space. I methodically chop and grate everything by hand to precise dimensions, while music plays in the background. The repetitive, focused nature of these tasks creates total immersion—not because I’m trying to be “mindful,” but because proper execution demands nothing less.

Some meals require hours of preparation, such as large batches of borshch, handmade *varenyky* (Ukrainian dumplings), or other foods that will be eaten fresh, but the rest preserved for later. By the end of these sessions, I’m often physically exhausted, sometimes burning more calories than on workout days. Some days, particularly in the heat of the summer for preparations requiring the oven and gas burners to be running, by the time I complete preparing the meal, I am too drained to eat it. The heat holds a special power over me, as I detail in *The Body*. Yet despite this fatigue, I feel mentally fulfilled in a way that passive activities never provide.

This isn’t relaxation in the conventional sense, especially not on days of intense preparation, or when cooking in sweltering heat. It’s engagement, the controlled challenge of transforming raw materials into something structured and refined through direct physical action. The result is a distinct mental state that persists long after the meal is complete.

**Picture 39.** Mussel pesto soup in a sourdough bread bowl.



*Sure, you could face your fears.  
Or you could conquer a bread bowl first.*

## Challenge as Growth Vehicle

When someone asks me to make something I've never prepared before, my answer is almost always yes. This isn't from overconfidence, but from recognizing the opportunity such challenges present. The initial anxiety, the desire to execute perfectly despite unfamiliarity, creates precisely the kind of productive stress that builds competence.

There's no shortcut to this growth. You can't think your way to cooking proficiency; you must act despite uncertainty. After navigating the challenge and seeing others' appreciation, there's a clear sense of expanded capacity, not just in cooking, but in your overall ability to handle complex, multi-faceted tasks under pressure.

This is psychological hormesis at its most practical: deliberately exposing yourself to manageable stress to build greater resilience. Interestingly, for me, and likely others, it can simultaneously act as a form of cognitive hormesis *and* recovery. Each new dish mastered, each technique refined, each complex timing challenge navigated adds to your capacity for handling future challenges both in and out of the kitchen.

## The Recalibration Effect

As I have repeated throughout this chapter, cooking functions as a powerful emotional recalibrator; not because it's inherently calming, but because it demands complete presence. When anxiety or mental fragmentation has taken hold, the structured process of preparing food forces immediate focus. You cannot remain



**Picture 40.** Homemade chicken Kyiv and varenyky, with smetana (sour cream), fresh dill, and bacon

*Focus, or the butter wins.*



mentally scattered when timing multiple components or executing precise techniques. If you do, disaster will hit, and your attempts will lead to increased stress. Once you learn this, you commit to fully paying attention.

For me, there's no space for rumination when you're reducing a sauce that could burn in seconds, or handling sharp knives that demand respect. Of course, this isn't true for everyone, one only needs to think of the stereotype of the depressed and anxious housewife consistently burning her husband's food, feeling the wrath of his temper. If you're someone with this kind of temper, reflect on the following: it's likely the exact response of your anger that is creating a negative loop of rumination, exponentially increasing the incidence of ruined dinners. But, I digress, for most of us, the physical nature of cooking, the tangible materials, immediate feedback, and sensory engagement, all create a direct pathway out of abstract worry and into concrete action.

This isn't distraction. As I have relayed, it's redirection of mental energy toward productive creation. The anxiety doesn't disappear, it transforms into focused attention. The outcome isn't just a meal, but a recalibrated nervous system.

## The Satisfaction Paradox

The apparent contradiction I addressed of strenuous and intensive cooking, namely, feeling physically tired but mentally fulfilled, reveals something important about human satisfaction. We aren't designed for constant comfort, as I have detailed over



**Picture 41.** Burrata salad with balsamic reduction

*Proof that not all knots are problems. Some are delicious.*

and over again through this book. The most profound contentment often comes after expending significant effort toward a meaningful end.

After spending hours preparing a complex meal, the exhaustion is real. Yet it's accompanied by a sense of accomplishment that passive consumption never provides. There's pride in creation, in mastery, in service, all of which are emotions that can't be accessed through shortcuts or convenience.

This satisfaction loop becomes self-reinforcing. The knowledge that your effort created something valuable generates energy for future efforts. Even when physically depleted, you finish happy; not despite the exertion, but because of it. This happiness, and importantly the sense of pride, is what keeps me coming back time and time again. It's what drives me to put in the effort even when both my mind and body scream at me to lie down, order a pizza and be done with the day.

## Implementation Without Dogma

The approach to cooking described here requires no special equipment, no professional kitchen, spiritual framework, or lifestyle overhaul. It simply demands intentionality, the act of treating food preparation as something worthy of your full attention and effort. Start with what you enjoy eating and focus on quality

**Picture 42.** Mille feuille with cherry/cherry syrup added. Messiest thing I have ever made!



*Mille-feuille: French for 'you thought you were in control.'*

ingredients. Embrace the physicality of preparation; the chopping, stirring, and timing. Create space for complete engagement by removing distractions, which means no phones, no screens, just the task (and perhaps music, which I recommend).

When possible, cook for others. The service aspect transforms the experience, adding purpose beyond personal satisfaction. Accept challenges, try new techniques, and say yes to preparing dishes outside your comfort zone. This isn't about becoming a professional chef or spending hours a day in the kitchen. We don't need to aspire to turn each hobby into a profession. It's about approaching cooking as a craft worth doing well, adopting an activity that engages your full capacity for creation and service.

## **Nutritional Clarity and Ingredient Control**

There's another advantage to cooking from scratch that often goes unrecognized: total control over what goes into your body. When you prepare meals from whole ingredients, you're not guessing what's in your food—you know what's in it. Every spice, oil, starch, protein, and vegetable is intentional. This level of awareness allows you to optimize nutrition, eliminate low-quality additives, and understand how specific ingredients affect your health. It transforms eating from a passive act of consumption into an informed act of self-respect.

## **Conclusion: The Deeper Connection**

At its core, this approach to cooking isn't about food, at least not for the most part. It's about connection: to ingredients, to process, to others, and to yourself. When you prepare food with intention, something beyond calories is exchanged. Whether cooking for yourself or others, you're participating in one of the most fundamental acts of human care. The meal itself is just the visible manifestation of something more significant: the willingness to invest effort in what sustains us.

Cooking is a foundation baked into willful practice. It's about getting your hands dirty, making mistakes, improving through repetition, and finding satisfaction in the tangible results of your labor. It's also about recognizing that some of the most meaningful experiences aren't found in grand gestures, but in the daily act of nourishing yourself and those who you value. That's not just another form of therapy or self-care; it's something far more fundamental: a direct line to what makes us human.



**Picture 43.** Me getting stem cells



*Stem Cell Therapy: small win, big price tag, even bigger needle—not the one pictured, the needle they needed to get into my hip joint through my quad is the stuff of nightmares.*

## CHAPTER 22:

# The Importance of Small Victories

Most people want to go to bed poor and wake up rich without having done any work in the meantime. The same applies to our fitness and mental health. We expect dramatic transformations overnight, and when they don't materialize, we abandon ship, convinced that the very pursuit of improvement doesn't work. This expectation of immediate change isn't just unrealistic—it's the primary reason most people fail to improve their lives. Real transformation happens incrementally, through what I call “small victories,” which are modest but intentional steps that accumulate over time.

## Small Changes → Real Impact

When I stepped on the scale in January 2019 and saw 267 staring back at me, 95 pounds heavier than what I was when my health crisis hit, I didn't set out to drop those 95 pounds. I just didn't want to buy new clothes, again. There was more to it, which I discuss in detail in *The Body*, but the tightening waistline and shirts that didn't quite fit anymore were the spark. I didn't set out for a life overhaul. Part of me had given up on that, so I committed to a minor, practical goal. I figured I'd drop a few pounds, feel a bit lighter, and move on.

But that single decision snowballed. Over six months, I lost 34 pounds, and I did it without stepping foot in a gym. For much of the time I was recovering from shoulder surgery and couldn't train, but the small changes added up. I was making slightly better food choices, preparing slightly smaller portions, I incorporated a little more walking, and began intermittent fasting. None of it was extreme, just consistent, manageable shifts. Since that 267-pound peak, I've had ups and downs but I've never come close to that number again. If I'm being honest: that weigh-in was first thing in the morning, naked, on an empty stomach, so even that number was doing me favors.

These days I hover around 205, and have been slowly inching down. I'm carrying significantly more muscle than I was at my heaviest, and while I'm not at the shredded 170 I hit in my peak condition, I feel good. My health markers are excellent, and their trajectory is solid. I'm not chasing a number anymore. I'm not naïve, I know that I'm on the wrong side of 40 with degenerative osteoarthritis in multiple joints. I'm not trying to rewind the clock to some idealized version of the past, because without massive and unexpected breakthroughs in medical science, it's never happening. My aim now is simple: steady progress, small victories, and sustainable, consistent improvement. I'm not aiming to be healthier than I was at 29, but I am doing everything in my power to remain healthier than I was at 34, and to ensure that goal is met until the day father time comes knocking.

What does that mean? Will I ever be as lean as I once was? Maybe, maybe not, but that's not the metric; the metric is health, it's contentment, and by those standards, I'm exactly where I need to be. I'm moving forward, one win at a time. This is the real math of transformation. People think change needs to be dramatic to be effective, but it doesn't. A 100-calorie surplus per day equates to 10 pounds gained in a year. Reverse that, and a 100-calorie deficit allows you to shed that extra weight. Very few would call 100 calories a diet, it amounts to a drizzle of oil, or a few bites left on the plate. The lesson here is that small wins compound. Ignore them, and so do small losses.

## **The Power of Intentionally Recognized Progress**

Small victories only generate momentum when consciously acknowledged. The brain responds to recognized achievements, triggering dopamine release that reinforces the behaviors leading to success. This creates neural pathways that make those behaviors more likely in the future. When someone prepares a healthy meal and takes a moment to feel genuine pride in that accomplishment, they're training their dopamine system to anticipate reward from self-discipline rather than instant gratification. This neurobiological reinforcement is far more powerful than any external motivation.

When you reward the behavior, not just the result, you're rewiring yourself. You're training your brain to crave the *process* that leads to long-term success and not the hit of short-term indulgence. That's the kind of craving you actually want. The more these small wins are acknowledged—whether through journaling, visual tracking, or simply mental reflection—the stronger the neural circuitry connecting effort to satisfaction becomes.

## **Shame, Guilt, and the Energy Drain of Incompletion**

When important tasks remain uncompleted, they generate shame and guilt, emotions I had a lot to say about earlier in the book. Most people know they should be eating better, moving more, or handling responsibilities more effectively. When they don't, that knowledge becomes psychological friction slowing momentum in all areas. If you know what you should do, and understand you're going to feel ashamed and guilty for having avoided it, don't. Commit, save yourself the negative emotions, and put the energy into improving your mind and body.

As Zig Ziglar observed, "*We have the energy to do what we want—we must apply it to what we need.*" His anecdote about the man too "exhausted" for yard work who suddenly finds energy for golf illustrates how perceived energy levels often reflect priorities rather than capabilities. Completing even small items frees our attention and creates upward inertia. This explains why people who accomplish more tend to have more energy, not less.

## Convenience vs. Integrity

One of the greatest destroyers of the human spirit and capacity for greatness is convenience. When people consistently choose what's easy over what's right, they communicate to themselves that their values and well-being aren't worth effort. Convenient but inferior alternatives sway many to make poor choices, leading to guilt about taking the easy route. Many tell me they "don't have time" to cook, yet find hours for television or social media. When asked how I find time to prepare meals that sometimes take hours, I respond simply: "*How can I not?*"

Each choice to do what's right, rather than what's easy, creates a cascade of identity reinforcement. A person begins to see themselves as someone who prioritizes long-term well-being over momentary convenience.

## Emotional Payoffs

The benefits of small victories aren't just physical, they're also profoundly emotional. Cooking a good meal brings pride. Walking outside lifts mental fog. A task completed well builds confidence. These emotional rewards sustain long-term change. They're not productivity hacks but identity cues repeatedly answering the question: "*Who am I becoming?*" Better choices reinforce the journey towards becoming someone who values themselves.

This explains why many feel worse emotionally when choosing what's easy—those choices signal self-neglect rather than self-respect. Victories aren't about intensity but about alignment with values. After asking yourself who you are becoming with the choices you're making, change the question slightly, and ask yourself who you want to be. Then, map out what you need to do to become that person, committing to walk that path one step at a time.

## The 80/20 Performance Law

In sales, the 80/20 rule holds that 80% of performance comes from 20% of staff. Interestingly, the 80% of people contributing only 20% of the results often feel they're working harder than the 20% contributing vastly more. This perception illustrates how inaction breeds perceived difficulty; the less done in a day, the more each task feels arduous. People who do more tend to find more capacity. They develop resilience and efficiency that compounds over time. Meanwhile, those doing little often feel overburdened by tasks that objectively require minimal effort. A 10-minute workout can feel overwhelming when it's the only productive thing attempted all day.

This is the silent tax of inertia, and the antidote isn't motivation, it's *motion*. Small, consistent actions lower perceived difficulty and rebuild your sense of what's possible.

Zig Ziglar had a line that's always stuck with me, even though I've forgotten exactly how it went—something like: *“Motivation and knowledge can plant your field, but they won't plow it.”* You can have all the right ideas, the perfect mindset, the clearest vision, but if you're not willing to do the actual work, none of it matters. Insight doesn't build momentum, effort does.

While a digression, I would be remiss not to bring it up. Understanding this perception of effort gives us an opportunity to work towards greater patience with those around us. That friend or partner or family member who is underperforming may legitimately feel like they're overperforming, putting their everything into it—because they are. The only way to extract more effort and output from them is through slowly increasing their tolerance and capacity, and this occurs not through derision, but encouragement and appreciation.

## **Consistency > Extremes**

Our cultural obsession with dramatic transformations has obscured a fundamental truth: consistency beats intensity every time. Society celebrates the person who loses 30 pounds in a month but ignores the person who loses 3 pounds monthly for a year and keeps it off. As expectations shift toward poor choices, people become desensitized to their impact while overvaluing isolated good decisions. *“I haven't had dessert all week,”* they declare, ignoring the burgers and pizza consumed in the same period. Or *“I had a salad for dinner,”* conveniently forgetting the late-night chips, soda, or alcohol that followed.

This warped accounting system lets people feel they're “putting in the effort” while “seeing no results,” ignoring the overall pattern that determines outcomes. The shifting “norm” allows them to justify their struggles, ignoring the decisions that led to those struggles. It reconciles egos by comparing their situations to others, allowing them to feel “they got the raw end of the deal.” Throughout my weight loss journey, I gave up nothing completely. The difference was in the consistency of making slightly better choices most days, not in dramatic deprivation.

## **Building Momentum Against Mental Health Challenges**

The compounding power of small victories becomes even more critical when facing mental health challenges. Stress, anxiety, and depression create vicious cycles where poor choices lead to worse health, which further deteriorates mental state. The Canadian Mental Health Association holds the same view: *“Mental health and physical health are fundamentally linked. People living with a serious mental illness are at higher risk of experiencing a wide range of chronic physical conditions. Conversely, people living with chronic physical health conditions experience depression and anxiety at twice the rate of the general population”* (Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario, 2008).

Small victories can interrupt these cycles. As previously mentioned, a 20-minute walk in nature can reduce cortisol levels significantly; a meaningful biochemical shift from minimal investment (Hunter, Gillespie, & Chen, 2019). I've experienced this firsthand. During a period of writer's block spanning from mid-August to the end of September, the only significant writing I accomplished came the day after I spent two days hiking throughout Zhangjiajie National Park in China, letting thousands of words flow pen to paper, so to speak. I accomplished this despite being busy, hungover, and mentally preoccupied, the writing feeling effortless. It dawned on me later that I hadn't been able to get out into nature for over a month prior to those two days, and I believe this connection was not coincidental.

A study demonstrated that 90 minutes in natural settings reduced activity in the prefrontal cortex (Bratman et al., 2015). The prefrontal cortex is the brain region associated with repetitive negative thoughts common in depression (Hamilton et al., 2015). Counterintuitively, during periods of feeling most "slammed" or "stressed," taking time for restorative activities becomes more crucial, not less. The times I've felt most overwhelmed yet forced myself to take periodic breaks resulted in dramatically higher productivity than periods of continuous, frantic work with no respite.

