

MENTAL TOUGHNESS

FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING



Dr Steve Harris

Foreword by **Chester Williams**

SURVIVING TO THRIVING WITH MENTAL TOUGHNESS

DR STEVE HARRIS

This document serves as a handout for those who attend my presentations and workshops.
I occasionally arrange an edit to clean up the errors I made from updating the content.

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Surviving to Thriving - Mental Toughness

Charles Darwin said that the strongest of the species will survive and the most adaptive will thrive. My research and experience confirm that improved mental toughness will help you to survive and provide a tailwind towards thriving. If you are already thriving, it will keep you moving ahead.

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FOREWORD

By Chester Williams

I met Steve Harris when I was playing for the Springbok rugby team. He provided motivational, teamwork, and mental toughness sessions. Thereafter, he represented the Springbok management on several tours in various roles. Since that first meeting, we developed a close relationship. I value his role as a counsellor for many of my life and career development decisions and his commitment to social justice. I have a special regard for his teaching of mental and emotional skills – known as mental toughness.

I am greatly appreciative of Steve's role in helping me develop my mental toughness. I have had the good fortune of being a black South African rugby role model. However, I developed a concern that my involvement as a Springbok rugby player so early in the genesis of our democracy, and thereafter my marriage to someone who is outside what is generally accepted as my community, was prejudicing me in some rugby circles and exacting a price on my ability to access national coaching jobs. This resulted in my accepting many, expedient, short-term appointments overseas, with long periods away from my family. Through Steve's guidance, I have transcended blaming thoughts and focus on personal responsibility. I currently have an absorbing and exciting coaching appointment at UWC.

With his assistance, I have retained my hope to coach South Africa, and to this end, I am growing my knowledge and skills to position myself favourably for that opportunity. If I am not successful, I will be consoled by the mind-altering experience my learning journey provided. Since our counselling sessions started, I have achieved a certificate and diploma in coaching science followed by a masters' degree in sport management. I am currently contemplating enrolling in a Ph.D.

This book highlights Steve's knowledge and skills in mental toughness. It gives practical examples of how to manage and maximise this important aspect that drives performance. I encourage anyone interested in self-improvement and sport performance to read his book. In addition, his mental toughness input has contributed to my successes and, possibly, more importantly, helped me manage the inevitable disappointments I have had thus far.

In Steve's presentations and workshops, he draws on insight gained through experience, learning, reading, and ongoing research. I like the way he builds the content around the concepts of surviving to thriving and the 'inches' that lead us to success and significance. In this way, he helps people make their lives a bit better than they were.

Finally, at the risk of sounding like Steve's sales department, I highly recommend his novel. I found it a real page-turner. Once I started reading, I could not put it down. As a bonus, I learned so much about South Africa's past from more perspectives.

(RIP DEAR FRIEND) <https://www.stev Harris.co.za/chester-williams-funeral/>

1. INTRODUCTION

When I completed my PhD in mental toughness, I hoped I had captured the full picture. The academic frameworks, the data, and the theories felt rigorous—complete. But I was wrong. I immediately started unlearning and relearning through reading, deep diving into AI, lived experience, strategy sessions, teambuilding, working with sales and customer service, guiding athletes, promoting wellness and navigating high-pressure environments.

Fast-forward several years, and this book has evolved and is now on its 21st edition. It's no longer my thesis about the mental toughness needed to become a Springbok rugby player — it's an up to the moment toolbox. I obsessively weave in insights from my interactions with business leaders, sales professionals, sports teams, and high-performing individuals across the globe. The result? A practical, battle-tested guide that transforms mental toughness from an academic concept into a thriving mindset you can use daily.

In the pages of this living e book, you'll discover:

- The solid, research-based foundations of mental toughness that emerged from my PhD.
- Real-life stories from boardrooms, training grounds, and everyday challenges.
- A framework that transcends surviving—you'll learn to thrive.

Whether you're wanting to: inspire change from getting by to getting better, encourage staff chasing peak performance, help a team striving under pressure, or simply someone ready to elevate their mindset to getting ahead of the game, this journey from surviving to thriving is designed for you.

2. CONTEXT

“What lies behind me, and what lies before me, are small matters compared to what lies within me.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

I currently believe life is mostly tough, therefore our experiences will inevitably be bittersweet – a mixture of pain and pleasure. Most of us find ourselves in situations where how well we manage our struggles determines the difference between surviving and thriving.

Whether we are grappling with difficult survival demands or striving for excellence, we encounter challenges such as relationship troubles, financial strain, unhealthy conflict, debilitating injuries or a range of physical and mental health issues. These trials often feel like echoes of the myth of Sisyphus, the legendary king of Corinth who was condemned by Zeus to an eternity of pushing a boulder uphill, only to see it roll back each time. Many of us experience this relentless cycle. It triggers instinctive blaming and a sense of futility, which traps us in survival mode and limits our capacity to act in ways that lead to thriving.

To cope, most people turn to culture, religion, spiritual practices, and consult professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists, or traditional healers. I am not suggesting we abandon any of these. Rather, I propose that we strengthen our existing ways by adding more mental toughness—not just to survive, but to thrive.

On the side of survival, it is evident that many are caught—often through bad luck—in circumstances that demand day-to-day, even moment-to-moment endurance. I argue that life feels even tougher when we feel we lack the resources to cope. That is why, in this book, I advocate for enhancing our mental toughness. With improved mental toughness as part of your psychological makeup, you may not be able to change life itself, but you can transform how you perceive it and respond to it. You may still bend under pressure, but you will rarely break.

Mental Toughness and Wellness: A Synergy

Drawing from my experience, my reading, and my PhD research on the mental toughness of Springbok rugby players, I have identified a strong and complementary relationship between mental toughness and wellness. As we enhance both of these capacities and align them, doors of possibility open, performance levels improve, experiences of joy become more frequent, and we become more resilient under the weight of our struggles. As a result, I have dedicated the final chapter to the subject of wellness.

My affinity for sport is lifelong, and I often use sports examples to explore ideas around performance improvement. One notion I find particularly fascinating is what rugby commentators call the "dark art" of scrumming—a term often used to describe the subtle, unseen techniques and tactics forwards use to gain an advantage. My experience suggests these "dark arts" exist across many skill sets, often involving a great deal of cunning, precision, and tacit knowledge.

Walking the Talk

Like everyone, I have had my share of adversity. From competing in sport at a high level to navigating the pressures of leading a college in an increasingly demanding environment, and

now, as I age, facing the growing awareness of my own health's fragility. While mental toughness helped me thrive in sport, it has also been crucial in helping me adapt to life's broader challenges.

Presenting my experiences, as a public speaker, has not always been smooth sailing. After my first paid talk on mental toughness, an audience member approached me and said, "That was nice." I replied with attempted humour, "Nice? Nice is a cup of tea." He responded sharply: "Yes, but you may not be everyone's cup of tea. You could miss the mark or offend some audience members."

Since that day, I've become acutely aware that audiences are polarised. At times it feels like people are competing in what I call the Outrage Olympics. On the extreme left, I encounter woke warriors, poised to react if they detect even a hint of bias around race, gender, or culture. Their mantra: "They can't be trusted; therefore, if we protest it is justified."

On the opposite right, I face conspiracy crusaders, who grow suspicious the moment I reference institutions like the WEF, COP, or WHO. Their mantra: "They are the enemy because their institutions are corrupt. If we break laws, it is justified."

In response, the mental toughness lesson for me is to accept that some audience members hold polarized opinions. This provides me with an opportunity for uncomfortable listening. At times even allow my views to evolve. Thus, I have concluded to hold my opinions and biases loosely. I strive to listen to multiple perspectives, to remain flexible in my approach, and to avoid dehumanising anyone, even when using humour. Humour remains one of my favourite tools, but it must always be used with sensitivity.

Audience feedback has confirmed that stories, particularly behind-the-scenes accounts of Springbok rugby or my international surf lifesaving experiences, can captivate listeners. However, I've also learned to walk a fine line between illuminating anecdotes and oversharing. Today, I draw more on my academic research, weaving it together with personal insights to strengthen the impact of my content.

The Power of Diverse Learning

As our world evolves, so too must our worldview. I learn from a wide variety of sources—books, podcasts, and talks. One example is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," which explores how reducing people or cultures to a single narrative can lead to misunderstanding. This insight aligns perfectly with the principles of mental toughness, which require us to see multiple perspectives, embrace diversity, and challenge our assumptions.

Woody Allen once said, "Eighty percent of success is showing up." For me, this quote underscores the importance of presence—physically, mentally, and emotionally. Failing to show up means forfeiting the chance to shape outcomes. If you're absent, decisions are made without your input. Opportunities pass you by.

Al Capone put it even more starkly: "You're either at the table or on the menu." This speaks to life's power dynamics—those who engage have influence, while those who don't risk being sidelined. Showing up, then, is about more than being physically present. It means being engaged, focused, and prepared to make a meaningful contribution.

Whether it's a business meeting or a romantic relationship, did you really show up? Or did you treat the moment like a passing parade? Remember: life won't repeat itself. You can't store experiences. They must be lived.

Gaining Insight: The Depth of Knowing

Over the years, I've had the privilege of connecting with many leaders in sport science. One such person was the late Professor Paul Avis from the University of the Western Cape. Initially, our discussions were professional, but we soon discovered a shared interest in mental toughness. Paul, who had played tennis against legends like John McEnroe, challenged me deeply.

"How did you come to know what you know?" he asked. Then he followed up with a more penetrating question: "How will you get to know what you don't know—since you don't know what you don't know?"

He encouraged me to deepen my understanding by pursuing a PhD. "If you already knew everything, you wouldn't need to study," he said, half in jest. "And when you do graduate, you may be considered an expert. Even then, there will still be questions that cannot be answered—but more importantly, there should be no answers that cannot be questioned."

I took his advice, enrolled and completed my doctorate. While I felt more informed, I remained hesitant about calling myself an expert. Paul had stressed the importance of discernment, especially in a world where information is often filtered through ideological or corporate agendas. Books like "Bad Science" and "Bad Pharma" by Dr Ben Goldacre further opened my eyes to this reality.

One expert I greatly admired is Professor Tim Noakes. In the world of sport science, Noakes revolutionised thinking by suggesting that fatigue is often more mental than physical. He argued that our perception of exhaustion might be a safety mechanism—our brain's way of protecting us, rather than a true indicator of our physical limits.

Rethinking Effort and Improvement

Humans carry with them ancient instincts—useful in times of immediate danger but sometimes restrictive in the modern world. Neil deGrasse Tyson calls this "neurological baggage." I refer to it as "mind capture." To truly thrive, we must sometimes override these inherited inclinations.

Stephen Covey's "Sharpen the Saw" story in *the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is about continuous self-improvement. But sometimes, we need more than sharper tools. Sometimes

we need a complete paradigm shift. Maybe it's not about cutting trees faster (his story to illustrate Sharpen the saw). Maybe it's about planting new ones.

Darwin's theory of natural selection suggests that survival does not simply favour the strongest or the smartest, but those most adaptable to change. While this popular phrasing from *On the Origin of Species* isn't verbatim, it captures the spirit of Darwin's insights. Adaptability—not brute strength or pure intellect—is the key to enduring and thriving. The same holds true in business, relationships, and personal development.

Pause and Introspect

Reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic. The world saw everything from panic and grief to widespread misinformation and conspiracy theories. Could enhanced mental resilience have helped us navigate that storm better?

Did we allow emotions and misinformation to cloud our judgment? In the future, can we reframe our trials as opportunities for growth? Can we emerge from hardship with stronger values, deeper empathy, and renewed purpose?

Adversity can be a crucible for change. It invites us to let go of outdated beliefs and to cultivate fresh thinking. It can inspire new passions, strategic alliances, and a reinvigorated commitment to positive change. Mental toughness is not just the bridge from surviving to thriving, it is the forge.

Everyone claims they want to thrive, but few take the steps needed. Many stay stuck in cycles of blame and repetition, like Sisyphus pushing his boulder. But then there are others, the resurgent ones, who recalibrate and rebuild. They emerge stronger and more fulfilled.

Take the story of *The Flight of the Phoenix*. Stranded in the Sahara Desert after a plane crash, the survivors rebuilt an aircraft from the wreckage and flew to safety. Have you had a Phoenix moment? Have you risen from adversity, wiser and more resilient?

Thriving: Success or Significance?

We could frame success and significance as opposing goals. But why not pursue both?

Success is usually about achieving goals, commonly defined by revenue, growth, market share, qualifications, or awards. Significance, on the other hand, goes deeper. It's about *impact*—on others, on society, on future generations.

Success is when you add value to yourself.

Significance is when you add value to others.

Those who pursue significance often care more about outcome than income. They focus on empathy, altruism, and solving real problems.

Think of effective altruists—people who look after themselves while also advancing causes bigger than themselves. They aim for transformation, not just generosity.

The road to thriving involves engaging with big issues—from climate change to social justice. Consider Boyan Slat, who founded The Ocean Cleanup, or José Andrés, whose

World Central Kitchen delivers millions of meals in disaster zones. These individuals embody the blend of success and significance.