## **Conclusion: The Path Forward**

Small victories aren't trivial; they're the only reliable foundation for lasting change. Progress, motivation, and pride must be earned, but they can be sparked from the smallest decisions, so long as those decisions are made consistently. The transformations celebrated in media are often the rare exceptions, such as people who "got rich quick" or models and celebrities pushing unattainable images achieved through weeks of strict dieting, intense training guided by multiple experts, and digitally enhanced photography. These are almost impossible expectations for most.

Sometimes, small victories still require tremendous effort or incur substantial costs. Recently, I decided to undergo two rounds of stem cell therapy. Both were circulated IV, as well as deep targeted injections into my left hip, in the hopes I could stave off arthritic driven joint degeneration to the point of no return. Following the two rounds, my left shoulder gained ever so slightly more strength and mobility; but this small gain increased function. I can now pay for parking at a drive through exit without getting out of my car—an extra two inches of range making all the difference—and I can now put plates and bowls on the 3rd shelf in my kitchen, whereas before I could only manage the first. With my back, I haven't had it go out in 8 or 9 months since the first injection. Before, I was on a surgery waitlist, my back failing me every month or two for days at a time. Finally, my left hip has opened up. While it still struggles, I no longer have to sit down—or lay down on bad days—to put on my socks. These improvements may sound small, but they have dramatically

improved my quality of life. They're helping me stay more active and fit, and regain some strength in areas that had previously atrophied.

Real progress isn't about dramatic gestures, but rather the quiet commitment to do slightly better today than you did yesterday. It's about recognizing that victories are not about being perfect, they're about making better choices most of the time. Progress isn't linear, and motivation isn't constant. But the accumulated effect of small victories creates a foundation that can withstand the inevitable fluctuations in both. This is the only transformation that lasts—the one built piece by piece, victory by small victory.

## Community, Relationships, and Emotional Recovery

*Of friends. — Only reflect to yourself how various are the feelings, how divided the opinions, even among your closest acquaintances, how even the same opinions are of a quite different rank or intensity in the heads of your friends than they are in yours; how manifold are the occasions for misunderstanding, for hostility and rupture. After reflecting on all this you must tell yourself: how uncertain is the ground upon which all our alliances and friendships rest, how close at hand are icy downpours or stormy weather, how isolated each man is! When one realizes this, and realizes in addition that all the opinions of one's fellow men, of whatever kind they are and with whatever intensity they are held, are just as necessary and unaccountable as their actions; if one comes to understand this inner necessity of opinions originating in the inextricable interweaving of character, occupation, talent, environment — perhaps one will then get free of the bitterness of feeling with which the sage cried: 'Friends, there are no friends!' One will, rather, avow to oneself: yes, there are friends, but it is error and deception regarding yourself that led them to you; and they must have learned how to keep silent in order to remain your friend; for such human relationships almost always depend upon the fact that two or three things are never said or even so much as touched upon: if these little boulders do start to roll, however, friendship follows after them and shatters.*

*Are there not people who would be mortally wounded if they discovered what their dearest friends actually know about them? — Through knowing ourselves, and regarding our own nature as a moving sphere of moods and opinions, and thus learning to despise ourselves a little, we restore our proper equilibrium with others. It is true we have good reason to think little of each of our acquaintances, even the greatest of them; but equally good reason to direct this feeling back on to oneself. — And so, since we can endure ourself, let us also endure other people; and perhaps to each of us there will come the more joyful hour when we exclaim:*

*'Friends, there are no friends!' thus said the dying sage;*

*'Foes, there are no foes!' say I, the living fool.*

- FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

People say real friends surprise you, but mine don't. The people I call friends, the ones still in my life, have already proven themselves beyond surprise. They show up, over and over, and not because they want something, not for clout, not for leverage, but because that's how they're built, and that's how our relationship is built. When they act, it's not spectacle, it's the foundational structure of who they are.



**Picture 44.** My fiancée and I at UFC 311 for the cage-side experience



*Gifted seats I never thought I'd experience, and without having to go through the existential horror of achieving mainstream fame to get them. Not sure which half of the equation I'm more thankful for.*

The last time I was surprised by someone, it wasn't an old friend; it was a new one—someone I'd met just a few months prior. I had moved to Toronto to manage a sales team, broke and exhausted. My van broke down, and with no buffer in my bank account, I was confronted with a problem I couldn't afford to fix, and didn't know how to repair myself. Financially speaking, he wasn't in much better shape than I was, probably worse, even. Despite this, he spent his only day off helping me replace the busted part. His act wasn't announced, there was no posting about it, no asking for anything in return. He didn't even tell our co-workers and boss. I did. He gave me his presence, effort, and time, and all he looked for in return was the same back from me, if I'd give it.

Later, I learned he struggled with mental health issues and came from a rough background. Maybe helping me was a way to affirm his own strength, a way to feel stable by offering stability. Maybe he recognized something in me that mirrored where he'd been. Whatever the reason, it wasn't selfless, because nothing is. It was sincere though, I am certain of that. He didn't do it for tangible gain, he did it because, in that moment, being a good friend made him feel more human.

Contrast that with people I'd known for decades; friends who vanished the moment they owed me money, and not even particularly large amounts, certainly not enough to warrant ghosting a lifelong friend. But, they didn't come to talk, didn't explain their situation, they just disappeared. The transaction was never about the money for me; it was a stress test for the relationship, and too many of those I once called good friends failed, but none that have failed have surprised me.

**Picture 45.** Double-fisting frozen vodka shots



*If two hands weren't meant for two vodkas,  
why are they perfectly sized?*

This chapter isn't about community in the vague, wellness-blog sense. It's about social connection as a tool for emotional repair and adaptive capacity. It's about relationships that strengthen resilience, not just warm the heart. Not everyone needs a tribe, but everyone needs to know who shows up when there's seemingly nothing to gain.

## Synthetic Belonging

For a while, alcohol was my tribe. Something about its effects unlocked skills I lacked when sober, at least most of the time. Conversations felt more natural, I laughed more easily, connected with

others' jokes, and they connected with mine. The barriers I felt to others eroded under the effects, delivering a sense of proximity to humanity that I had always lacked. Perhaps the greatest effect alcohol had on me, in this way, was slowing my mind. I no longer worried if my personality was too much, not quite right, or if I was overcompensating and being too distant. I just *was*, and those around me *were*, and we existed in that space together.

In my late teens and early twenties, this let me feel like I belonged, at least when the sun went down and the party started. I made countless friends, or should I say, situational friends. Within those situations, whether it was the crowd I went to raves with in the early 2000s or those I frequented nightclubs with, those friends felt complete, at least when under the influence. Many of them were willing to extend the friendship outside of the parties, but I quickly learned that once the lights went on, the music stopped, and the intoxication dissipated, the friendships were built on nothing but illusions. So, I'd meet up with these friends once or twice, realize that we could never be compatible sober, and then resign to making excuses, while planning the next party with them. This strategy led to leading a double life, of sorts, one that was unsustainable in the long run.

**Picture 46.** Seeing the band Typhoon live



*Volume up. Lights down. Defense mechanisms slightly loosened.*

I connected with most people far more easily when I was drinking, and maybe I still would, but the cost simply rose to a price I was no longer willing to pay. As I aged, I became more keenly aware of its effects on my health, my cognition, and eventually my performance. I talk about my relationship, or rather, former relationship with alcohol in greater detail in Chapter 7 of *The Body*, but more than anything else, the cost to my performance became too much to bear. Where alcohol once, at the right dose, opened the floodgates to my thoughts and creativity, eventually, it completely closed them. Perhaps this is what makes it hard for me to connect with most, but impediments to what I believe to be my purpose hurt me far more than isolation ever has.

I wasn't addicted to the chemical, I never experienced the bends the times I took a break, or when I eventually quit, but I was addicted to what it gave me access to: simulated acceptance and a temporary tribe. Alcohol projected the illusion of connection that didn't require the slow burn of vulnerability, but a bond that only exists in a blood-altered state isn't a bond, it's sedation-inspired fantasy. Eventually, living in that fantasy interferes with what matters most: becoming who you actually are, and working towards who you want to be, without distortion, or delusion. Alcohol wasn't the only addiction linked to the artificial connection I adopted, but it was the one that affected me the most, at least physically.

For years, I used sex the same way. One-night stands offered fleeting moments of contact, they provided a quick hit of being wanted. Not loved, not known, and not *actually* wanted, not permanently. I was wanted just for long enough to forget the ache for something deeper. In the moment, these interactions made me feel connected, as if for a time I did belong, and could connect, but in the end, I always felt more distant, not just from them, but from myself, as well.

One-night stands aren't true intimacy. I wasn't drawn to the visceral pleasure; I was seeking validation, and the easiest validation to achieve came wrapped in flesh. One-night stands allow you to present yourself as you please, allowing you to feel less alone without ever having to risk being seen. Throughout the years, the rejection I most often dealt with wasn't immediate; it wasn't the type that instills fear of starting a conversation, approaching a stranger. It was much more personal and much more hurtful.

I didn't have any trouble attracting people to the aura I gave off, especially when under the influence of alcohol, but once they were around me long enough to realize that I'm fundamentally different, *not normal*, the rejection would be swift and brutal. The real pain was the number of times I grew to know someone well enough to gain the confidence to start behaving as my true self, sharing my genuine thoughts, interests, societal criticisms, and eventual aspirations. As I'd be overcome with glee thinking I have finally found someone to accept me for who I am, not having to play this charade any longer, I'd be hit with 'the talk,' or more frequently, just a message.

So, for a time, I tried to play the numbers, and I would just reveal my true self from the get-go, convinced that there had to be someone out there for me. At least in my 20s, meeting with other 20-somethings, this strategy proved disastrous. Young women aren't looking for partners with radical theories on life and society who are determined to never work for someone else. When I explain my philosophy of life now, *after* starting multiple successful, disruptive businesses, making many millions of dollars, and accomplishing everything else I have with no formal education, people listen. However, leading with that before you accomplish anything of note has others looking at you as if you're crazy, maybe even dangerous.

So, with each string of devastating and rapid rejections, I returned to the quick hit of pleasure and momentary escape from solitude. You can only play that game for so long before the emptiness outpaces the pleasure. With each passing experience, the charade became less effective, until finally, it no longer worked at all, not even in the moment. I slowly realized that these quick hits of acceptance were my impediment to real growth, and as long as I used them as a crutch, I'd never find true connection and would continue to hinder my pursuit of true meaning and purpose. It was time-consuming and fueled by alcohol, and it had to end. So I stopped, at least with the false connection. It took me a number of years to shed the crutch of alcohol, also.

## **The Tribe That Isn't There**

I've said before that I don't need a tribe, that I've outgrown the desire to belong, but that's only partially true. The fuller truth is less convenient: I don't have a tribe because no tribe exists for me.

For a long time, that hurt more than I let on. In my younger years, I kept hoping one would materialize. Every new city, every new hobby, every skeptic group, intellectual salon, or niche subculture; I'd feel that flicker of recognition: *maybe these are my people*. Sometimes, at first, it felt like they were.

Most communities were welcoming enough. There wasn't hostility, and there certainly wasn't exclusion; at least not at first, and never overtly. But as I realized they weren't quite aligned with me—perhaps their values were off, or their priorities skewed—I'd start to pull back. I'd become quieter and less engaged, and that withdrawal was usually interpreted as rejection. They'd feel the shift, and things would fracture. There wouldn't be any drama, just distance. Occasionally, I was the one excluded outright, but more often, I was the one slowly stepping away. Even if the hobby or activity still brought me value, the realization that the illusion was shattered, that I was an outsider within the group, had been brought to light, and that was a reality that brought me discomfort and awkwardness.

Eventually, I stopped expecting anything. I built armor, I built systems, and I adapted. I joined activities for the activities, completely expecting from the get-go

that I would not fit in, closing off the opportunity before I could be rejected. Even then, the ache didn't vanish completely. Every once in a while, something would cut through the defenses. Some comment, shared moment, half-recognized likeness, and I'd feel that old instinct rise again. The hope for resonance, the reflex to reach. It usually passes, but it still appears from time to time. That part hasn't been totally stripped out of me. There's a song by Arcade Fire named "Sprawl II." Early in the track, Régine Chassagne sings:

*'Cause on the surface the city lights shine / They're calling at me, "Come and find your kind."* (Arcade Fire, 2010)

Those lyrics stir that old hope, the suggestion that belonging might still be out there. That maybe, somewhere, the lights are real. But then the second half of the verse lands:

*Like a mirror, your city lights shine / They're screaming at us, "We don't need your kind."* (Arcade Fire, 2010)<sup>18</sup>

That contrast—the invitation and the rejection—isn't poetic to me, it's diagnostic. It names the exact pattern I've experienced over and over again. The sense that community might be possible, followed immediately by the reality that it usually isn't. Not for people like me. Not for people who can't (or won't) edit themselves to fit in.

A second track by the same band, "Age of Anxiety I," hits from a different angle. The lyrics are devastating, not because they're dramatic, but because they're accurate:

*When I look at you, I see what you want me to / See what you want me to /  
When you look at me, you see what I want you to see / What I want you to see  
is me.* (Arcade Fire, 2022)

Most human interaction isn't truth, it's carefully curated projection. We build images, we read signals, and we hope quietly and desperately that someone sees through it all and recognizes what's underneath. Most don't, because they can't. We are too busy playing our roles, transmitting our curated selves.

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<sup>18</sup> In Arcade Fire's *The Suburbs* (2010), the lyric in question—"Like a mirror, your city lights shine / They're screaming at us, 'We don't need your kind'"—has sparked quiet controversy among fans. Some transcriptions (including Google's) list the line as "Black river," while others (Apple Music, Genius, and many listeners) hear it as "like a mirror." I prefer the latter: "like a mirror" evokes the alienating feedback loop of urban sensory overload (lights reflecting lights, presence met with rejection, etc.), whereas "black river" leans more metaphorical and abstract. Both interpretations serve the song's dystopian landscape, but only one captures the cold fluorescence of modern cities repelling rather than welcoming.

The rest of the song dives deeper into the disconnect:

*It's a maze of mirrors / It's a hologram of a ghost / And you can't quite touch it / Which is how it hurts us the most.* (Arcade Fire, 2022)

That's the reality we live in. Not just loneliness, but *simulated* connection. The soft blur of digital life, and the dopamine economy of notifications all create the feeling of being surrounded by people, and somehow untouched by all of it. In that space, we try to cope, so we scroll, we suppress our sadness, we train ourselves to ignore our longing, we isolate in fear of being found out and rejected, and then we perform, acting how we believe is normal, rather than how we know to be true. We convince ourselves that solitude is strength, and sometimes, it is. Other times, however, it's just resignation. So here's the message I wish I'd heard years ago, and the one I now offer to anyone wired like me:

You may never find a tribe, and you may never fully belong. But you are not alone in being alone.

That might sound bleak, but there's power in that sentence. It is not a comfort, sure, but there is power in clarity. Because once you stop waiting to be seen and start building systems that *function*, the ache becomes manageable. You build a structure that lets you show up with integrity—even when you're isolated, *especially* when you're isolated.

This isn't about giving up on community, but it is about not letting the lack of one define your worth, or derail your growth. It's about building a life sturdy enough to carry your truth even if no one else sees it. In a world of masks, noise, and half-connection, it's easy to feel like an alien. But aliens don't die in orbit, they build ships, so build yours. Train for the days no one gets it. Train for the days the room doesn't reflect you back. Train for the kind of clarity that doesn't require consensus. If the day comes when someone finally sees you—not the image, not the role, but *you*—then you'll know it's real. Not because you needed it to survive, but because you survived without it.

## **My Current Approach to Social Support**

I've deliberately maintained friendships across ideological, cultural, and professional lines. My closest relationships tend to be with people who challenge my thinking rather than simply reinforcing it. Last year, a business partner with political views diametrically opposed to mine pointed out a blind spot in my assessment of a particular situation. My first reaction was defensive irritation, but his perspective eventually led me to increase my understanding and construct a new position, devoid of the same shortcomings. That intellectual friction, uncomfortable but valuable, exemplifies the connections I seek. I've written about my strategy regarding my editors throughout this book, and the concept is no

different. I maintain these diverse relationships not out of tolerance, but utility, and a desire to understand humanity and the world around us.