So, where do you stand? Are you waiting for the metaphoric sword of Damocles to fall—or are you seizing each day with calm determination, committed to making a difference in your life and in the lives of others?

3. COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES

Having an edge will likely lead to a more joyful and meaningful life. It's obvious that in competitive sport having competitive advantages helps you succeed. These advantages often stem from attributes that set you apart — sometimes natural, often developed. But with distinction comes challenge. Standing out can provoke admiration or discomfort. Others may perceive your uniqueness as superiority or feel threatened by it. Being ahead of the pack can feel both exhilarating and isolating. As the saying goes, “the tallest trees face the strongest winds.” Still, would you rather adapt to your distinctiveness, or wrestle with a fear of standing out?

I believe that mental toughness is one of the most potent differentiators that can lead to sustainability and if desired on to success. Improved mental toughness enhances resilience, self-leadership, and purpose, helping you survive or thrive.

A Case for Distinction: Lewis Pugh

Lewis Pugh's transformation into the “human polar bear” captures the essence of a competitive edge that is distinctive and used for good. His extraordinary tolerance to frigid waters earned him global recognition—not only as an elite endurance swimmer but also as a passionate environmentalist. His journey began at the Clifton Surf Lifesaving Club, where discipline and dedication set him apart. He didn't just swim—he made a statement. Pugh's example shows how standing out can inspire and serve a purpose greater than self.

However, not all attempts at distinction are celebrated. During Euro 2016, English football fans and players made headlines for their poor conduct—an example of standing out for the wrong reasons. Contrast that with their dignified performance in the 2018 FIFA World Cup and the 2019 Cricket World Cup, and the lesson is clear: it's not just about being noticed, it's about what you're noticed for.

Marginal Gains: The 1% Advantage

The British cycling team's surge under Sir Dave Brailsford is a powerful example of the impact of marginal gains. Before 2012, they had never won the Tour de France.

Brailsford's revolutionary approach? Aim for a 1% improvement in everything—nutrition, gear, technique, sleep, even hand-washing habits. These small, consistent gains accumulated into dominant results.

Ross Tucker, a leading sports scientist, points out that at elite levels, the difference between gold and fourth place can be fractions of a second—tiny margins that yield life-changing outcomes. Al Pacino's famous “Inches” speech in *Any Given Sunday* drives the same point home: success lies in clawing for every inch.

The 2024 Paris Olympics proved this yet again. Noah Lyles won the 100-metre gold by just 0.056 seconds—less time than a blink. That sliver of time crowned him the fastest man on Earth. These micro-moments reflect a broader truth: consistent, incremental improvement is the engine of excellence.

Creating Your Own Ocean

Competitive advantage starts with strategy. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne's *Blue Ocean Strategy* offer a way to move beyond conventional strategy.

Conventional strategy keeps you in the game—chasing incremental returns and reacting to your current context. Crafting a Blue Ocean strategy - refocusing the lens: you shape a better future, stepping ahead of rivals, and creating space where competition matters less. Essentially you intensify existing advantages and create new ones. The question is are you going to shape the future or be shaped by the future?

Here are the directions you can pursue to achieve this:

1. **Develop world class staff; Guarantee / Certify products; Diversify markets; Lower costs; lift efficiency; Deep dive into technology and AI.**
2. **Deliver superior client experience – forging emotional bonds, turning customers into communities.**
3. **Foster high performance teamwork by collaborating with the entire stakeholder group – building trust and reputation.**

This approach gains power when you treat staff as intrapreneurs—encouraging them to design new advantages that stretch beyond current reach. That mindset drives faster evolution and shapes a stronger future.

Most organisations compete in Red Oceans—crowded markets where rivals fight over the same demand with cutthroat tactics. Blue Oceans are different: demand is created, not fought over, and competition fades into the background.

At the heart of the Blue Ocean Strategy lies the **Four Actions Framework**. It challenges you to ask:

- **Eliminate** – What factors should we drop that the industry has long competed on?
- **Reduce** – What should be cut below industry standard?
- **Raise** – What should be raised well above standard?
- **Create** – What new factors should we offer that the industry has never seen?

These questions ignite innovation and uncover opportunities others haven't noticed—or haven't dared to pursue.

Takeaway

Whether it's marginal gains or blue ocean thinking, the goal is the same: craft your edge. Make your mark for the right reasons. Standout by inspiring rather than intimidating. And if you want to sustain your success, develop your mental toughness—it's your secret weapon in the pursuit of excellence.

4. CULTURE

We all operate within a context. This context includes your social environment which broadly speaking, defines your personal culture. In addition, your workplace has a culture which may, or may not, align with your personal culture. I find the more comfortable you are with aligning your personal culture with the work culture the more likely both you and the organization is able to survive and thrive.

A crucial introspective question for examining culture is: "Is our culture exclusively a representation of our past, or is it also a beacon for our future?" Renowned spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle posits, "If you live in one culture for the first 20 years of your life, you become conditioned without realizing it." Applied to organizations, this underscores the importance of assessing whether our culture serves our envisioned future or is merely a vestige of the past.

I feel organization culture feeds into our meaning and shared purpose. It is the values and behaviours that characterise how we interact, the way we get things done and how we feel about the workplace. It's the organization's operating system—an underlying code that dictates day-to-day functioning. This culture originates from a mixture of three main sources: cultural reproduction, personal cultures and leadership.

Cultural reproduction takes place through induction training that introduces new members to the established ways.

Personal cultures are rooted in individual backgrounds, traditions, norms and beliefs. Personal culture is the identity each member brings to the organization.

Leadership blends these personal cultures with the organization's strategy. This synergy fosters inclusion and fuels innovation. However, it requires a delicate balance; employee's personal cultures should not dominate the organization, nor should they feel, they must forsake their identity to embrace the organizational culture.

Culture vs. Strategy: The Energy-Sapping Power Play in Organizations

The phrase "Culture eats strategy for breakfast," attributed to management guru Peter Drucker, captures a profound truth about organizational dynamics. Many strategic plans, crafted meticulously in boardrooms, often fail to permeate the broader organizational fabric. The critical question is: why do even the most well-designed strategies falter? Very often the answer lies in organizational culture. If the cultural milieu does not complement or support the strategy, its successful implementation remains elusive.

Dr Gabor Mate observes, "The road to hell is not paved with good intentions, it is paved with a lack of intention or poor execution." The strategic plan represents the organization's aspirational intent and significantly contributes to its culture. Most organizations aim for a high-performance culture, delineating this through mission statements, visions, and core values. However, challenges arise when these intentions remain mere words, failing to

resonate with stakeholders due to a lack of participation or insufficient communication. As posited in "The Score Takes Care of Itself: My Philosophy of Leadership" by Bill Walsh, a high-performance culture is foundational, not consequential. True champions internalize a culture of excellence even before tasting victory.

Pitfalls in Nurturing Culture

The discord between culture and strategy often stems from common oversights in cultural management:

1. Lack of inclusivity in strategy formulation.
2. Disparities in organizational wealth distribution, as indicated by the Gini coefficient.
3. Misalignment with the strategic vision among employees.
4. Insufficient induction and training to bridge the culture-strategy gap.
5. Leadership does not exemplify the desired culture.
6. Inadequate emphasis on team cohesion.
7. Mishandling internal conflicts.

The ultimate test for any organization is its adaptability and inclusivity. Reflect on whether the organizational culture is universally understood, embraced, and whether it amplifies collective joy. When hiring, it's crucial to balance preserving organizational ethos with infusing new perspectives that mirror societal diversity. Fareed Zakaria, in "Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World," eloquently captures the essence of our times: "To succeed in this world, we will have to learn to manage diversity and gain strength from it rather than feel threatened by it" (Zakaria, 2020). As organizations navigate the evolving landscape, understanding and embracing the symbiotic relationship between culture and strategy will be paramount.

5. ALIGN PERSONAL STRATEGY WITH ORGANIZATION STRATEGY

The Rationale for Organizational Strategic Planning: Charting a Path to Blue Oceans.

To explore uncharted waters or maintain a competitive advantage within a position in existing blue oceans, an effective strategic plan is paramount. Such a plan should:

1. **Prioritize National Agendas:** The organizational direction should align with the broader national objectives and goals.
2. **Incorporate Stakeholder Perspectives:** Stakeholder needs and challenges must be addressed and integrated. It ensures the organization remains relevant and provides value.
3. **Foster Organizational Culture:** Through shared vision and objectives, staff should feel unified, promoting an intrinsic organizational culture.
4. **Pursue Both Success and Significance:** Success denotes achieving organizational goals, while significance relates to its broader societal impact.
5. **Navigate VUCA Challenges:** A strategic plan must provide a framework to manage volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.
6. **Preserve Established Value:** Uphold existing strengths, differentiators, and value propositions.
7. **Innovate and Disrupt:** Craft new differentiators and propositions that can disrupt the status quo, turning impossibilities into realities and diversifying income streams.

An organization's strategic plan is more than just a roadmap. It's a living document, evolving with the internal and external environment, guiding decision-making processes. Staff contributions in formulating annual goals promote momentum, ensuring that the vision remains actionable and achievable.

Strategic planning becomes more effective when there is profound buy-in from staff and stakeholders. This not only drives passion but also encourages adaptability during tumultuous times.

Embracing Existing and Prospective Markets

- **Retaining Existing Markets:** Enhancing offerings with superior value, optimizing costs, and consistently outperforming competitors are pivotal.
- **Forging New Markets:** Identifying gaps and reasons why certain demographics remain non-customers can pave the way for innovative solutions. Challenging prevailing organizational paradigms is essential to adapt and cater to new market demands.

Resilience-building is essential to withstand unexpected external shifts and manage planned organizational transformations.

A comprehensive strategic plan typically encompasses:

1. Mandate and Purpose
2. Mission Statement and Broader ESG Relevance
3. Vision and Future Aspirations (including creating new value)
4. Values and Their Contemporary Relevance
5. Stakeholder Expectations
6. External Analysis (PESTEL)
7. Internal Analysis (SWOT)
8. Blue Ocean Strategy Matrix
9. Elevator pitch
10. Key differentiators
11. Operational model
12. Risk assessment
13. Goals
14. Operational Plans
15. Monitoring and Review Mechanisms

Blending Personal and Organizational Plans

Personal and organizational aspirations must blend. It's unwise to solely blame external factors for individual setbacks. Personal aspirations often override organizational strategies in dictating success trajectories. Therefore, aligning personal goals with organizational strategies is pivotal.

For employees, comprehending and contributing to the organization's strategic plan offers a dual benefit: It aligns individual aspirations with organizational objectives and ensures value addition to the collective mission.

However, occasional discord between personal and organizational plans is natural. Addressing these early, through constructive dialogues with superiors, can mitigate potential performance impacts.

Your Personal Strategy Blueprint

Life doesn't operate in isolated compartments. A clear alignment between personal aspirations and professional roles fosters effectiveness, resilience, and mental fortitude. At times, compartmentalizing specific life segments can mitigate stress. As Zig Ziglar aptly put

it, "Of course, motivation is not permanent. But then, neither is bathing; but it is something you should do on a regular basis."

Crafting a personal strategic plan parallels an organizational one, encompassing:

1. Vision for Self (including creating new value)
2. Personal Values and their Evolution
3. External Influences (PESTEL)
4. Self-assessment (SWOT)
5. Stakeholder Expectations in Personal Life
6. Blue Ocean Strategy for Personal Growth
7. Risk Evaluation and Mitigation
8. Defined Goals (SMART)
9. Personal Budgeting
10. Immediate Action Steps
11. Backup Plans and Side Hustles

Remember, while organizational strategic planning guides collective progress, personal planning is the compass guiding individual journeys. Both are integral to holistic growth and success.

6. MENTAL TOUGHNESS DEFINED

The Potential of the Mind

The sentiment captured by Lettie Cowman's quote, "Strong minds suffer without complaining; weak minds complain without suffering," serves as an apt reminder of the power and significance of mental resilience. Although the quote may seem harsh, it underscores the immense potential that resides in our minds.

The mind is claimed to be a beacon of potential. Cultivating mental toughness is akin to adding to our capacity to set and achieve intentions including being able to sustain the pain of overcoming struggles and defeatist beliefs. It aids us in maintaining emotional equilibrium, navigating self-destructive thoughts, and confronting fears. It also nudges us towards understanding consensus reality, being open-minded, less judgmental, more inclusive, fair and solution oriented.

Mental toughness isn't just about enduring hardships. It's about not being trapped in the negatives of past, seeing things differently and possibly transforming barriers into stepping stones. You could say with improved mental toughness you are more likely to overcome defeatist beliefs; mental toughness turns what seemed to be improbable into seeming to be probable, what seemed to be implausible into seeming to be plausible, and what seemed to be impossible into seeming to be possible.

Mental toughness is more than just being steadfast in adversity. It is the art of channelling one's mind, ensuring distractions don't deplete our energies. It empowers us to offer our optimal performance, irrespective of internal or external circumstances, sculpting us into our best selves. I am suggesting that you incrementally (inch by inch) improve the components of mental toughness as defined in this document.