Truth be told, when one of my editors pressed me to think of an example, the one I vaguely alluded to came to mind, and it will remain intentionally vague due to the controversial nature of the subject. That said, I've lost count of how many times friends, colleagues, and even family members with views completely opposite to my own have pointed out something I missed. Sometimes it's in business, sometimes in science, sometimes in life. Like with my business associate, my first reaction is often resistance, followed by disagreement and irritation. Yet often, they're right. Sometimes I immediately see where I'm wrong, and can abate my annoyance in an instant, other times I need to separate, and assess. Every time they've seen something I didn't precisely because their views are opposite of my own.

We need this tension to grow, and understand. I find little value in groups where everyone shares identical worldviews and experiences. My emotional self-regulation tends to be internally driven rather than externally dependent. This doesn't mean I don't value my relationships, quite the opposite. I simply approach them as enrichment rather than necessity. I say this, and muse about a contradiction in my emotional state. Direct affirmation makes me uneasy, whether it's compliments, publicized recognition, or being told how important I am to someone. However, without any affirmation, I feel empty, unseen, and unimportant. Perhaps I crave the nonverbal cues, the actions, words, and signs that show I am valued, without someone directly putting words to it.

One of my editors, Vadim, reflected that my perspective on friendship perhaps draws a parallel to the way Akira Kurosawa framed human relationships in his films. I haven't seen them, but Vadim let me know that his films are rarely about unity—they're about alignment through difference. In *The Seven Samurai*, seven men come together not because they're alike, but because they each offer something distinct. Different motives, different styles, and different levels of discipline. The strength of the group isn't in cohesion—it's in contrast, calibrated for a shared goal. The roughness between them is part of what makes them functional.

Or take *Rashomon*. Four people witness the same event, and none of them sees the same thing. Each tells a story shaped by ego, emotion, or survival instinct. There is no clean truth, but that's the point. When you surround yourself with people who think differently, you're reminded how fragile your perspective really is. These descriptions have led me to add the films to my long list of recommended watches, which grows longer every year, as I virtually never watch shows unless it's with my fiancée, and she plays a major role in deciding what we watch. She has agreed to add them to *our* list, so they'll be watched sooner or later, but perhaps not before this book releases.



Vadim's explanation of the Kurosawa films is precisely the kind of connection I seek. I'm not interested in curated social spaces where everyone shares the same worldview and signals the same values. As I stated, I regulate internally, and I don't need group affirmation. I need sharp minds and sharper conversations. The people I value aren't the ones who agree, they're the ones who test. When they do, they don't just make me feel supported, they make me better—and that's what it's all about.

In reflecting on this, I think back to my very progression towards molecular hydrogen; it was catalyzed by confrontation and friction with a friend. It was the fall of 2013 when a friend and former employee of mine decided it was fitting to post something on his Facebook, which was not only wrong but also demonstrably dangerous and harmful. He had recently joined a “cult” (or rather a multi-level marketing organization) that sold an expensive (and poorly designed) water ionizer for an enormous price tag, the company training having led its salespeople to sell the concept of magic rather than substance. He claimed his health had turned around and his “grandmother had been cured of cancer,” which I believe was my personal tipping point.

I had already done my due diligence debunking alkaline water as my sister had previously pushed it on my family, so I came into the comments guns blazing. A couple of other mutual acquaintances jumped in on my side, and a full-blown war erupted on his Facebook, yielding hundreds of comments on the original post in a day. These two mutual friends were blocked by the poster because emotions got heated. However, my friend who posted this and I settled some issues privately and remained friends, for a time, anyway.<sup>19</sup> The thread was deleted, but not before a superior from the MLM of the friend who posted the original thread nudged him to “mention the hydrogen.”

While my friend didn't follow this instruction on the thread (he didn't really know anything about it), since I had already heard about molecular hydrogen about a year before when searching the literature for selective antioxidants targeting the hydroxyl radical, I privately asked him about this function. I got sparse information, but hydrogen water was once again back on my radar.

When my health unraveled in 2014, and the time I had previously spent exercising was focused on scouring PubMed's research archive, molecular hydrogen yet again revealed itself to me, but this time for the potential to regulate the inflammatory response. That was enough to contact the friend, and ask for more details on the machine he was selling. Those conversations weren't pleasant; I told him that I wanted to buy if it created molecular hydrogen, and yet, he still tried to ambush me

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<sup>19</sup> We never had a falling out, we just grew apart, largely because I became busier and busier developing the tablets, and he moved across the world for a new venture.

with his direct superior of the MLM, under some misguided notion that I needed to be sold a bill of quackery to actually convert.

The conversation derailed, ending in a shouting match. I left without buying, but contacted the friend again a week later with explicit instructions: I would pay in full with my credit card, but when he delivered it, I wanted absolutely no sales pitch, no bullshit, just the machine. That was something he was seemingly incapable of. When he arrived, he continued to feed me a bill of goods, this time about how the water would kill any viruses. I asked him if that included HIV, he said yes. I believe he was likely confused, conflating the cleaning application of the ionizer with the drinking water, but that's irrelevant, as he said what he said.

As I dove into the research on molecular hydrogen, this is when I found Tyler LeBaron, who had just started the Molecular Hydrogen Institute. He was happy to engage with any questions that came in, we started long back and forths, and I began understanding the science better and better. In the spring of 2015, after needing to stop taking the high-dose naproxen I was on due to the resulting ulcers and GI distress, I realized the ionized water wasn't providing any benefits. I speak about how this led to my invention of the tablets, but there is more to the story.

When I first began pressing the tablets for myself, experiencing their profound benefits, I wanted to ensure that I had not succumbed to the placebo effect. First, I made some for my best friend and roommate, who had just injured his rotator cuff, and his girlfriend who had done the same competing in martial arts. Neither was expecting much, but they were good friends and obliged my request.

Days went by, and while my best friend's girlfriend said she felt better within a few days, he was adamant that they were doing nothing. He is incredibly skeptical by nature, perhaps the most cynical person I know, and I did not expect him to report anything that wasn't accurate. In his words, he has a finely tuned "bullshit detector." On day 5, however, he came home brimming with excitement. His shoulder felt *way* better; while clearly still injured, he could move it around, and the pain had gone down. He was sold, and so was she. For context, both of them are current shareholders of my company; she is now a UFC fighter, and the hydrogen tablets are perhaps the only thing that he has ever invested in. Both of them, while no longer dating, continue to use the product to this day.

Next, I sent tablets to one of my first mentors in business, knowing he had ruptured discs in his back and a frozen shoulder. He didn't know much about what I was doing at first. In fact, he was extremely surprised as he was one of the two others on my side in the Facebook war that began this story regarding the myths of alkaline water. But, in his words, because it was coming from me, out of loyalty, he would try these hydrogen water tablets as I had asked him to and report back if he noticed anything, however doubtful he was at first.

Over a week went by and he felt no benefit. I was starting to doubt the H<sub>2</sub> tablets again, but then day 9 came. His shoulder had loosened up. It had been completely frozen before starting, and on day 9 he woke up to it feeling much better. We spoke on the phone, and he thought I may be on to something. He quipped that it hadn't helped his back which was "worse than ever," but it had done something noticeable. He offered to put me in touch with his brother, a biochemist researcher at Duke University, who remarkably remembered a Baylor/Texas A&M paper on the therapeutic effects of hydrogen published in *Science* in 1975 (Dole, Wilson, & Fife, 1975). Then, all of a sudden, after more than three weeks, his back loosened. He called me, in absolute disbelief, talking about how good it was feeling, better than it had in years. This couldn't be a coincidence; *this was becoming quite profound*. This mentor became another of my first investors, and likewise, continues to use the hydrogen tablets to this day.

In a way, and not a small one, I owe my entire purpose, the life I have built, and what I discovered to a friend with whom I strongly disagreed with. Even though I hold that he was wrong about *almost everything*, and his tactics in sales and persuasion were unequivocally immoral, this confrontation, and willingness on both of our parts to talk it out after publicly sparring, was my entry into seriously pursuing molecular hydrogen. That irony does not escape me, and it is one of countless reasons I prioritize engaging in discussions that question my beliefs, my thinking, and the conclusions I have previously drawn. It is how we grow, how we understand, and how we must structure our lives if we aspire to achieve greatness.

## Can We Be Friends With The Opposite Sex?

This section exists because one of my editors, Vadim, asked me a question, and it was one that stayed with me longer than I expected. We were going back and forth on the manuscript when he posed to me, "*Do you think men and women can actually be close friends?*" I paused, not because I hadn't thought about it, but because I'd never been asked so directly. At least, rarely am I asked questions so directly as by my editors.

Vadim told me about someone he'd known for over fifteen years: a woman he considered a close friend. They'd weathered their own relationships, moves across the country (and continents), and other major life events such as this. However, their friendship ended; it was a somewhat quiet dissolution, in fact. The loss stayed with him, and he shared that it lingered with him not only because it hurt, though it did, but because no one really *talks* about it. You're supposed to move on from things like this, say "life happens," and pretend it was never real to begin with.

But according to him it *was* real—or was it? That's what prompted this section: a wound, a familiar one to me and possibly most of those reading. I've seen something like it in friends, very briefly lived it in my youth, and have spent

considerable time pondering the dynamics in order to come to my own conclusions. What follows is an honest, maybe uncomfortable attempt to say what most people won't, can't, or don't until it's too late.

So: can we be friends with the opposite sex?

Let's talk about it.

Of course, anything is possible, but sometimes the odds of long-term success are so low that it isn't worth seriously discussing. When it comes to close friendships between a man and woman, where they are both heterosexual, I firmly believe this is one of these instances. First, I need to define what I mean by close friends, and distinguish between other, friend-like relationships that can and often are successful with these dynamics. A close friend is someone you share your feelings with, your worries, aspirations, frustrations, failures, and successes. They are someone you confide in, who likewise confides in you; in short, someone with whom you are emotionally open and available, who reciprocates this trust.

It is reasonable to maintain friendly relationships with the opposite sex, perhaps colleagues, others from a hobby or group you're involved in pertaining to a specific interest, or those connected to your larger social circle. These relationships, by definition, will omit the deeply personal aspect of a close friendship. When the deeply personal is involved, inevitably, in time one party in the friendship will long for more. Let's break this down.

If both individuals long for something more, when it evolves to this state, it ceases to be a friendship. If the individual who wants more is the male, the chances of leaping past the pit of doom out of the friendzone are all but an impossibility, a long-running joke that virtually all men are aware of. In these types of relationships, the woman *always knows her friend is in love with her*. A woman who keeps a man around in a situation like this is, by definition, *not their friend*, as they do not have their best interests at heart. The man is kept around to serve the woman's ego; a shoulder to cry on, a confidence boost after rejection, or what you could call an emotional golem: absorbing all the pain of the woman, internalizing it, and, when the creator loses control, going mad, even violent.

The reasoning driving the inverse dynamic, where the male is desired by the female, is largely the same. The male may use the female, who he usually, but not always, knows desires him, for his own ends. Perhaps to help him meet women he *does* desire, a tragic irony, or to help him decipher the actions of the other women in his life. Regardless, this is a selfish act that can, and will, lead to emotional havoc on the woman's part. Additionally, while it is virtually impossible for a friend-zoned man to transition to intimacy with the woman, a friend-zoned woman has a legitimate chance to cross over to a brief moment of intimacy with the man. This hope, and potential for a taste of her desire, is paradoxically far more emotionally destructive

than never having the chance. If the woman was friend-zoned for a reason, and the man lazily or carelessly opts for intimacy, he rarely wants to continue into anything prolonged or serious. The moment the woman believes she has her desire, it is cruelly pulled away from her, leaving her with no hope. This is both devastating and cruel.

Perhaps, some of you may be thinking, “*there are instances where neither individual desires the other, surely,*” and you’d be right; precisely why I led off this section saying *long-term*. Our “type,” just like *our self*, is a constantly changing sphere made up of all of our lived experiences, in conjunction with our current physiological state. What we desire today is not what it was a decade ago, nor is it likely to be what we will desire a decade from now. The longer the friendship lasts, the more likely one individual in the equation *becomes* the other’s type *in that moment*. If this occurs, and it is not mutual, it can swiftly annihilate a long-term friendship. Since the likelihood of eventual failure is almost guaranteed, I would argue it is foolish to try.

Finally, there is one last scenario. It is, paradoxically, the scenario that is both the most likely to succeed in the goal of *being friends* and the most likely to cause serious stress and anxiety, ultimately collapsing abruptly. When two people have *already* been intimate and mutually decided that they are not a good fit; perhaps they get along personally but have poor sexual chemistry. In this scenario a platonic and deep friendship is possible. This friendship may last for years, but it will undermine the confidence of all future romantic relationships. Despite the real threat of infidelity likely arising from a stranger, personal trainer, colleague, or any number of individuals most never think about, the mental image of your loved one spending time with someone they have been intimate with conjures jealousy and uneasiness in virtually all people. This type of friendship is cruel to your current and future significant other. Once this is made clear, you will be left with the uncomfortable task of ending the friendship, through no fault of your friend. This creates a different type of pain for both, as it is one without anger, without fault, with no one to blame but themselves, and the inevitability of the collapse.

Respect the opposite sex and strive to maintain friendly relationships, but it is crucial to avoid forming deep, personal friendships. It will only lead to pain and anguish, if not for yourself, then for others.

## **The Science of Human Connection in Recovery**

While my approach differs from the norm, substantial evidence shows that for most people, emotionally supportive relationships provide significant benefits during psychological restoration after stress or emotional difficulties. Research consistently shows that meaningful social connections lower cortisol levels, the primary stress hormone, and activate parasympathetic nervous system responses associated with calmness and recovery (Goodyke et al., 2022; Løseth et al., 2022). A 2015 meta-analysis published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* analyzed 70 studies and found that both actual and perceived social isolation were associated with a 29%

increase in mortality risk—comparable to risk factors like smoking—with no significant difference between objective and subjective forms of isolation (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

From a neurobiological perspective, supportive human contact triggers the release of oxytocin, which counteracts stress hormones and facilitates emotional regulation (Takayanagi & Onaka, 2022). This biochemical response works in concert with the dopamine pathways discussed in earlier chapters—genuine social feedback can amplify the reinforcement effects of small victories, creating stronger neural connections that support continued progress. However, these benefits aren't universal, nor do they manifest identically for everyone. The key distinction is between genuine, earned trust in relationships versus superficial social performance.

## **The Pitfalls of Community Culture**

Most modern “communities” have devolved into environments that foster groupthink rather than growth. Whether online or in-person, these groups develop implicit rules against honest disagreement, where challenging the prevailing narrative becomes heresy rather than opportunity.

This dynamic creates spaces where:

- Weakness narratives are normalized and even celebrated.
- Comfort is prioritized over intellectual challenge.
- Dissenting viewpoints are treated as moral failings.
- Ideological performance replaces substantive thought.

Community is supposed to make us stronger, but most modern communities instead act as a social justification to remain weak together. Tribes used to protect against physical danger. Now they protect people from discomfort, truth, and their own growth. Over-identifying with a group identity, whether political, religious, professional, or interest-based, corrodes critical thinking. When group membership becomes central to one's identity, cognitive biases like confirmation bias and in-group favoritism intensify. The result is intellectual atrophy precisely when expansion is most needed, and in some cases, this atrophy leads to cult-like behavioral patterns.

When people think of cults, they either gravitate towards the horrifying examples, such as the Manson Family and their murder spree, or the Heaven's Gate or People's Temple's mass suicides or, at the other side of the spectrum, they mock tight knit and innocuous (or even beneficial) communities, such as CrossFit, veganism, or any other exercise style or dietary protocol-turned-community. Less frequently are mainstream political movements declared cults, despite behaving exactly the same as the worst of them. Technically, the omission is accurate, as the very fact that they are mainstream disqualifies them from the designation; however, the behavior by the adherents mirrors the behavior of cult followers to a 'T.'

In short, while different definitions of “cult” exist, a cult is a small group of people who have an extreme, possibly dangerous, devotion to a certain individual or doctrine. The first examples given are undoubtedly cults. The second group is undoubtedly not. The final group, mainstream political movements, often exhibit extreme and dangerous positions—many descending into violence—but since they are mainstream, and often not actually tied to any official organizations, they are not technically cults, even when exhibiting cult-like behavior. This is also true for major established religions. For me, the popularity of an idea matters very little; what matters is the integrity of the ideas and openness to engage in contradictory views. I digress.