Introduction to the seven key pillars of mental toughness

1. Concentration

Mental toughness starts with reflecting why you are doing what you do. Are you passionate about this activity? The next step is a laser-sharp focus on a vision that pursues excellence and resonates with your passion. It's structured through planning and sustained by preparation. We don't just work hard, we work with purpose, blocking out distractions and zoning in on what really matters.

2. Controlled Aggression

This is fire in the belly, ice in the brain – it's using divine discontent to drive improvement. It's bold energy to execute, push boundaries and disrupt with just enough restraint to stay strategic. Controlled aggression transforms vision into action, raises existing competitive advantages and creates new ones.

3. Composure

In chaos, the mentally tough have calm determination to get things done. They manage pressure with poise, avoid knee-jerk reactions, and don't freeze in uncertainty. Composure is about not acting too fast nor too slow, holding the line - steady, sharp, and clear-minded, especially when others panic.

4. Confidence

Supreme confidence unlocks the courage to become the main actor in the decisive scenes of your existence—it's self-belief to voice your opinions, contribute regularly and embrace change. It is built on preparation, experience, and perspective. It unlocks situational leadership, grows trust and high-performance teamwork starting with understanding your instinct to choose collaboration.

5. Calculated Risk-Taking

Mental toughness means reaching beyond your grasp, breaking barriers and creating new ways of working—but with eyes wide open. You dare, innovate, and improvise, learning from each failure without fear. You don't chase reckless bets—you make bold, informed moves.

6. Competence

Competence grows into a rare attribute when we uncover the drivers to our behaviours. Therefore, we need a lifelong cycle of learning, unlearning and relearning. Most people have a history of learning but many struggle with unlearning that which is counter-productive and trapping us in the past. To unlearn we need to embrace research and not settle for searches that reinforce our confirmation. To relearn we must adopt and adapt technology (like AI) that leads to better solutions.

7. Commitment

This is grit in motion. Not playing in a blame game nor making excuses. No victim mindset. Just relentless responsibility and accountability for your journey. When the going gets tough, commitment drives you to dig deeper, rise again, and use setbacks to motivate new differentiators that enable a comeback story.

Mental toughness isn't fixed—it's forged like steel.

It's not just about surviving—it's about thriving.

Mantra: *I can lead a fulfilled life despite pain and loss—I can get better, not just get by.*

Mastering Mental Toughness

Mental toughness is akin to forging steel—each element refines and strengthens the whole. When you acquire the skills and behaviours essential for each component of mental toughness, you are able to craft a superior version of yourself. This transformation enables a harmonious interaction between a self-authored mindset and the societal influences that surround you.

Such metamorphosis not only allows redemption from previous inertia and performance missteps but sets you on a path to present-day and future excellence and joy.

The relationship between our mind and body is deeply intertwined—each influencing the other. Consider how a physical ailment can overshadow mental clarity, or how emotional distress can manifest in physical symptoms. Striving for excellence involves acknowledging this symbiotic relationship and consistently refining both our inherent attributes and acquired skills.

Imagine performance over time as a bell curve. To truly excel, one must anticipate and try to act before the curve peaks then starts to decline. This proactive approach, though initially leading to a short-term performance dip due to new learnings, ultimately sets a trajectory for prolonged, enhanced outcomes. Delayed actions or complacency can, conversely, precipitate a steeper decline. The key question: Are you navigating ahead of the curve?

Visualize mental resilience through the poetic interplay of fire and ice. Here, fiery determination meets the iciness of strategic patience. These seemingly conflicting forces can, when balanced, coalesce into a formidable power. But if unchecked, their opposition can diminish their potency—much like fire melting ice or ice quenching flames.

The discourse on mental toughness is nuanced, far from a binary of strength versus weakness. Substantial evidence underscores its pivotal role in performance optimization. Eschewing narrow viewpoints and championing a multi-faceted, evidence-backed stance reveals the true depth and breadth of mental toughness.

7. CONCENTRATION

"Concentration is the lifeblood of excellence."

Jack Nicklaus

Leaders aim to co-opt their team in a shared vision and steer them towards an improved, new value future, highlighting essential results, offering guidance on what merits attention, tracking progress, and suggesting improvements. To achieve this, they aim to build trust, ignite passion, champion transformations to herald innovation, engage in discussions about challenges, carry out performance assessments and deploy compelling reward structures.

Despite these efforts, it's not uncommon to hear grievances like: "We're unclear about the company's direction; There's a communication void; Changes are imposed without our input; Rewards are scant and I'm uncertain about my future here."

Why do such objections persist even when organizations seemingly have mechanisms to address them? Could it be that external 'noise' diverts our attention, muffling critical leadership messages? Or do we, influenced by societal conditioning, conveniently lay blame on entities like management, scientists, or governments?

Delve into what concentration means

It's a commitment driven by passion, integrating conditional optimism, strategy, preparation, and action. The key aspects are:

1. Passion drives the design of your strategy and provides the ability to forge through difficulties.
2. Your strategy goes beyond staying in the game, it aims to put you ahead of the game.
3. The strategy raises your existing advantages and creates new advantages.
4. It benchmarks best competitors and best practices. This mean you don't simply become an inferior copy of a superior model – to some extent you are future proofing.
5. The strategy follows trends and anticipates as well as shapes trends.
6. Your strategy adds achieving significance in addition to success.
7. Your preparation exceeds that of your opposition.
8. At a personal level self-leadership drives time management.

Your concentration's mantra is - I cultivate energy reserves and prevent energy drains.

Before I expand on the above list, I want to comment on the shock that I believe drove an SA Rugby strategy to shape trends towards more winning – in particular winning world cups. You probably recall on Saturday the 16th of September 2017 the All Blacks beat the Springboks 57 to nil. I guess that was the wake-up call to change the Springbok's strategy play-book. It was serious enough for the rugby authorities to introduce a new selection strategy that makes South African players playing in any country eligible for selection to the Springbok team. Now the coach had many more players to select from – and they were good players who had gained

international experience. An additional benefit to more winning was it created emotional bonds in a revived Springbok support community.

It starts with passion

Steve Jobs said, "The key to professional fulfilment is pursuing work that resonates with your heart." If you haven't discovered this yet, keep searching.

The level at which you are willing to sacrifice to achieve an outcome reflects your level of passion. Confucius offered this perspective: "Choose a job you are passionate about, and you won't work a single day".

Passion is the heartbeat of concentration. It's the 'why' that gives meaning and drives us through our difficulties towards achievement. Without it, survival might become our best-case scenario and thriving remains elusive.

Reflecting on my personal journey, starting at the end of 1971 and after my first university stint, I received call up papers for the South African Defence Force – this presented a moral quandary. The government's reasons for a war seemed dubious to me and driven by their political party's underlying racial prejudices. I initially tried, ineffectively, to avoid serving, but eventually and reluctantly, to avoid a prison sentence, I complied, choosing a path of conscription over principled resistance, unlike the example of iconic figure, Muhammad Ali, in the USA where his reaction to being drafted into the U.S. military during the Vietnam War was one of defiance and principle. Citing his faith as a Nation of Islam follower, Ali refused to serve, famously stating, *"I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong."* His decision led to widespread controversy, costing him his heavyweight boxing title, a hefty fine, and a ban from boxing for several years. Ali's stance, however, cemented his legacy as a champion not just in sports but in social justice, inspiring others to stand firm for their beliefs despite significant personal sacrifices.

By the early 90s, ANC icon, Nelson Mandela's, image transitioned from a euro centric perception of villain to a hero, representing unity for South Africa. His inspired many South African to choose passion for a rainbow nation with a clarion call for all South Africans to reinvent their minds with dignity and decency so that we unite not fight, where we don't focus on berating our past but work on shaping a better future.

Unfortunately, his influence was reasonably short-lived, as South Africa's promise tarnished with corruption coinciding with Mandela's relinquishing power. My view then and still is, rather than waiting for another Mandela-like saviour, the onus is on all of us to champion dignity and dignity in our narratives, fuelled by passion and fairness.

I recently listened to Mo Gawdat, who previously served as chief business officer for Google X and is the author of the books *Solve for Happy* and *Scary Smart*, interviewed by Steven Bartlett (4th August 2025) and was struck by the statistic that the governments of the world in 2024 spent 2,7 trillion million dollars on weapons and that it would take an investment of 40

billion dollars to eradicate global hunger. Mandela would turn in his grave to realise that fear, greed and egos still drive hunger and premature deaths of our children.

Back to passion – it often tops the list of priorities for many, but it still needs to be paired with decisive action.

Sadly, many may find their careers devoid of passion, and merely a means to an end.

But I digress – back to passion. The journey to mental resilience begins with aligning work with passion. Some may have lost their initial passion, but it's never too late to rediscover it. Beliefs and external factors can quash passion, pushing people from eager anticipation to weary indifference.

Your passion forms the bedrock of your purpose. Unless you have clarity about your desires and destination, the journey remains undefined. As Lewis Carroll illustrated through Alice's conversation with the Cheshire cat, without a destination in mind, any path will do. It's vital to craft a roadmap aligned with your passion, as it not only drives excellence but might also enhance mental longevity.

Remember, purpose infused with passion is more powerful. Without it, you're probably drifting, like an untethered balloon, vulnerable to life's capricious winds. With it, you can chart a course to your chosen horizon.

If you find yourself disconnected from your passion, perhaps it's time to recalibrate. Understandably, life can sometimes obscure that initial zeal with challenges and setbacks, transforming our eager yearnings into monotonous yawns or despair.

However, the essence of mental toughness lies in rekindling that passion. As we navigate our life, disappointments and wounds can dim our ardour, placing us on a spectrum ranging from obliviousness to passionate deficit, to a deep awareness of this loss. Sometimes, this void extends into realms of mental illness, manifesting as reactive blaming, explosive anger, extreme anxiety, or deep-seated depression.

Take Martin Luther King Jr., a beacon of unwavering passion. His monumental "I have a dream" speech, on August 28, 1963, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a pivotal event in the American civil rights movement. Speaking from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King addressed a crowd of over 250,000 people, calling for an end to racism, segregation, and economic inequality. Set against the backdrop of widespread racial injustice and the struggle for civil rights, his speech articulated a vision of equality and harmony, grounded in the principles of justice and the American dream, inspiring hope and mobilizing support for civil rights legislation. He epitomized the alchemy of converting passion into purpose, challenging individuals to sculpt their realities based on their dreams of inclusion rather than being enslaved by past limitations.

Tech magnate Michael Dell's invitation to his team to "peer around corners" echoes this sentiment. The context of this statement lies in the emphasis on visionary leadership and the importance of forward-thinking in the face of challenges. Michael Dell's invitation reflects a

mindset of anticipating future trends, opportunities, and threats before they fully materialize—a critical skill in the fast-evolving tech industry.

Similarly, Steve Jobs' advice about not being "tethered by fear in the shadow of mortality" underscores the need for courage and bold decision-making, urging individuals to focus on what truly matters rather than being constrained by fear of failure or life's impermanence. Both sentiments encourage innovation, resilience, and the pursuit of meaningful work in uncertain times.

Passion emanates an innate drive to vigorously defend and chase after dreams. Such passion doesn't merely remain an abstract concept; it requires translation into tangible actions. Reflect on your current life trajectory: Are you in inertia or caught in a relentless cycle of repetitive drudgery, with aspirations languishing in the realm of "what ifs"?

Alice's encounter with the Cheshire cat in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland offered a poignant reflection on purpose and direction. If one lacks clarity on their destination, any path is as good as none. Hence, the importance of meticulous planning cannot be understated – crafting a clear, passion-driven roadmap that provides direction and imbues life with purpose.

Dr. Sanjay Gupta, a renowned neurosurgeon and health expert, emphasizes that having a sense of purpose can significantly impact brain health. Research suggests that a strong sense of purpose not only improves overall mental well-being but may also act as a protective factor against cognitive decline as we age. This highlights the connection between psychological resilience and long-term cognitive functioning.

Optimism: Fuelling the Future with Hope

I have concluded that Mental toughness transforms hope from a mood to a method, and the method is in the seven steps.

With passion as a foundation, optimism has a good change of following. For those wrestling with a bleaker worldview, heed Winston Churchill's wisdom on optimism. He underscores its power as a practical approach to navigating challenges. By choosing to focus on opportunities rather than obstacles, optimism becomes a tool for resilience and problem-solving. Churchill's leadership during World War II exemplified this mindset; his ability to inspire hope amidst adversity turned optimism into a strategy that galvanized nations. In modern contexts, embracing optimism fosters creativity, motivates teams, and sustains momentum even in the face of setbacks, proving that a positive outlook is not naive but often the most effective path forward.

Such sentiments are mirrored in Toby Ord's discussions in *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity* remind us that humanity's potential is vast and worth protecting. By broadening our perspectives—philosophically, temporally, and practically—we can not only mitigate risks but also work toward a future of extraordinary meaning and flourishing.