I’m reminded of a fallout with a former friend. This individual and I had known each other online for many years, through the game I discuss at length in Chapter 5. When a former business I was involved in required me to travel to his city on a few occasions, we met up, had some drinks and food, and immersed ourselves in deep conversations and debates about everything from philosophy to politics to religion—the light stuff, unlikely to offend. We disagreed on everything, usually arguing the antithetical points on each subject, but we both seemingly enjoyed the conversations; they never escalated to anger, just friendly, engaged debate and reflection.

As the “woke” movement gained traction, this friend became increasingly polarized in his positions. For a time, he would post about an issue with extreme vitriol, and I would continue our normal habit of offering reasoned pushback. For a time, he would engage, ask questions, and we’d go back and forth; he would say I had given him a perspective to consider, and the communications remained friendly. Over the months following the 2016 US Election, I watched him descend into greater and greater levels of anger and hatred, flying into rage and accusations at others commenting on his posts in disagreement. I presumed that our relationship would hold, as disagreement was the crux of our friendship and the value we both found in our debates, but I was wrong. I can’t recall the debate, it would have been something regarding either his positions on equity of outcome being the only moral position, or perhaps supporting BIPOC issues, but I made a comment pushing back on a post of his with a different perspective, and fell victim to his tirade. I was called a psychopath and told my opinions had no value. There was probably more—I seem to recall a comment full of caps-locked words. His father reached out to me privately to apologize, stating it was a phase that would pass, but it never did. To this day we still ‘follow’ each other on social media, and I observe the same behavior being repeated.

Less surprising, but just as egregious, was a similar instance with my sister. In a group chat with our mom—who can only be described as a lifelong socialist who has championed for the disadvantaged, promoted multiculturalism and tolerance, and everything that goes with it—I shared a clip from *South Park*, my sister’s favorite show. At the time, my sister had descended into this same woke echo chamber, living

in Venice Beach, California. The clip I shared was from the “Board Girls” episode, where the “Strong Woman” Vice Principal enters a “Strong Woman Competition” just to find that her ex-boyfriend, who is a parody of Macho Man Randy Savage, had entered as “Heather” Swanson, “transitioning” in his declared identity just weeks earlier.

My sister flew into a rage, declaring the clip transphobic and hateful. Confused, I began discussing the concept that one could protest against biological men in women’s sports, or biological men in women’s change rooms, while remaining sympathetic to the struggle of these individuals, which I am. Our mother chimed in in agreement, speaking to her feelings that women have been oppressed throughout history, and trans women taking safe spaces from biological women is just a new form of oppression against women. This surprise alliance (from my sister’s perspective, I knew our mother’s position on the subject) led to a complete meltdown. She blocked and deleted both of us from Facebook, and we had to see her subsequent post through screenshots sent to us.

My sister posted, publicly, that I was a bigot and a transphobe who hated that community. For context, she had posted about my hydrogen technology and companies many times, and now stated that “she still thinks my products are great, but since I am a hateful bigot, no one should support my work.” She went on to state that my biggest evil was “corrupting” our compassionate mother to be a “hateful bigot.” Of note, our mother strongly held the position regarding biological men in women’s sports before she and I ever had a conversation about it, despite immersing herself only in left-leaning media. It struck my mom as wrong and unfair to women, and she detested how it was being presented by the media she had spent her life following. This is not an uncommon opinion of socialists from her generation, especially female socialists, who the woke community now labels as TERFs, or trans-exclusionary radical feminists.

Recently, my sister has tried to reach out on a few occasions, but she has never apologized, or acknowledged her actions were wrong—because she doesn’t believe that they were. I hold little ill will, and her post in no way tangibly harmed me, but I have little time for people with whom I am unable to have open conversations with. If the only thing I can speak to someone about, lest I offend them so egregiously they proceed to have an emotional meltdown, is the weather, then I prefer not to talk to them at all. That is precisely what these political cults are doing. They are creating such mental and emotional fragility in their adherents, that said adherents are unable to engage in any sort of conversation with individuals outside of their cult. That is dangerous, and society collapses when we are no longer able to engage with opposing viewpoints.

Unfortunately, the appeal of these cults is more than the emotional connection to other individuals and shared ideologies. Our social media algorithms push us down



these silos, ensuring we only see confirming viewpoints, engage with those within our echo chamber, and increasingly view all outsiders as dangerous, stupid, insane, or psychopathic. As these cults take hold of our minds, the tools pushing us into them latch in deep, pulling us deeper and deeper. This is a concept I speak to in greater detail in *The Final Thought War*, and it is an existential crisis that will lead to the end of society as we know it—unless we take action now.

## **For Those Who Crave Belonging**

It's important to acknowledge, again, that my approach places me somewhat outside the norm. Most people do derive significant benefits from structured community spaces and consistent engagement with others, and my approach would likely prove disastrous for them. For most, the drive for social connection runs deep; biologically, psychologically, and evolutionarily.

For those who find value in community settings, the critical distinction is between environments that cultivate intellectual dependence versus those that foster independent thought within a social context. Even when seeking connection, avoid groups that offer discomfort avoidance at the expense of development. The most valuable communities demand as much as they deliver.

Research consistently shows that most people recover more effectively from stress and emotional difficulties when they have access to supportive social networks (Taylor, 2011; Ozbay et al., 2007). This doesn't invalidate my more individualistic approach—it simply recognizes the diversity of human needs and responses.

## **Conclusion: Auditing Your Connections**

Regardless of where you fall on the spectrum, from deeply community-oriented to fiercely independent, it's worth pausing now and then to assess the quality of your social ecosystem. The people around you shape how you think, how you grow, and even how you see yourself, often more than we realize. There is a truth I learned when I was young: we inevitably become like those we surround ourselves with. Are your relationships challenging you in productive ways, or simply providing emotional comfort that shields you from necessary discomfort? Do your conversations stretch your perspective and introduce new ideas, or do they just echo back the same assumptions you already hold? Are those in your community heading towards goals you admire, and do they uphold ethics you're comfortable with? When choosing our community, we must first ask ourselves if they align with who we are today, but more importantly, we must next ask ourselves if they align with who we want to be tomorrow.

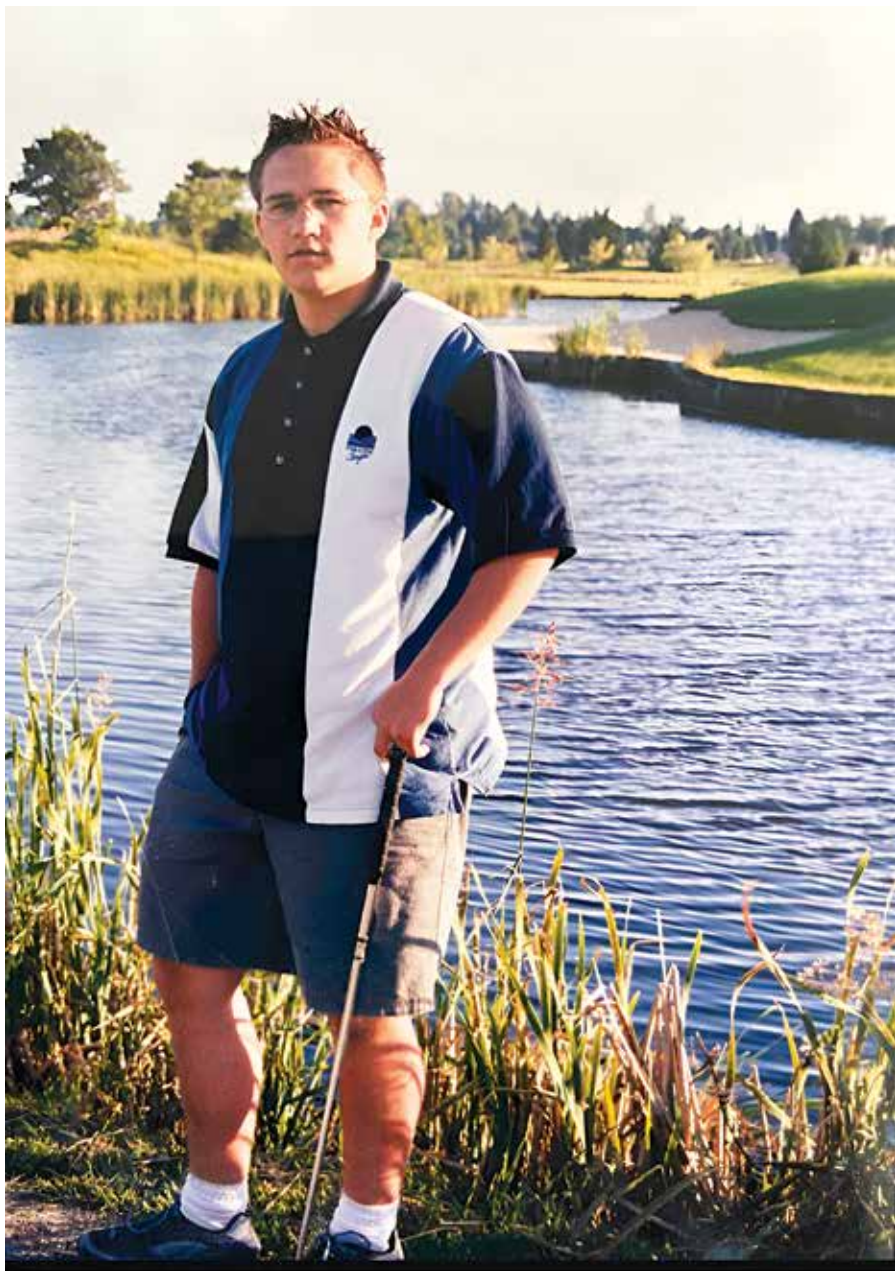
These aren't easy questions, but they're necessary ones if you want to grow as a person. Your social environment can either act as an incubator for personal

development or a padded cell disguised as community. The difference lies in whether your network invites complexity or quietly punishes it.

The modern wellness industry's emphasis on "finding your tribe" misses a crucial distinction: tribal belonging constrains growth when it demands conformity as the price of membership. True mental realignment requires both backing and the freedom to evolve beyond current limitations—something that rigid community structures often prevent.

Ultimately, relationships serve as tools for emotional recovery, and they're powerful for most people, although less central for others. A scalpel can save or kill, depending on who holds it, and so can a relationship. Used with precision, relationships sharpen resilience. Used as identity or escape, they rot it. The difference is in the grip—not the tool.

**Picture 47.** My dad lives to golf, so while I was under his charge, I was forced to as well.



*I definitely wasn't an übermensch at 14.*

## Chapter 24: What I Am Is the Silence

I used to envy people who knew exactly what they wanted to be when they grew up. They never questioned the path; they just followed it. They went to university, earned their degree, began their careers, started a family, applied for a mortgage, saved for retirement, and patiently waited for death. *I don't mean that sarcastically.* There's peace in that kind of certainty, a sense of relief in knowing the script.

I never had that, and for most of my life, I thought that meant something was fundamentally wrong with me, that I was broken. Usually, when I read the script, my mind screams at me: *"This is insanity, it makes no sense."* Even when I try, I lack the will; my inertia fails, and my mind spirals into nihilism. So, I trudge on, forging my own path despite the pleas of my family and friends, especially my mother.

Arcade Fire captures this sentiment perfectly in their epic song "Sprawl II":

*They heard me singing and they told me to stop*

*Quit these pretentious things and just punch the clock*

*These days, my life, I feel it has no purpose*

*But late at night the feelings swim to the surface* (Arcade Fire, 2010)

That's what the world does to us; it tries to break our spirit, it demands that we stop dreaming, stop creating, and live within the paradigm that has been created to control us. Our entire education system fits this mold. Mainly, it trains us that original thought is harmful, that success occurs when we follow the rules, regurgitate what is fed to us, and do as we're told. I write about this in great detail in my upcoming book *Manufacturing Minds: The Education System's War on Free Thought*.

This strategy never worked on me, but not because I was strong enough to resist it; I tried as hard as I could to comply for many years. Perhaps something is broken in me because I couldn't, the irony being that what is broken in me has become the part of me I appreciate above all else. So I forged forward, unable to commit to anything, until molecular hydrogen, which I discuss in greater detail in the chapter dedicated to that topic on *The Body* side of this book (Chapter 8).

In short, I wandered through careers like a tourist with no map. As I've intimated throughout this book, I progressed through management in a company that specialized in door-to-door sales. During this time, and shortly after, I tried my hand at some other sales ventures, and a few novel businesses that worked for a while, until they didn't; or maybe, because I didn't. At one point I even tried to learn my dad's business, a sign and print shop, with the thought I'd take it over, following in his footsteps, and his father's before him, who also ran a sign and print shop.

Throughout all of these ventures, I would put my everything into them, for a time, until brief moments of clarity would shatter the illusion I had built. While running the door-to-door sales crews, I worked under the regional VP, a man I deeply admired. He was intelligent and hardened by life in the rawest sense. His siblings had perhaps more publicly impressive credentials. One was the longstanding Secretary to the Governor General of Canada, the top bureaucratic post in the nation, another was a top chemical buyer for a large multinational. When the Soviet Union broke up, he was part of the team that built bottling plants in Eastern Europe, while yet another brother made his career as a research scientist at Duke, who I mentioned in Chapter 23, the brother who remarkably remembered a rodent trial exploring the therapeutic potential of molecular hydrogen in the 1970s.

My mentor throughout these years, though, forged his own path. He made his money in his younger years in less than legal ways, serving a stint in a Federal Penitentiary. Later he studied Behavioral Sciences, addictions, and hypnotherapy. In fact, while I was no longer working with him at the time, I was aware of the therapy because of him. After the fire of his youth subsided, he created a new life for himself, one based within the confines of the law. He started a family and in time secured that mortgage I spoke about, while he worked his way to the top of the sales company I eventually started working for. He never stopped learning, and he never stopped questioning. Critically, he never stopped being angry about the world, and the way it was structured.

This takes us to the catalyst of my decision to abruptly depart the company I had worked at for nine years. I spent a lot of time at his house in these years. We'd talk about the world: ideas, neuroscience, philosophy, or whatever ideas were coming into our heads, all while shooting a few games of pool. One day, after an especially absurd new rule was implemented by the newspapers we were contracted with, he shrugged, trying his best to remain stoic while being visibly agitated, and said, *"They're the cash cow, and we're just sucking at their teet."* I remember the words exactly, because they landed with such force.

A week later, we were watching UFC fights, as we tended to do every Pay-Per-View Card. He pointed at the VIP row: celebrities, athletes, and business moguls, and said, *"We'll never sit in seats like that."* Something inside me recoiled, not in anger, but in rejection. It was a quiet but undeniable *"no,"* followed by a *"why not?"* It was the kind of repulsion that settles in your bones before your brain catches up.

I've thought about that concept many times over the years: tickets you can't buy. This is the type of experience, the earned privilege, that doesn't come from compliance. It must be earned by following your purpose, bending the rules, pushing forward where others retreat. Eventually, it may provide a want or need for someone in a position to give you those tickets. Years later, as I have written about elsewhere, I sat in those seats, amongst the celebrities and moguls, in seats that were gifted to me. I may never sit in them again, but that's not the point.

If I'm being honest, I've always believed I was destined for greatness. I can't explain it, but from the time I was a teenager, I simply believed I was better than others and deserved more. I don't agree with that sentiment today, at least not in any way resembling my younger self, which should be abundantly clear by this point in the book. What drives me today is more passion, which was initially catapulted forward by anxiety and fear of failure, and is completely replete of any sense of entitlement, which I don't believe is present within me, at least not anymore. But, my 17-year-old self was very different, unrecognizable even. For instance, the topic of an essay I wrote in the 12th grade for my AP Lit class was, to paraphrase the title of which I don't perfectly remember, "Why I Should Be The Leader of The World." Of course, at the time, if I somehow had miraculously realized that aspiration it would have been an unmitigated disaster. Today, I wouldn't want the job; I don't think anyone is worthy or capable of wielding that type of power. But, I digress.

The feeling I felt in my final days working in the sales company, what I believe others have labeled *the ick*, overcame me a second time a few years later, when I was trying to make the best of the situation while learning my dad's business. One day, after a shift, while I was still working away as my dad was having a drink and chatting with some employees and a few customers, I spotted a tiny error on one of the signs we were fabricating. It was barely noticeable, but I brought it up anyways, as my dad, sometimes but not always, is a perfectionist. One of the workers said, "*We're not building rocket ships.*" Everyone laughed, and my dad, who is often more concerned with fitting in with the group at any given moment than staying true to himself, added, "*A blind man on a horse at full gallop would never see that.*" More laughter.