Yet, this optimism should be strategic. Simply hoping for brighter days won't cut it. I advocate for conditional optimism forged in mental toughness: not merely expecting things to improve

but actively creating conducive environments for progress. This outlook neither assumes relentless positivity nor gives in to unwarranted pessimism. Instead, it harnesses both ends of the spectrum for a more harmonized, approach to life.

A forward-focused vision is invaluable. Drawing inspiration from successful entrepreneurs like Elon Musk and thought leaders like Yuval Harari, we recognize the need to constantly innovate and create possibilities beyond our current horizons.

Yet, it's essential to anticipate potential roadblocks. While planning for success, ensure that you're also equipped to handle unforeseen disruptions. Passion, conditional optimism, and effective planning undoubtedly elevate the likelihood of success. However, remember that your goals may intersect with others or be influenced by unpredictable events. This intricate dance demands mental agility and resilience.

Future projections, whether in life or business, are fraught with uncertainties. Yet, these uncertainties needn't be a source of perpetual anxiety. Engage in a systematic process that: envisions a brighter future, learn from past disappointments, and lay down actionable steps. Such an approach not only heightens anticipation for the future but significantly curtails apprehensions.

While many swear by the reliability of their gut feelings, it's essential to differentiate between raw, primitive instincts and more refined, informed intuitions. Rather than blindly following a knee-jerk reaction, strive to develop an *intelligence instinct*—a more evolved sense of judgment shaped by intuition but grounded in diverse perspectives, meticulous research, ethical principles, and a clear grasp of current realities. By anchoring your instincts in wisdom and knowledge, this refined approach offers a more reliable and thoughtful alternative to impulsive gut reactions.

The Power of Planning

When you integrate a planning process into your life and business, you find a harmony between the logicity of plans, societal conditioning, and your innate instincts. This process helps delineate your priorities, allowing you to discern which matters deserve your attention and defence, and which can be dismissed, such as diversions that veer you off your intended path. Consequently, you cultivate the skill to evaluate the instinctual urges that vie for your attention. Armed with this knowledge, you can still listen to your instincts, but with better judgment.

However, while creating your blueprint, note that it is time related and often needs rejuvenating or reinvention. Overly focusing on future plans at the expense of being present can be detrimental, similarly, being ensnared and immobilized by past regrets or dogma is disadvantageous. It's essential to stay engaged and present, even as you sketch your future. The current moment is your immediate reality (however quickly it is gone), and it is a moment which may not coincide with your aspirations.

My belief is that our strategy should anticipate and craft trends as well as follow them, we should bench mark best competitors as well as best practices to create ways of raising existing

value and creating new value. In rugby, Red Ocean thinking, benchmarks the *best competitors* - implying copying what top teams (like New Zealand or South Africa) have done successfully in the past—a reactive mindset. In this scenario you are in danger of becoming an inferior copy of a superior model.

In Blue Ocean thinking, benchmarking *best practices* means looking at what currently works best across disciplines or innovators—even if it's emerging or disruptive. The French rugby team's tactic of reducing rucks and increasing ruck speed thus keeping the ball alive fits this notion. It's a best practice not tied to tradition, but to improved outcomes: faster ball movement, more continuity, equals more tries.

Consider the analogy of an athletics event. If your goal is to achieve a personal best in a marathon, you'll naturally prepare for the race's unique challenges. But, if a formidable competitor begins the race at an unexpected speed, and you impulsively try to match their pace, you may tire quickly, with your goal appearing increasingly elusive. Such hasty reactions, dictated by misplaced attention, can ruin your strategy.

The sport of cricket mirrors this sentiment. Though your strategy may be to win and score enough runs to outpace the opposition, they will deploy tactics to divert your attention and hinder your progress. To succeed, you must remain wholly present, playing each delivery on its merit, all the while navigating distractions from competitors and onlookers.

I recall when Peter de Villiers took the helm as Springbok rugby coach. He aimed to evolve the Springbok team's traditional approach by adding creativity and a broader skill set. I facilitated his initial planning session with the team. After an intensive strategy discussion, de Villiers articulated a vision of holistic rugby, emphasizing individual responsibility for creative plays, informed decision-making, and innovation. However, steering a new direction in the face of long-standing traditions proved challenging, and external pressures eventually led de Villiers to revert to the Springbok's traditional strengths.

I have concluded, to drive a transformative vision, it's vital to align not only the team but also the larger stakeholder community to this new direction.

Dan Ariely, in his book *Predictably Irrational*, argues that an overabundance of choices can lead to decision paralysis, stemming from our innate desire to keep options open. This overload of possibilities not only drains our mental energy but also erodes our resilience over time. To cultivate effective mental fortitude, it's essential to focus on a curated set of well-considered options in our planning. By prioritizing preparedness and adaptability, we can conserve energy, maintain clarity, and increase our chances of success.

Picture a dog chasing seagull on a beach, constantly shifting its target, and eventually conceding, drained and unfulfilled. Similarly, many people pursue opportunities that emerge, only to alter course when faced with challenges or seemingly greener pastures. This inconsistent pursuit results in missed opportunities, leaving individuals drained and disheartened.

Does this imply we should quash our instinctual optimism? Far from it. But it underscores the importance of amalgamating instinct with strategy, enabling us to navigate myriad choices and

make informed decisions about which avenues to pursue. This discernment not only reduces feelings of being overwhelmed but also ensures you're on a trajectory aligned with your passions.

Is there ever a point in life when it's too late to redefine your future or construct a visionary plan? My belief is that it's never too late unless you're on your last breath.

With age comes the realization of time's fleeting nature. This awareness prompts the understanding that it's unwise to waste time on uninspiring endeavours.

The essence of life includes defining a personal purpose combined with efficient time management. If your current activities aren't in alignment with your life's aspirations, it warrants introspection. Being trapped in a monotonous routine is akin to a hamster treading a wheel – continuously active but achieving little of substance.

A personal experience, my divorce years ago, made me introspect my life's direction. I realized I had been too engrossed in managing time, neglecting the broader perspective of leading a meaningful life. Although I wasn't unhappy, upon reflection, I felt trapped in a conventional employment structure. I aspired for a life built around continuous learning and fitness, where my income was aligned with my passions. Since then, I've largely achieved that vision, but now I prioritize seizing unplanned, special moments, understanding that these opportunities often arise outside planned frameworks, requiring adaptability and optimistic resilience to grasp them.

The story of the misplaced map is a widely cited anecdote in leadership, psychology, and decision-making discussions. Its most well-known source is from the Hungarian poet and philosopher György Faludy, who recounts it in his autobiography, *My Happy Days in Hell*. The tale has been adapted and retold in various forms to illustrate the importance of having a plan or framework, even if it's not entirely accurate.