Again, I was overwhelmed with that feeling. I was already starting to feel it, knowing that this wasn't the path for me and my life was slowly slipping away, but this moment cemented the dread into my very being. This complacency, laughter, and dare I say joyful acceptance of mediocrity, struck me like a dagger to my soul. Pink Floyd's voice still echoes in the background:

*And you run and you run to catch up with the sun but it's sinking / Racing around to come up behind you again / Sun is the same, in a relative way, but you're older / Shorter of breath and one day closer to death.* (Pink Floyd, 1973)

That's the truth most people avoid, which I was avoiding at the time too. We burn our finite amount of daylight running someone else's race, aging under fluorescent lights, and tirelessly working to build someone else's vision for a few trinkets and the privilege of being allowed to survive. The system was never built for sovereignty; it was built for compliance. Unless you break the script, it will bury you in it, eventually, literally, never having risen to the person you were capable of being. According to Xenophon, Socrates said something to the effect of: "*No man has the right to be an amateur in the matter of physical training. It is a shame for a man to grow old without seeing the beauty and strength of which his body is capable*"

(Andretti, 2017).<sup>20</sup> While I agree, I will add that the true shame is growing old without ever having learned the capacity your mind and will were able to endure, towards a purpose that sparked flame into your spirit.

If those of us who cannot follow the script fail to find our purpose, we are destined for a life full of labored starts, and abrupt stops. It is a life of angst, turmoil, and in time one defined by defeat. At the peak of my existential angst, desperately searching for something to fill the void, I spent my nights staring at the ceiling, unable to sleep, while simultaneously unable to act. I had no direction to act towards, and everything I had tried to pursue, in time, I needed to abandon. Perhaps this is why these short lines from the song “Hunger and Thirst”, like much of Typhoon’s work, resonate so strongly with me. I lived them.

*Eyes in the dark*

*And it occurred to me that I have spent my whole life starting over*

*Caught pining for the things that I could have been* (Typhoon, 2010)

What never stopped working within me, through all my trials and tribulations and attempts to conform, was my sense of curiosity. This curiosity, perhaps, is what kept part of me in the moment, and looking to the future, while my angst, the pining for what could have been, was pulling me towards the past, towards immobility. I often think about how lucky I am, how lucky the few of us are who simply cannot follow the script, and how many others would be exponentially happier if what was broken inside of us was broken in them. But this is only true if those of us who are broken are also able to break free from the past, and curiously and optimistically look to the future. Of course, I believe this is a skill; one I detailed in Chapter 16 on Stoicism, and not an innate quality.

I think about the possibilities of changing the script, to encourage others to be broken in this way, and what the world would look like in this scenario; an army of curious, strong, forward thinking revolutionary thinkers driving towards a better world: a world we all want to live in. For most of my life, all of my attempts to either follow or break the script failed, solely because I didn’t believe in what I was doing, I didn’t extract sufficient purpose, or feel the necessary truth required to act with intention. Despite never having succeeded, I never stopped trying to find something that worked, something that would bring me purpose, bring me truth.

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<sup>20</sup> The often-quoted line is adapted from *Memorabilia* 3.12, where Xenophon records Socrates saying, “It is a disgrace to grow old through sheer carelessness before seeing what manner of man you may become by developing your bodily strength and beauty to their highest limit.” In context, the passage concerns one’s civic and military readiness; Socrates prefaces it by admonishing that, even if the city does not train publicly for war, one should still prepare oneself. While this sentiment is frequently invoked in modern fitness culture, there is little evidence that Socrates himself maintained exceptional physical prowess, though he did serve as a soldier. Plato, by contrast, is said to have achieved athletic distinction, possibly winning at the Olympics or a smaller Panhellenic event.

Typhoon has two lines of lyrics the song “Common Sentiments” that capture this reality that I previously lived:

*As a child I aspired to be a superhero  
Now I live with the corpses of the lives I let go* (Typhoon, 2013b)

I don’t think I aspire to be a superhero; but I do aspire to pursue truth and virtue, to act in ways that create value not just for myself, but those around me. Importantly, I have learned to let go of the lives I abandoned. I no longer live with them, not in the sense that they bring me anguish, anyways. The start of this shift in mentality, perhaps, is what allowed me to finally succeed. Typhoon, again, has a set of lyrics in “Hunger and Thirst” that embody this truth, as in, my need to be true to myself.

*I’m hoping for a song that will come to me when I’m asleep / because I can’t lie  
and so I can’t write* (Typhoon, 2010)

So when hydrogen entered the picture, after I’d already built another reasonably successful business, albeit one that didn’t bring me purpose, I didn’t hesitate, and I relentlessly pursued it with every fiber of my being. I didn’t have a degree. In fact, I still don’t, but I patented a technology that researchers around the world are now exploring. I’ve published in peer-reviewed journals and developed other technologies with additional patents pending in fields unrelated to hydrogen. I’ve been invited to advise startups as an equity partner, spoken at academic conferences, and entered more rooms I was never “qualified” to be in than I can count. None of that came from following the script; it came from obsession, stubbornness, and from the refusal to sit in a seat I didn’t choose.

But when you carve your own path, you also inherit a specific kind of weight. The creative paralysis that sets in when your own internal compass collides with the world’s expectations. You’re not just forging something new, you’re doing it while being asked, constantly, to explain yourself, and to prove that you belong, that you’re not an impostor. That demand can rot the creative process from the inside. To yet again turn to Typhoon’s “Hunger and Thirst,” which caught this fracture with haunting precision:

*I could have been a pop singer / But what I am is the silence.* (Typhoon, 2010)

That’s the dilemma; if you can’t lie, if you can’t fake it, then what happens when the world demands performance? When it wants you to play a role, but you were never wired to wear the mask, or to obediently recite the lines that you were given? The answer, *my answer*, was that you don’t perform, you don’t comply, and you build something else entirely, from the friction, the silence, and the truth that won’t let you rest until the reality you see is real. Typhoon’s lead singer and songwriter Kyle Morton’s mask, the one which he couldn’t wear, is that of a pop singer. At least he knew his purpose: music, and art. I’m not sure what mask I rejected. It isn’t as simple



as saying I couldn't be a pop singer, because I couldn't be anything I attempted, other than who I am today.

The crisis, for those who are the silence, isn't that you don't know what to do. The crisis is that the world taught you that not knowing means you're broken, that uncertainty is a defect, that wandering is failure, and that curiosity needs to be subdued to make room for compliance. But that's the lie, you don't follow your own path, you forge it.

We're biologically wired to seek meaning, but not to inherit it. There's no genetic script for finding our purpose. Your instincts pull you toward creation, toward risk, toward becoming. But your culture pulls in the opposite direction. It asks for obedience, predictability, for clean answers and polished timelines. In that collision between biology and bureaucracy, you feel the ache. The dissonance of being human in a system that punishes what makes you alive. The system wants certainty, but real growth demands uncertainty.

Meaning isn't handed down like family china; it's built through struggle, strength, agency, sovereignty, and eventually, if you're lucky, understanding. Meaning, for many, is only found through the slow, often agonizing process of standing alone in the silence until something real begins to take shape. Pink Floyd didn't just observe this, they mapped it:

*Every year is getting shorter, never seem to find the time / Plans that either come to naught, or half a page of scribbled lines / Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way. (Pink Floyd, 1973)*

That line stuck with me, but the truth is it's not just the English way; it's the modern condition. Quiet desperation masked by productivity, where people simply exist to work jobs that don't matter, and buy things that won't last, all to impress people who won't notice. Chuck Palahniuk captured this sentiment perfectly in *Fight Club*, through the words of his character Tyler Durden:

*We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War's a spiritual war... our Great Depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars. But we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off. (Fincher, 1999)*

Uncertainty is frightening, but I'll choose it any day over the anger of having no purpose. Baz Luhrmann put it simply:

*Don't feel guilty if you don't know what you want to do with your life. The most interesting people I know didn't know at 22. Some of the most interesting 40-year-olds still don't. (Luhrmann, 1999)*

We tell eighteen-year-olds with a straight face that it's time to stop dreaming, pick their career path, and commit to the rest of their life. If they want to change their mind, they're ridiculed, told they're making a mistake, *losing time*, and falling behind. 'Losing time' is ironic, as our time is all we have, and what we do with it is what matters the most. Additionally, we cannot fall behind on a path we were never meant to follow. We need to stop treating young adults like their life is a shipping label, needing to be applied now lest they miss the deadline, and that once shipped out the door, there's no prospect of rerouting, no return to sender, just the final destination.

There's a song by Pink Floyd that once filled me with dread, that now connects on another level, one of admiration, recognition, and hope. They alluded to what I'm talking about decades ago, as little has changed. In the song "Time" from *Dark Side of The Moon*, the lyrics go:

*Ticking away the moments that make up a dull day  
You fitter and waste the hours in an off-hand way  
Kicking around on a piece of ground in your home town  
Waiting for someone or something to show you the way  
Tired of lying in the sunshine, staying home to watch the rain  
And you are young and life is long, and there is time to kill today  
And then one day you find ten years have got behind you  
No one told you when to run, you missed the starting gun* (Pink Floyd, 1973)

This song screams of the irony and insanity of our structure. We simultaneously present our youth with an infinite number of choices, paralyzing them with fear, expecting them to commit to a single option *forever*, and then having the gall to tell them there is only one path. This leads to a depressing reality: most of us don't pick our career, we inherit it from fear, expectation, and systemic inertia. Those who succeed through school, excel in their career, are labeled as ambitious; but that ambition is usually just anxiety with an official title. Real ambition is saying no to the false choices we are presented with, having the confidence, the need, and the drive to say, "*I think I'm going to do things my way.*"

If you don't fit the mold, that's not a defect, that's your edge. If no tribe exists for you, that's not isolation, it's the foundation of something new and a signal that you were meant for more. I still don't know exactly what I'm here to do, where my purpose and meaning will evolve as the years pass by, but I know what I won't do: pretend. I won't compromise my values or my curiosity, I won't betray what brings me meaning for a shiny object, and I won't be distracted from the path. I may not know where it is going, but I know the direction I need to move to get there: *always forward.*

It isn't enough to notice the silence, you have to step into it, embrace it, and build something out of it. What you're building is a strength that cannot be given, and cannot be attained through mild curiosity, only a lifetime of harsh, but endured, reality. Christopher Nolan's Bane may have been born in the darkness, but I was born in the silence, and that silence gave me strength beyond measure. The weight of strength isn't just muscle or willpower, it's the willingness to carry your own uncertainty without collapsing under it. That's the price of sovereignty, and the very foundation of meaning. Typhoon, again, says it better than I could:

*Oh what am I waiting for  
A spell to be cast or for it to be broken?  
At the very last some wild ghost from my past come to split me wide open?  
No. If I hold out my hand there is nothing at all because nothing's the token  
I will be good though my body broken  
I will be good  
May I want for nothing at all* (Typhoon, 2013b)

That's the doorway where you finally cross the threshold to greatness. There is no one coming to save you, to deliver you to your path, and it starts the moment you stop waiting. So... what are you waiting for?

## CHAPTER 25:

### Learning From the Loathsome

*The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them.*

-GEORGE ORWELL

It's our natural tendency to rationalize the problems and inconsistencies in the ideas of friends and thinkers we generally agree with. Likewise, it's our innate urge to reject even the best ideas of our adversaries. I explore these thoughts in much greater detail in *The Final Thought War*, specifically, Book 3 on critical and analytical thinking in health science. Of course, the concept transcends health science, and the

**Picture 48.** Gorgeous hike 10-15 minutes from my home



skills I teach in that book must be addressed in this one in order to tie up some loose ends and complete some thoughts.

Between the thinkers I dissected in Chapter 15, and the stories I shared in Chapter 23, it should be clear that I'm not resistant to engaging in a wide breadth of political, social, and existential philosophies. I do my best to try to be fair to each thinker, but despite my efforts I often fall short.

The truth is that overcoming the natural emotional tendencies innate in all of us to support our allies and vilify our enemies is a never-ending battle, one which often gets harder over the years—not easier.

I believe it's imperative to understand the pain of all groups, especially the most extreme, in order to fully synthesize our societal issues into an accurate and vivid portrait of the problems and, critically, the shared roots of them. We cannot offer systematic solutions grounded in truth without this pursuit.



*Beware the irrational, however seductive. Shun the 'transcendent' and all who invite you to subordinate or annihilate yourself. Distrust compassion; prefer dignity for yourself and others. Don't be afraid to be thought arrogant or selfish. Picture all experts as if they were mammals. Never be a spectator of unfairness or stupidity. Seek out argument and disputation for their own sake; the grave will supply plenty of time for silence. Suspect your own motives, and all excuses. Do not live for others any more than you would expect others to live for you.*

-CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

I spend an inordinate amount of time engaging with the ideas and pain of various conspiracy theorists and extremists on all sides of the political sphere. I've yet to find a single group I couldn't find at least one position, even if only a diagnosis they observe and not a prescription for a solution, in which I wholeheartedly find truth. Finding these truths often requires not just reading the thinker or influencer propagating the ideas, but also the commentary and posts of the followers. It requires scrolling through their profiles to understand them, at least a little bit, to better grapple with what may drive them to said group and ideology.

Despite the great lengths I go to get exposure to different lines of thought, in the quest to be fair and reasoned, this is a pursuit where I feel I am failing—not in the literal sense, but the abstract one. I put in exponentially more effort than most to overcome my own biases, but, for one reason or another I often stubbornly cling to them, necessitating a counter force—maybe a friend, or an editor, to press me hard and relentlessly on a position until I stop resisting, and start truly thinking.



**Picture 50.** I'm going to miss this acreage when I get a bigger property



*Nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer; nothing  
is more difficult than to understand him.*

-FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

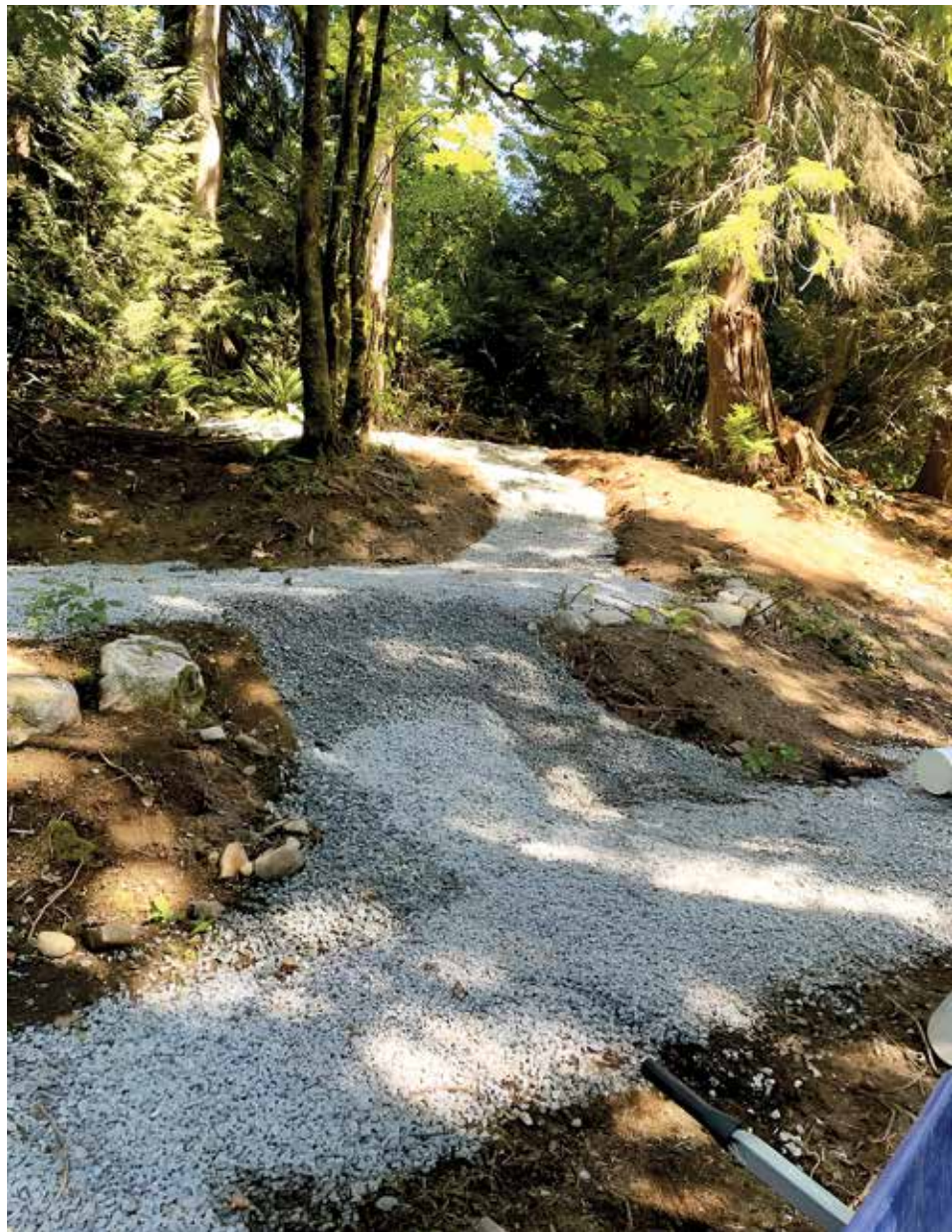
I was recently reminded of one of my blind spots while writing this book. First, one of my editors suggested I read a piece by Noam Chomsky, someone I have little time or respect for ideologically or intellectually speaking. I should add that this editor (Vadim) is not a fan, either, but hadn't descended into a complete state of dismissal of all of his work as I had. I relented, and gave a quick read. Chomsky had stumbled into something worthwhile, albeit obvious. It speaks to my disdain for Chomsky that I am giving him credit for the obvious, as the obvious tends to almost always escape this intellectual fraud of a man.

In particular, Vadim nudged me toward *On Anarchism*, and to my surprise, it contained a rare moment of clarity: in a discussion about the nature of meaningful work, Chomsky recounts how he once planted thirty-four trees by hand in a meadow behind his house. It was difficult labor, sure—but he enjoyed it. “*I wouldn't have enjoyed it,*” he writes, “*if I'd had work norms, if I'd had an overseer, and if I'd been ordered to do it at a certain moment... On the other hand, if it's a task taken on just out of interest, fine, that can be done*” (Chomsky, 2005, p. 189).

What Chomsky recognized, almost despite himself, is that the context in which skill is applied radically changes how we experience it. Physical labor isn't inherently



miserable, just as intellectual labor isn't inherently fulfilling. Meaning emerges from the alignment of challenge, autonomy, and perceived relevance. The same back-breaking work can either crush you or invigorate you, depending on whether you chose it, whether it demands something of your whole self, and whether you believe it matters.



**Picture 51.** Leveled and tamped with the intent to pour and stamp concrete for a 3 level patio.



*The surest way to corrupt a youth is to instruct him to hold in higher esteem those who think alike than those who think differently.*

-FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

When I first came across this essay in Chomsky's book, it struck me as obvious to the point of banality. *Of course* voluntary work feels different than coerced labor. This is a concept my mom intuitively realized when she changed her strategy to let me pick the books I was reading as a child, a topic I detailed in Chapter 4. It is something that basically any person immediately understands.

Frankly, I've always found Chomsky to be among the most overrated public intellectuals alive. I only hedge in saying 'among the most overrated' as I can't think of a supposed intellectual I have more disdain for at this moment, but there's the possibility one exists. Of all the thinkers I've engaged with, he's the one I have found that I had the least to learn from: a man both loud and hollow, who speaks either the obvious or the *obviously wrong*, all the while holding his head up with an unearned sense of superiority. I'd even go as far as to say I loathe the man, and tend to lose a few points of respect for anyone who says they are a fan of his.

Therein lies the problem. With Chomsky, I had betrayed my own strategy. Rather than trying to understand, at the very least, what his followers saw in his teachings, I took the easy route and discounted everything he's said, and judged his followers without endeavouring to understand them. This revelation came to me after I wrote this piece on Chomsky, which was originally in a different chapter, a complete digression written solely to throw an attack at this man and those who support him. What's worse, this attack was written *after* I had discovered something I legitimately agreed with him on.

After I dismissed Chomsky's supposed revelatory insights in *On Anarchism* as banal, Vadim pushed a bit harder. He surprised me by stating my critique and ultimate rejection of Hans-Hermann Hoppe's utopian prescriptions, which I originally covered in Chapter 15, but will now be in the the companion book *The Stone Wall*, was functionally identical to Chomsky's critique of Murray Rothbard, who was Hoppe's mentor. Chomsky had said that Rothbard's world was so bleak, so stripped of human warmth and moral intuition, that no one would actually want to live in it (Chomsky, 2002).

At first I was skeptical Vadim was remembering correctly, and I asked for proof—confident I could find a glaring error in Chomsky's criticism of Rothbard. As strange as it is to me to say this, there were no obvious errors and Vadim had remembered correctly. Chomsky got that one right, and this realization returns me



to what I logically know to be true, even if I emotionally forget it: every thinker, no matter how wrong they are most of the time, gets some things right, and has something to offer.



*When you want to help people, you tell them the truth. When you want to help yourself, you tell them what they want to hear.*

-THOMAS SOWELL



Constructive criticism and well-intentioned pushback makes us stronger. This book is substantially improved over what I would have put out without the firm corrections and honest engagement of my editors. I rewrote an entire breakdown of John Rawls because of Ljubomir's objections. My position didn't drastically change, only softened, but importantly my arguments did. My original write-up on Rawls ironically turned out to be precisely what I was accusing him of. I attacked him from numerous angles in a somewhat dishonest fashion, asserting subjective interpretations of his vague and contradictory language to reveal the truth of his intent, or so I proposed. I relied on slight adjustments to his statement to fit into my takedown, which meant my assertions were *mostly* true but not entirely honest.

After a period of reflection, where I worked to dissociate myself from the emotional charge I felt towards Rawls'

**Picture 52.** Lots of owls on the property. Luckily Harley is about 18 pounds, far too big of a cat for an owl to press its luck.

ideas, I ended up writing a more nuanced and well-reasoned criticism grounded in exegesis, presenting possible interpretations of his text without asserting them as intent (this treatment of Rawls is in the upcoming *The Stone Wall*). My criticisms of Benatar in Chapter 13 were drastically altered and tempered towards being more fair and reasoned after pushback from both Vadim and Ljubomir—not because either is a fan, necessarily, but because they recognized where my contempt for a line of thinking I find loathsome and reprehensible had overpowered my logic, reason, and honest representation of truth.

The lesson of this chapter isn't based solely on the pursuit of truth and fairness. The critical purpose behind understanding others is grounded in the war for our autonomy that is waging behind the scenes. As I propose in the conclusion, we cannot fight an enemy we don't understand, nor can we without sufficient strength. I detail the purpose behind this strength in the sections that follow, but this must be prefaced with the understanding that unity of strength only works if we build bridges to understand each other, to understand where, how, and why our true enemies are manipulating us to turn on each other. The more we fight ourselves, rooted in opposing conceptions of the problems facing us, the less able we are to observe our true enemies, let alone fight them.



*If someone can prove me wrong and show me my mistake in any thought or action, I shall gladly change. I seek the truth, which never harmed anyone: the harm is to persist in one's own self-deception and ignorance.*

MARCUS AURELIUS

These enemies are the architects of our misery, and of the wars currently being waged—literally and figuratively by way of culture and politics. We're being programmed towards manufactured rage to blind us from the evil that ought to inspire true rage. While I disagree with the societal models proposed by Rawls and Chomsky, at their core, they both have strived to work towards a world they believe will be more just, more fair, and more productive. Their solutions, I believe, are wrong, but their intent is not.

So, this is a reminder to me that I must do better—and a call to all reading to likewise commit to doing, and being better. The work never ends, for if we win this war of perception, our victory will eventually defeat us in time, when the next crop of wolves manipulate narratives to drive us apart.

So read, think, follow and understand others. Especially those you are most opposed to. Society, and your sovereignty, depends on it.

**Picture 53.** Driveway to my house. This bad boy takes a couple hours to shovel in the winters.



## Conclusion: The War for Mental Sovereignty

This book was written inside a war, just not one fought with bullets, tanks, and bombs. It is a war for control of our minds and strength. We are under assault each and every day, the power structures in society ensuring that our truth is distorted through media; our bodies and minds weakened through a focus on overmedication and a disregard for foundational health; and our purpose and meaning is robbed via synthetic distraction capturing our attentions for a few moments at a time.

The most devastating part of this war is that many do not even realize they are fighting it. We cannot hope to beat an enemy we do not understand, much less one we do not even see. Every societal trend thrust into the spotlight, from social coddling creating emotional fragility, to intellectual sedation leading to uniformity of thought, ensures we are being led towards accepting slave morality as the only truth. The tragic irony is that we are being taught to believe those who walk amongst us, who were not born into hereditary power and wealth, but seek strength anyway, are the true enemies. Our focus is constantly directed towards those amongst us with the power to protect, always away from the architects of our misery, who are pulling the strings from above, out of sight.

This misdirection serves two purposes: it turns those made weak by artificial sedation against the strong, a particularly powerful play in a democracy that grants one vote to each citizen, while simultaneously turning the strong against the weak. Those with the capacity to protect are becoming disenfranchised with the weak, intolerant and agitated. Ultimately, they are turned wholly against them, resigning to become wolves themselves—acting as both soldiers and cover for the true wolves who have premeditated this constructed chaos.

There exists a catch-22: we cannot fight an enemy unless we see and understand them. However, once we see and understand them, we cannot fight the enemy unless we possess the strength to resist. If we understand before we possess the strength, the formidability of the enemy could dissuade us from pursuing said strength, believing the mission futile. My second book, *The Final Thought War*, which I discussed releasing and then quickly pulling to rewrite, seeks to elucidate the extent to which our perception of truth, particularly relating to health science but applicable everywhere, is systematically and completely distorted. This distortion spans everything from the media, to peer reviewed science, and to the influencers on *both sides* of the debate, which I term as the mainstream and alternative skeptics.

Originally, *The Final Thought War* was chosen as the first book to release, despite having finished writing both around the same time. Shortly after committing to this release order, I started to second-guess it. When I decided to pull the book, I experienced a sense of relief, feeling that *StressHacked* deserved to come first, and ought to. First, we must train our strength, of mind and body, and then we can

confront the enemy who besieges our autonomy. Reversing the order could lead to the challenge feeling insurmountable, as I previously stated.

So, first we build. We must commit to the relentless pursuit of strength. When we confront the enemy, it will take incredible power and unfathomable inertia to redirect and then dismantle their own momentum. All of us capable must be prepared to walk forward with intent, understanding, and the resolve to see it through. This demands a level of resilience that cannot be bought, is not innate, nor is it ordained; it is something that can only be earned. We build this strength because we must—because we must become dangerous, not to each other, but to those who would turn us against each other and profit from the chaos.

Our world is unraveling by the hour. I am not being hyperbolic when I state we have 10, maybe 15 years remaining in Western society to reverse course before collapse. This war is not being fought with physicality and violence, and it will not be won in this manner, either, whether by the people or by the architects of our despair. If we do not wake up to it now, rise up and reclaim our strength and sovereignty, even the option of violence will escape us. I need to make it clear, again, that this final resort of violence is not one I condone in any way, and believe will lead to further despair, not victory.

Our mind and body are connected, this is the premise of the book, and our spirit and purpose is likewise instrumental in making us whole. Since this war is attacking us from all fronts; neutering our mind, destroying our spirit, and weakening our body, we must tackle each, to build the foundations first before erecting our defenses needed to repel these subversive assaults. This is why we confront the pain of cold, of hunger, of strenuous exercise for the body, and then likewise, plunge our minds into the chaos of introspection, existential philosophy, and also the discomfort of the new—whether it be a foreign language or otherwise. This battle is about becoming whole, for when we are whole, we become invulnerable to insidious attacks; those who would subjugate us would need to show their faces, to use actual force, a move which would unravel all of what their power is predicated upon.

When you venture to walk down this road, many in your lives will look at you like you're crazy. Anyone enchanted by the addiction of immediacy and ease will view the quest for strength through suffering as insanity. Anyone hypnotized into thinking that what currently is also happens to be what ought to be will recoil from assertions our societal paradigm is not only undesirable, but foundationally toxic. Don't mind them, you must continue. I'm reminded of the words from the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Peggy Carter in *Captain America: Civil War*:

*Compromise where you can. Where you can't, don't. Even if everyone is telling you that something wrong is something right. Even if the whole world is telling you to move, it is your duty to plant yourself like a tree, look them in the eye, and say "No, you move."* (Russo & Russo, 2016)

We cannot compromise on our pursuit of strength, and we cannot compromise on our sovereignty. The two are interconnected; strength demands sovereignty of mind, body, and purpose.<sup>21</sup> Protecting your sovereignty requires the strength to repel the mechanisms of control we are inundated with every day, perhaps every waking moment.

This strength, this sovereignty, is constructed one piece at a time. It is the result of failing and struggling, but despite this, having the will to endure and stand back up, defiant. To channel Fedor Emelianenko, and his wise words after his first real loss in a decade of competition:

*The one who doesn't fall doesn't stand up.* (Morgan, 2010)

He said it following being finished by submission, living through the loss of his indestructible aura in real time. Ego battered, reality shattered, Fedor embodied the same calm and stoic demeanor he projected in victory, this time in defeat. There was clarity in his calmness, real-time wisdom from a man who trained his body and mind to hold the line. That's not a motivational quote, it's a way of being, a philosophy of life.

For some, my calls to action for the greater societal threats may ring alarmist, hyperbolic, or flat out delusional. It matters not, for the principles laid out in this book will carry you through your own personal battles in life better than any other. Lawsuits, health scares, tragedy, divorce, and financial collapse can all lay ruin to our peace of mind, derailing our forward focus. Even the cumulative and daily stressors of existence, from work, to parenting, to maintaining our relationships possess the power to deplete us if we lack the necessary strength.

No matter the reason you decide to move towards your own strength and sovereignty, whether it be to protect yourself from normal life and grow more capable in the face of it, or prepare yourself for collapse, real, civilizational collapse, the time to start is now, not tomorrow, not next week: now. With each step forward, each small victory, each struggle you overcome, you are building resilience to anything and everything that will come next. The only question is will it be enough?

I hope I am wrong, that civilization self-corrects, that our unraveling is random, a cumulation of bad decisions, not by a patchwork of intentional design. That clarification is important, and will be covered in *The Final Thought War* in more detail. The architects of our misery are not in active conspiracy, they operate in tacit collusion, because the strategies work and benefit their systems of power and control. If I'm right, which I believe I am, I hope that enough of you join me in resisting. Our

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<sup>21</sup> By 'sovereignty of purpose,' I mean to convey the importance of having autonomy over one's purpose. This should be shaped by your own morality, knowledge, and vision, not by societal pressures to fit a societal script.



act of resistance is one of commitment to strength of body and mind, not of weapons and armies. No lives need to be lost, just strengthened, fortified, and enlightened.

Accepting that everything about our society and reality is predicated on a lie is a vicious truth to acknowledge. Some of you will, some of you won't, and some may already know. To borrow from the Marvel Cinematic Universe one more time, specifically, *Captain America: Winter Soldier*:

*I know I'm asking a lot. The price of freedom is high; it always has been. But it's a price I'm willing to pay. And if I'm the only one, then so be it. But I'm willing to bet I'm not. (Russo & Russo, 2016)*

So take the first step, work towards unifying your body, mind, and spirit, and prepare for the next battle: *The Final Thought War*, where the very fabric of what is true, what is knowable, and the question if we have any avenues to even pursue either comes under fire.



**Pictures 54-55.** Only good friends can get me to drive an hour to have breakfast.

*The skill of smiling on command has always evaded me. The upside is that my nightmare of being a famous actor is incredibly implausible.*



## Now Prove It

*A harmless man is not a good man. A good man is a very dangerous man who has that under voluntary control.*

-JORDAN PETERSON

I hesitated to lead with this quote; perhaps from a certain lens, the advocacy of strength as a virtue, it may seem that Jordan Peterson and I are aligned in certain philosophies. While this is undoubtedly true, as there are few thinkers I find no value in, in reality I find myself disagreeing with him far more often than agreeing. On this position, however, I fully agree, and his succinct words precisely elucidate the reality—but only if you understand that his use of ‘danger’ means strength, the type of strength capable of causing great harm to others.

Virtue cannot emerge from weakness. It requires strength and, when not properly channeled, strength is dangerous. I’ve spent the better part of my adult life striving to be a good man, a virtuous man, but when I was younger, when my limbic system was undeveloped, and I hadn’t yet borne the weight of the guilt from my deplorable actions, I possessed strength, and lacked virtue. More often than not I was not a good man in my youth, and unfortunately, I was not harmless.

I often reflect back to a particular story in which I was, without a doubt, the antagonist. I cannot say if I reflect on this story more than it deserves; or if the guilt I feel from it is wholly insufficient. It’s impossible to know, as my muddled memory of the manipulative game I orchestrated evokes multiple contrasting emotions.

Let’s rewind, and start with the story. The year was 2006, I was 20 years old, and just shy of my 21st birthday. For the first time in my life I was in charge of something: a door to door sales crew. I’ve spoken about this experience throughout the book, intimating the regret I feel for the man I once was, while simultaneously understanding that without those mistakes, those character flaws, and the emotional reckoning I faced when confronting them, I wouldn’t be the man I am today.

Back to the story. In the spring of 2006 my sales team was relatively small in numbers, but overpowered in performance. I inherited many of the reps from a former manager who left town, once my contemporaries, and utilized those titanium bones to build a monster crew. Within that crew was a rep, a year younger than me, who would have been a top performer on any other team. But, he was on this team, and every rep on our team would have been the top performer on every other team in the city, at that time.

Looking back, that rep, Cal, may have been the only one of us with his priorities straight. He viewed the job as it was, a part time after-school job, which he checked in for, performed competently, before returning to his actual goals: his education. For



that maturity, some of the other reps gave him a nickname: “Average Cal,” and I’m ashamed to admit I not only adopted it, but cruelly ran with it.

I can’t be sure what turned me into a bully during this time. Bullying was something I always loathed to the core of my being. Throughout high school, on a number of occasions, I lost my temper protecting vulnerable classmates being bullied. It likely would have come as no consolation to the young Cal, but perhaps the reason I felt my actions were justified was for the fact he wasn’t vulnerable; he was strong, competent, and a peer. Of course, the actions weren’t justified, these musings only serve to try to understand the person I used to be, and critically, if that part of me still exists somewhere deep down.

An idea for a less than ethical social experiment emerged from the void of my not yet matured mind a few weeks before our companies fiscal year end. There was a performance based bonus up for grabs: \$1000 to all sales reps who signed up 1000 deals during the year. Most of my reps had already qualified and, based on Cal’s numbers, it appeared to be a lock for him, as well. The third to last week came and went, Cal performing as expected, chugging along at the exact sales rate he needed to hit his bonus, with no room for error.

I don’t know what inspired me to act; the manipulative game I played certainly satisfied a number of the emotional shortcomings I had at the time, so it’s impossible to truly know what the dominant motivator was. Act I did, telling Cal that there had been a mistake: that there weren’t 2 weeks remaining, only one. It was my fault, but he’d need to somehow close 50 deals in a single week, not two, substantially more than his best week ever, which had sat at 39 for some time. I told him after the Saturday shift the week prior, fully expecting him to suffer in stress all Sunday, before I told him the truth after shift Monday, maybe Tuesday to see how he was handling it.

That’s not what Cal did. He accepted the turn of events, and asked me if he could work Sunday, and if he could also get some territory to start knocking on doors early throughout the week. He was determined to hit that bonus. I obliged, my curiosity piqued. Cal came out selling right away Sunday, and showed no signs of slowing Monday. Smelling a competition, the two top reps on our team chased him, a 3 way race, all tracking for their best week ever. We worked Saturday, and again the following Sunday; an 8 day week. Cal hit his bonus the Saturday, but, by that time it had become more than just a bonus; he was on fire, and you don’t slow down when you’re on fire.

Up until the final Sunday, no one else knew that I’d actually lied about the end of year date. The other reps who had a chance at the bonus had hit it long ago, and the ones that didn’t were too far away to care. Overcome with glee and self satisfaction, I bragged to each rep on the team, one by one, revealing the stunt I’d pulled. All seemingly found it hilarious, but again, this was a group of 18-20-year-olds, so of course they did.

I purposefully picked up Cal last, ensuring that every other rep was in the van waiting. Three reps broke 60 sales that week, all personal records, including Cal. As he sat down, proud of himself for the goal he'd accomplished, I ruined the moment by letting him in on the secret: the entire stress was manufactured, there was another week left in the year. The other reps erupted in laughter, as Cal sat there, stunned. When he finally spoke, still processing, he said something that stuck with me:

*Big guy, I hate you for what you just did. But from the bottom of my heart, thank you.*

I'm fairly certain those are the words, because over the years they've evoked strong and antithetical emotions in me. At the time, when I was 20, it was smugness, superiority, and even infallibility. By the time I was 30, the memory was a soul-crushing reminder of who I never wanted to be again, my psyche emerging from an existential angst that nearly broke me. Today, I look back on this memory more with curiosity, an inquisitive process in which I walk through my journey with this emotion, and ask myself what my current feelings around it mean about who I am today.

Not because of this event, but despite it, Cal went on to succeed at his goals; he worked his way through school, entered the career he'd chosen, and bought his first home by his mid 20s; in Vancouver, might I add, a formidable task. I recall calling him a year or two after he stopped working for me. He was still in Vancouver, and I had moved to Toronto to take a position with the same company. I felt compelled to tell him that hiring others made me appreciate how great of a rep, but more importantly, a team player and hard worker he was. As Cal finished his schooling, he took on every extra job he could with me; he helped pick up staff, turned in my paperwork to the office late nights after shift, and often opted to sleep on the couch at his school, to save the hour drive home. That's a kind of dedication few are capable of, and even fewer have.

Today, he spends his time pursuing his hobbies, travels to Europe ~2 months a year, and lives life on his terms. He also happens to be one of my groomsmen at my upcoming wedding; perhaps, a friendship I don't entirely deserve. So, it's fair to add forgiving and understanding to his resume, as well. Definitely not average, not in the slightest.

This story, as hard as it is to tell—this is my 6th draft writing it, no version feeling perfectly right—is necessary for two reasons. It is the culmination of the lessons I've shared and a segue into the final call to action immediately succeeding this interlude. Cal's story teaches us that sometimes we don't get to pick the stressful situations that assail us; *sometimes they're thrust upon us*, and in that moment, we either overcome, or crumble. The only way we can stack the deck in our favor, so that when the chaos confronts us we overcome it, is to pursue strength. It is to relentlessly and methodically subject ourselves to measured doses of struggle, in order to prepare ourselves for when it comes unexpectedly. Cal overcame, because he possessed the

strength in him to do so. If he hadn't, perhaps we wouldn't be friends today, and perhaps I wouldn't have resolved my guilt enough to share this memory.

Despite the amount of time I have spent reflecting on this memory, I still can't be certain what possessed me to behave this way. I don't really know what my main motivation was. Did I suspect he could be inspired to push past his self imposed limits? Perhaps, and that's what I told myself for a long time, but it's certainly not the whole truth. Did I just want to fuck with him? That could have played a role, but as the sole motivator it seems unlikely. Did I want to tear someone down because I was insecure? This certainly is a possibility, at least as the initial motivator, but clearly my actions indicate that if it was running my operating system, it was overridden the second Cal stood up to the challenge. Perhaps I wanted to manipulate, just because I could? Or maybe all of the above were true, meaning, none are fully true.

This is exactly the reason we need to practice introspection, and the reason we need to strive to grow as human beings. Twenty years ago my strengths were a weapon. Ten years ago, overcome with guilt, that weapon was turned inwards. Today, I feel that most days, most of the time, my strength is directed towards my purpose; and the ability to aim is owed, in full, to my ability to understand, reflect, and grow.

Being harmless is not synonymous with being virtuous. Past actions do not forever condemn us to permanent depravity. We are imperfect beings; we make mistakes, and if we reflect, we learn and grow. As I detail in one of the next sections, called "The Weight Of Strength," the responsibility that comes with being truly strong is a burden most are incapable of carrying. Paradoxically, it may necessitate first carrying the burden of guilt, a much different, and much more brutal weight. To carry that weight, the full weight of the guilt for our actions, it's first necessary to confront ourselves and our past. The guilt I feel for behaving as I did has provided the necessary context I need to strive towards virtue. Maybe I'm not there yet, not all the way, and that's ok; the job is never finished, it's a lifetime, a pursuit. The pursuit has led me to clarity on what's needed to be strong, and more importantly what's needed *of the strong*.



The mind may be the architect, but the body is the proving ground. You've spent this book learning to think clearly under pressure, to sharpen perception, to train towards earning your sovereignty, and to peel away illusion until you hit something unshakable.

But now comes the harder part:

***Now prove it.***

*Observation is never enough*, and neither is calibration. The most elegant mindset in the world folds under heat if it hasn't been pressure-tested. Pain doesn't care about

your beliefs; hunger doesn't care about your clarity. Fatigue, cold, blood sugar drops, inflammation, collapse, absolutely none of it cares how smart you are. *Ideas die under load*. Identity breaks in the presence of chaos, and during chaos, only what's real survives. If you can't command your body, you haven't mastered your mind. If your body collapses under basic strain, your sovereignty is a theory.

So now we take the next step and venture into the twin blade that compliments everything we've forged here. Just like *The Mind* isn't about optics, *StressHacked: The Body* isn't about aesthetics, it's about war-readiness, and reclaiming the capability that modern life has made you forget. Our strength must be unified, complete, because the system doesn't just attack your mind, it attacks your structure, hormones, joints, digestion, metabolism, and eventually, this impairs your ability to walk uphill without pain, let alone mount the energy to fight an enemy you don't see coming. Those robbing us of our sovereignty, and our strength, they do so with our permission. They get away with this crime with polite slogans, and fake kindness.

*"Love yourself as you are."*

*"Food is joy."*

*"You're perfect already."*

*"Health at any size."*

But you're not, and you *know* it. This next book is a field manual, a *counterattack*, the blueprint to strengthen your body to support the will of your mind. You've built the clarity, and you've trained the mind. Now bring that self to the mat, to the weights, the heat, the discomfort of the fast, and the jarring pain of the cold. Importantly, bring your new strength to the fight. See what's still an illusion, what still bends, folds or breaks, commit to pushing the limits, and then rebuild, with clarity, purpose and understanding.

Let's begin, with the end of this book hopefully leading to the beginning of the next chapter in your life. But first, we must understand the responsibility that comes with strength, we must commit to the weight we are obliged to carry.



# The Third Layer of the Mind

The mind, like the body, is not one-dimensional. The modern world typically considers it to have two: intellect, which enables us to solve problems, and knowledge, the information we store for our intellect to utilize in the future. There is a third, however, that is often forgotten. It's the one that matters most, because it decides what to do with the other two, and motivates our actions.<sup>22</sup> I struggle to find a suitable name for this third layer, settling on 'spirit,' though others may refer to it as 'soul' or 'will.' The semantics are perhaps less important than what it stands for: it is what transforms us from a biological computer into something *of purpose*. Without the spirit, you are just processing power incapable of directing your capacity, collecting data without meaning.

## The Spirit Is Not What You Think

Let me be clear: I'm not talking about the supernatural, and I'm not pushing religion. I'm not advocating dualism; my criticisms of Plato were tempered by one of my cool-headed editors, as I absolutely detest this fantastical idea that mind and body are separate substances. What I'm describing is real and observable: the guiding will which ensures that your strength and cognition serve something higher than dopamine hits and biological impulses. It's the compass that orients your capabilities toward meaningful action. Without spirit, intellect becomes manipulation, the knowledge you amass becomes deception, and eventually, your mind becomes a weapon.

This is not hyperbole; all you need to do is look around. The most dangerous people in the world are often some of the smartest. What they lack isn't IQ; it's orientation and alignment with their spirit. They've developed the first two layers of the mind while neglecting the third, and that omission doesn't neutralize their power; it weaponizes it against those around them and, in many cases, internally against themselves.

## When the Mind Loses Its Way

A mind without spirit doesn't collapse quietly. It malfunctions, holding power it cannot control inwards, until it finally detonates and collapses systems around it. We live in an age that has replaced "good" with "comfortable," and "truth" with "validation." Where "flourishing" has been mistranslated as "comfort." Where even academic institutions have twisted Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia from a life of virtuous struggle into a pursuit of sensory pleasure, and this is no accident; it is a systematic sedation.

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<sup>22</sup> Some frameworks propose a different "third dimension" of mind: emotional regulation, which draws on psychological resilience and stress management. In this view, emotional regulation operates alongside intellect and knowledge as a coequal capacity. Under such a model, the quality I describe here would be considered a *fourth* dimension rather than a third.

Consider our most powerful institutions: AI development is rushing forward without adequate ethical guardrails. Big Tech is optimizing for engagement rather than human welfare. Pharmaceutical companies profit more from managing than curing disease. All are driven by brilliance, calibrated towards profit, not driving societal value, as the brilliance is directed with no conscience. Throughout history, we have enacted laws to mitigate the worst of humanity, yet still, predators flourish. I believe this is a result of broken bureaucracies and systems molded over time to protect those who have made it to the top without developing this third layer of the mind.

When intellect and knowledge become unmoored from purpose, they don't remain neutral, they become destructive. The mind without spirit is a ship without rudder; except worse, because it continues to accelerate.

## **Why This Book Needed to Build You Up First**

There's a reason this discussion of spirit comes at the conclusion of the mind's exploration. You can't develop the spirit when your body is broken and your mind is inflamed. Physical sovereignty and cognitive clarity are prerequisites. Only with these foundations can you truly *choose* who you want to be.

Each aspect is necessary. Without physical health, your cognitive abilities are compromised. Without cognitive clarity, your judgment becomes corrupted. Without the united strength of both, your ability to act with purpose is fundamentally limited.

## **The Moral Weight of Capability**

If you're reading this, you are likely already stronger than average. Your mind likely is clearer than average and you are undoubtedly more ambitious than average. That capability comes with responsibility. This is the weight of strength. Spirit doesn't mean softness, and it certainly doesn't mean universal compassion; I eviscerated those notions in Chapter 15. It means choosing *what you carry* and *who you become*.

Many who are capable of strength choose not to pursue it further. They have the potential, the intelligence, the discipline, and still, they decide to tend their own garden instead. This is not weakness; there is a quiet dignity and purpose in choosing a life that ethically enriches yourself and those closest to you without seeking broader influence.

The problem arises not from those who choose simplicity, but from those who seek power without responsibility, who develop capability only to prey on the vulnerable. This is when strength becomes toxic. You are not obligated to lead. But if you are capable, and ambitious, you are *morally bound* to act with direction, to build rather than exploit, and to elevate rather than manipulate. The elite, meaning the truly

capable, have always had two paths: become shepherds or become wolves. The choice defines not just your legacy, but the trajectory of civilization itself.

It is not strength, nor even power, that corrupts; *it is strength and power without spirit.*

## **The Modern Vacuum of Purpose**

We face a paradox in the modern world. Religion, for all its flaws, gave people a framework for meaning. Without it, the modern world has offered countless alternatives, but the ones most widely embraced have been shallow: sedation, addiction, and distraction. This isn't a condemnation of secularism; it's a critique of what's commonly filled the void in recent history. When people lose a story, they don't stop believing. They just start believing in worse things. I'm certainly not arguing that religion is the answer. I am saying that without direction and purpose, we become worse. We, meaning humans, need something to orient us, we need a framework for channeling our capabilities to something that aspires for more than immediate gratification, something that drives towards the question of "why," even if this question can perhaps never be answered.

In the absence of a meaningful purpose, people have turned to whatever provides dopamine. Meaning has been outsourced to culture, ideology, and addiction. The masses drift without anchor, susceptible to whatever promises fulfillment without effort.

Without some form of spirit, the modern mind collapses into endless dopamine loops and nihilism. Flourishing becomes comfort, which is unfortunately a non-satirical truth I learned is being taught at a major university in North America after I attended a class called *The Science of Mental Health*. Sedation replaces purpose, and the endless pursuit of pleasure leaves even the materially wealthy spiritually bankrupt.

Without the strong channeling their strength into a true and meaningful purpose, our society faces collapse; the evidence suggests that's where we are heading, and I argue, it is precisely for this reason. When the capable lack purpose, when they become ambitious without responsibility, systems corrode from within. Laws, designed to mitigate our worst impulses, become manipulated by those with ample intellect and knowledge but no moral compass. The strong amongst us become corrupted by the wolves, eventually becoming wolves themselves. This is not the way it should be, it is not the way it can be, but it is the way it currently is.

## **True Flourishing Is Not About Happiness**

Let me return to Aristotle, one last time, but I'll keep this brief. It is widely debated what Aristotle meant by 'eudaimonia.' Was it happiness? Was it flourishing? I cannot know, I do not speak Ancient Greek, and even if I did, I was not alive during his time. What I do know is that many modern translations, such as 'happiness' and especially 'comfort,' are antithetical to the rest of his philosophy.



I choose to believe that a good life means purpose, or more accurately, the pursuit of our purpose. To further refine this thought, a good life requires a purpose that involves benefitting wider society, and pursuing this purpose requires strength. Since my purpose is this, strength is my currency, and that includes strength of body and mind, with intentional calibration of my spirit.

True flourishing (eudaimonia) is about living up to your potential, relentlessly seeking to strengthen your mind and body, resigning to take action, always forward, always towards a better life. This necessitates aligning your capabilities with meaningful direction. If you think this sounds exhausting, you're missing the point. Nothing feels better than moving with purpose. Nothing provides more sustainable satisfaction than knowing your strength serves something beyond your own comfort. The real exhaustion is pretending that comfort will fulfill you.

This is why people who have “everything” often feel they have nothing. They’ve developed the capacity without the compass.

## **This Is Why We Fight**

The purpose of training our body is not for aesthetics, and the purpose of sharpening our mind is not to win debates, demean others, or impart on ourselves a misguided sense of superiority. If pursued to these ends, the results will leave us empty, broken, and filled with an anger we don’t understand, and cannot fix. We build ourselves up so that when life demands strength, we are ready to answer the call. It is so we can withstand what would derail us—like a statue defiantly holding its ground in a hurricane—and, if we’re strong enough, to carry those around us, lest they lack the strength and risk being blown away.

Because of the reality we face, which is a crumbling society designed to rob us of our purpose, filled with distortions to hide the true corruption baked into the very fabric of the systems, the ones we seldom question, it is up to the strong to reclaim society. We must reclaim it in order to protect it from those who would prey on the vulnerable. Not through force, not through violence, but through strategic resistance. We do this by refusing sedation, by refusing to be managed, and by refusing to surrender our clarity to the endless distractions engineered to keep us weak, placated, and devoid of thought.

The third layer of the mind is the part that refuses to surrender, to be comforted by false platitudes, and resign to defeat, accepting manufactured decay. It’s the part that asks “Why?” and then demands you answer with action. It’s the part that leads you to strength; and gives that strength a reason to exist.

Because strength without reason is just force, and we don’t need more force. We need aim.

# Prelude to The Weight Of Strength

## Before We Begin

I need to make something abundantly clear, because if what follows is misunderstood, it will be distorted into the very sentiments it is written to resist. What follows is not a philosophy of domination, nor is it a justification for elitism, and it is *absolutely not* a blueprint for collectivism. My writing is a call to strength, to those capable of earning it, and those with the requisite virtuosity to ethically wield it. This is a call to build (and channel) strength not just in body and mind, but in spirit, grounded by integrity.

For strength to reach its full form, the kind that builds rather than destroys, it requires restraint, wisdom, tempered empathy, and command of our emotional self, which must first be understood in order to be directed. Once this strength is achieved, by carrying the burdens that others cannot or will not, it cannot be deployed to achieve personal glory; it is not intended to isolate and rule.

**Its purpose is to carry.**

The strong exist for the rest, and for too long, society has reversed this truth. The burden the strong assume is heavier, not because they are morally worth more, but because they are capable of bearing more. Strength, rightly cultivated and methodically curated, does not lead to looking down on those below; it gives the ability to lift those up who have the will to try, but lack the capability to climb unassisted. For the strong, those below may be our parents, siblings, childhood friends, and neighbors. The ability to gain strength and the will to pursue it come down to fortune. By recognizing this truth often stated from the delusional empaths, that our fortune is just luck and not any moral superiority, while acknowledging the cold truth of the callous pragmatists that hierarchy still exists, ability still differs, and human nature always prevails, we can reconcile our fortune with our success, and understand why it is our responsibility to lift.

A functional society requires a spectrum of strength and ability, not homogeneity, and certainly not forced equality. Hierarchy is inevitable; we cannot avoid it, and all attempts to do so will inevitably fail miserably, as history has demonstrated. Therefore, we must acknowledge its existence and resign ourselves to undertake its construction upon the premise of integrity and service, not inheritance or ego. The weak are not useless; they are not to be discarded, and they must be treated humanely, allowed to thrive, and given the space and freedom to contribute in ways that align with their nature.

The truly strong have never exploited the weak, and never will. They have devoted their lives to protecting them from the wolves—those with fractured strength, weaponized to mask the unresolved weaknesses that poison their spirit. These are the

people amongst us possessing raw gifts, without grounding, who seek only dominance, applause, admiration, or chaos. The wolves were always meant to be cautionary tales, not leaders, but over time, they inevitably seem to seize and hold the balance of power. This truth is so prevalent today that their actions are often heralded as virtuous and aspirational, not despicable and deplorable.

This book exists for those who are capable of suffering deliberately, transforming with discipline, and returning from that fire not embittered, but bound to serve. Because the test of true strength is not how high you climb; it's how much weight you can carry *and still leave no one behind to the wolves.*

# The Weight of Strength

## Hierarchy Is Not a Problem. It's a Structure.

If you've made it to the end of this book, it will be challenging to logically deny that hierarchy is real, inevitable, *but undeserved*. Undeserved as it results from the materialization of potentially infinite actions that all transpired in a way to give those of us with strength said strength. Regardless of how strength was attained, it exists. As such, we must consider it both a privilege and a burden, for understanding our fortune, truly reconciling it, leads to the realization that those lacking strength, likewise, are in their position due to chance: a stacked deck, further stacked by society's perception of earned merit and its accompanying entitlement.

For some of the strong, it can be tempting to default to elitism, to carry contempt for those with capabilities less than your own. It is only through a deep understanding of humanity and the world we exist in that we can shed this toxicity, or at least, work towards shedding it. I admit that this is a reality I must relentlessly endeavor to remind myself of, one of the most critical aspects of my introspection is to remind myself of precisely this truth, lest my frustration with the capabilities of others lead to contempt and callousness.

Some days we are weaker than others. Some days, I am ashamed at how I let my emotions control me; it's almost always over minor inconveniences or displays of incompetence that I expected, accounted for, and shouldn't have been bothered by. I've learned this about myself, and my time spent on introspection has worked to address some of the roots of these issues. I now catch myself, often, as I start to get upset at a frontline worker, messenger, or other workers relaying information I dislike, which they have no power to control. I apologize profusely, explaining I am just frustrated at the situation and not them personally. It usually helps, because I mean it. The fact is, this admission of wrongdoing and display of embarrassment and humility is not weakness; it is strength. Weakness is denying our faults, leading to a failure to face them, and an inability to grow. Years ago, I refused to admit my faults in the moment. Then, when I turned off the lights at the end of the night, I would just stare at the ceiling, mortified by my actions and unable to sleep. So, on the surface, I show this humility for the person I just acted unfairly to, but in reality, it is meant to improve myself, to help me live with my actions more easily, undertaken so I can sleep soundly. To become strong, we must admit the ways in which we are still weak.

As I have repeated several times throughout this book, and to expand on the opening paragraph of this chapter, the strong cannot reasonably take credit for the genetics they inherited, nor the experiences they accumulated through luck and randomness that helped build their resilience. In the same vein, those of lesser capabilities did not choose their genetic makeup, or experiences, either. The answer isn't unrestrained

empathy, which can be toxic in of itself, but rather, learned patience and understanding, leading to tempered empathy.

I meditate on this concept because if you, dear reader, are strong, I suspect you may suffer from the same reflex I do; to recalibrate back to entitlement after each major success. Likewise, you may default back to an unearned smugness after watching each incomprehensible failure from someone around you. These are understandable, but wrong, emotional instincts that will inevitably lead you to become angry, contemptuous, and more. This is a trap, one which our biology drives, an easy emotion, but one that will inevitably corrupt your mind and poison your spirit.

Learned patience, tempered empathy and understanding, and acknowledgements of not just our own faults and limitations, but the limitations, usually more substantial, of those around us, serves our strength and also society, it doesn't undermine it. I've stated that we need people of varying capacities, and this is inarguable. That doesn't mean everyone deserves equal outcomes, but it does mean we need our strong to carry weight that others can't. For that to work, for strength to be functional rather than destructive, it must be integrated.

Because unintegrated strength is weaponized and turns either outward or inward, often both. A powerful mind without clarity becomes a manipulative one. A powerful body without self-awareness becomes a coercive one. A powerful spirit without logic makes one delusional. When strength is built in one domain and neglected in the others, it mutates us and eventually corrupts us. The goal of building strength is to elevate, and to elevate we must be whole. The body becomes a weapon when the mind is weak. The intellect becomes a scalpel when the spirit is corroded. When harmony of strength is disrupted, we begin to harm without even trying, often without even knowing.

Tim Minchin alluded to this concept in his speech, "4 Life Lessons," at his 2013 commencement address to the University of Western Australia. Lesson 4, in particular, is relevant to this book:

*Exercise. I'm sorry, you pasty, pale, smoking philosophy grads, arching your eyebrows into a Cartesian curve as you watch the human movement mob winding their way through the miniature traffic cones of their existence. You are wrong, and they are right.*

*Well, you're half right. You think, therefore you are, but also, you jog, therefore you sleep, therefore you're not overwhelmed by existential angst. You can't be, and you don't want to be.*

*Play a sport. Do yoga, pump iron, run—whatever, but take care of your body. You're going to need it. Most of you mob are going to live to nearly 100, and even the poorest of you will achieve a level of wealth that most humans*

*throughout history could not have dreamed of. And this long, luxurious life ahead of you is going to make you depressed. But don't despair; there is an inverse correlation between depression and exercise. Do it! Run, my beautiful intellectuals, run.*" (Clear, n.d.)

We need to be honest about what "mind" really means. As I detail in the "Third Layer of the Mind," it's not just intellect, nor is it just knowledge, logic, or information. The mind is where your anxiety lives, it's where embarrassment, greed, jealousy, rage, and all of the animal forces originate. A strong mind isn't simply a clever and educated one. True strength of mind is one that understands and integrates its emotional layers, rather than being hijacked by them. These emotional states are all, at their core, physiological; when our body is broken, our hormones and neurotransmitters become derailed, and the very nature of our being is altered. This is the tragic truth for many intellectuals; the mind cannot maintain strength, not enduring strength, if the body is collapsing.

Duality is a beautiful story, one that while not originating from Plato, was elevated by him in a manner that shaped Western civilization; perhaps the main reason for my unfettered disdain for his teachings, albeit not the *only* reason. Unfortunately (for the reason of its poetic beauty), dualism is demonstrably false. When our body fails, our mind collapses with it, along with our emotions, hopes, dreams, purpose, and even the content of our character. A weak body distorts the very essence of our being. This is an uncomfortable truth that all aspiring for strength must reconcile. Our true self exists in a different manner, each moment calibrated by the strength of our body and status of our health. What this means is that we have no true self, not unless we pursue all domains of the self with equal consideration, and harmonized outcomes. If not, our true self is left to chance, distorted whichever way the wind blows.

True strength is whole, unified, and must be pursued relentlessly. We cannot maintain our self by simply committing to the maintenance of our strength, because the very definition of maintenance is the action of fixing what has already broken, or is in the process of breaking. By the time our strength, our health, is wavering, our self has become altered, meaning we may now lack the very strength necessary to correct course. If we aren't constantly and obsessively working towards improving our capacity for holistic strength, we are resigning to break, to become weaker, and to devolve into a self we do not recognize as our own.

There's a song by Typhoon called "Morton's Fork": a call out to a logical dilemma in which two seemingly contradictory, predetermined, options lead to the same undesirable result, that perfectly captures the historical plight of the shepherd. Kyle Morton (coincidentally sharing the surname of the Lord Chancellor, Archbishop of Canterbury John Morton who devised this fatalistic logical fallacy while serving under Henry VII) muses in his lyrics:

Turns out that we are shit out of luck

*There are things in the woods*

*That will prey on the things that you love* (Typhoon, 2013c)

This acknowledgement, this truth, that there is evil that would prey on what you love, gives you the moral and ethical permission to pursue power. In fact, you are not only allowed to be powerful, it is your moral duty to seek it, but only if it is channeled towards societal improvement, towards carrying the load that others cannot. Morton continues in the lyrics, singing:

*And they'll come through the fold*

*This is the sound of a wild pack of hungry wolves*

*I won't lie to you, it will be painful*

*It's in your nature to fear what is natural* (Typhoon, 2013c)

When the wolves come (and they will, whether under the guise of the constantly perverted laws enacted to protect them, or as a result of societal collapse and ensuing anarchy), a strong mind connected to a weak body will not protect you or the ones you love from them. A weak spirit may distort you into one yourself, or lead to the fear-driven facilitation of the wanton ransacking the wolves perform. Morton's lyrics continue on, with Typhoon's female backup singer reciting perhaps the most emotionally devastating lyrics in the song:

*“(Here it comes, here it goes*

*This is the sound of our hearts turning into stone*

*We are alone in this together*

*All alone in this together*

*All alone)”* (Typhoon, 2013c)

The reason the wolves have always won throughout history is that each shepherd stands alone in defiance, weakened by their solitude. The wolves, however, form *pacts* in the manipulation of our structures and systems of power, no different than the *packs* formed by the wild animals themselves, uniting their combined power in a way that no singular shepherd can reasonably withstand. Morton seems to understand this, ending the song with the verse:

*I haven't slept in several nights and I'm not tired*

*Who protects the ones I love when I'm asleep?*

*Though there's little I can do, I say a prayer*

*That when the wolves come for their share*

*They'll come for me* (Morton, 2013c)

Morton presents the wolves who would take us all as an inevitability, a predetermined outcome we have no power over other than our moral obligation to

try to protect those we love. I, however, contest this fatalistic position; succumbing to the wolves is not an eventuality. They are organized, dangerous, and ruthless, but they can be resisted, for they lack true strength, and virtuous purpose. Morton's lyrics, while powerful and morally grounded, are misguided. We are not alone in this together, we are just made to think we are.

Up until now, the shepherds have always remained wary of each other. We have been trained to fear those below us who aspire for more, and on our level who covet what we have, so that those above won't be concerned with us. This fear may be true on a personal level, but the destruction of the foundation of what allows us to carve out our plots of land, metaphorically or literally, and exert influence on those around us is being subversively undermined by those above. They are the true threat, the wolves at our doorstep.

This is why the shepherds must unite, in purpose and awareness, because the truly strong, once unified not just in body, mind, and spirit, but unified with each other, possess the possibility of harnessing a power stronger than the wolves will ever be capable of matching. So, you must unite yourself, first, and then seek out others with the strength of self, guided by virtue, withstanding the wolves' onslaught. The strong will exist across all cultures, belief systems, and upbringings, and must be united not in shared vision of future ideals, but shared acknowledgement of immediate threat.

Critically, we cannot beat the wolves unless we match their power, influence, wealth, and ruthlessness. However, with our earned strength, we must avoid being ruthless against each other, or against those unaware of the game; we must only be ruthless to those who have created the system, to those who have rigged the game. The game is rigged, the deck is stacked, but it's all imaginary; as soon as this is realized, one can accrue wealth and power at an alarming rate. Wealth and power cannot be pursued for their own end; they will corrupt, and the very act of pursuing them as the purpose will impede their acquisition, for lack of true purpose. This must be recognized for what it is, and collected as such; an imaginary but necessary fiction necessary to play the game constructed to trap us.

This is why this is not the end; it is just the beginning of the next battle, the battle for sovereignty of your physical body. Now flip the book over, invert it, and start from the beginning. Once you make it back to the middle, your strength will begin the process of unification; not completely, and not permanently, which is why this undertaking is continuous, and its demands all encompassing. Your mind and body are inseparable, and they must be treated as such. Read this again, and accept the truth your future must align to, and then proceed, committed, eternally.





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