The essence of the story highlights how a sense of purpose, direction, or even a flawed roadmap can provide the confidence and momentum to persevere through uncertainty or adversity.

Values serve as our moral compass. Whether it's dignity, decency like Mandela's choice or compassion, professionalism, or sustainability, identifying guiding values can steer your decisions and actions. It's essential to reflect on their origins and how they might have evolved over time. For instance, many cultures and societies held shared values long before organized religions. Engaging in introspective exercises can illuminate and potentially recalibrate your core beliefs, ensuring they align with your overall aspirations and those of a sustainable environment.

Vision: Painting Your Future

"Where there is no vision, the people perish." Beyond just surviving, a clearly articulated pioneering vision ensures you're thriving, channelling your energies towards desired outcomes. Your vision, built on your passions and values, offers a blueprint for your future aspirations.

With a solid vision in place, you're better equipped to avoid distractions and maintain focus on your path forward.

Current Reality: Your Starting Point

Understanding where you are presently is pivotal. By assessing your current situation and contrasting it with your envisioned future, you can gauge the journey ahead.

Key Competitive Factors: Aspects to Sharpen

Pinpoint the elements in your life that demand enhancement to bridge the gap between your current reality and your vision. This could range from health and networking to skill development and, notably, mental resilience.

Goals: Concrete Steps Forward

Derived from your vision and current standing, goals are the tangible milestones you set for yourself. Ensure they conform to the SMART criteria—specific, measurable, agreed upon, realistic, and time-bound.

Action Plans: The Momentum Drivers

For each goal, outline specific tasks that help transition from stagnation to momentum. These actions, whether as simple as making a phone call or as complex as launching a project, are the drivers of progress.

Stakeholder Support: Harnessing Collective Power

An impactful plan thrives on broad stakeholder endorsement. While unanimous approval is elusive, ensuring the majority is on board is crucial for the plan's efficacy.

Performance Pathway: My lessons from SA Rugby

In essence, building mental toughness isn't merely about resilience in adversity. It's about building mental maps that not only foresee challenges that help you manage the unforeseen ones, having a robust plan in place, and navigating through them with focus and determination. With the right blueprint, you're not just prepared for the journey; you embrace it.

The early 2000s saw SA Rugby grappling with bridging internal cultural divides. They aimed to with a well-prepared strategic plan and a commitment to aligning varied stakeholder interests.

A large component of the plan was the development of the game at all levels and a commitment to transformation, where the organization at all levels reflected the demographics and aspirations of a better South Africa. This intended to create a pathway to fast-track a diverse group of players into national teams in line with the reality of South Africa's demographics.

The CEO asked me to assist by driving the creation and implementation of a player transformation plan. It resulted, among other interventions, in the establishment of the annual Grant Khomo tournament for under sixteen rugby players - because the research indicated that player ability at this age was a sufficiently reliable indicator of future performance. A large squad, known as the green squad, was selected after the tournament (in diversity appropriate numbers) and tested regularly for strength, speed, and a range of rugby skills. These test results were recorded, monitored, and analysed nationally. Each player was given an appropriate improvement plan which included exercise and nutrition. In many instances, players were supplied with the food as well.

The next stage was the selection of a high-performance gold squad after the under eighteen Craven Week tournament (again in diversity appropriate numbers). Testing and support were also given to these players. They were required to attend a series of rugby development camps that included psychological inputs to help build mental resilience.

The outset of the plan showed promise, yet the unexpected introduction of a new rugby executive became a twist in the story. Three years post-implementation, a fresh face assumed the rugby president's mantle. During his campaign, he asserted that SA Rugby was in chaos, and he presented himself as the saviour, uniquely equipped to reinstate its former glory. Reflecting now, one might jestingly say he aimed to "make South African Rugby great again."

His victory at the polls led to harsh decisions. He discarded his predecessor's strategies, replacing most associates of the previous executive with his own. Such upheavals are not uncommon when a new leadership assumes control, operating without perceived limitations. Interestingly, a few years later, he too was replaced.

The Value of Preparation

Fareed Zakaria's 2020 observation highlights a critical lesson in crisis management: proactive measures are far more cost-effective than reactive ones. Prevention and preparation involve relatively small investments of time, resources, and effort, yet they significantly enhance a system's ability to withstand and recover from disruptions. Conversely, an unprepared and ineffective response to crises—whether a global pandemic, economic meltdown, or natural disaster—can result in devastating financial losses, prolonged recovery periods, and far-reaching societal impacts.

Zakaria's insight underscores the importance of unbounded rationalizing as part of strategic planning as described in Steven Johnson's book *Farsighted* (2019). My conclusion is that resilience and readiness are not luxuries but necessities for long-term sustainability and success.

It's essential to understand that a plan, in isolation, won't materialize your envisioned future. Its actualization hinges on many factors, including the depth of your preparation and the dedication of your competitors.

Daley Thompson, the legendary decathlete and 1984 Los Angeles Olympics gold medallist, epitomized the power of preparation. While the world celebrated his victories, Thompson credited his unparalleled success to relentless preparation and an unwavering commitment to outworking his competitors. His journey underscores a fundamental truth: preparation is the cornerstone of achievement.

Bruce Lee, the iconic martial artist, once said, "I fear not the man who has practised 10,000 kicks once, but the man who has practised one kick 10,000 times." This philosophy aligns with the words of swimming legend Michael Phelps: "Medals are earned in the hours when no one is watching." Both highlight a universal principle of excellence: consistent, focused, and disciplined preparation is what separates greatness from mediocrity. True success is not born of fleeting brilliance but forged through the unseen hours of deliberate effort and practice.

Deliberate Practice

Beyond routine practice lies the concept of *deliberate practice*—a focused, systematic method designed to improve specific skills. Unlike repetitive habits, deliberate practice requires intentional effort and intense focus, targeting areas of weakness to enhance overall performance. Malcolm Gladwell, in *Outliers*, popularized the "10,000-hour rule," suggesting that approximately 10,000 hours of practice are necessary to achieve mastery in a field.

However, this interpretation has been nuanced by Anders Ericsson, the psychologist behind the original research. Ericsson emphasizes that it's not just the number of hours that matter, but the quality and structure of those hours. Daniel Coyle, in *The Talent Code*, builds on this idea, highlighting how deep, concentrated effort can yield quicker results. Coyle uses futsal—a fast-paced soccer variant played on a smaller pitch—as an example. In this environment, players experience accelerated skill development due to the condensed, high-intensity nature of the game. This insight underscores that with purposeful and deliberate practice; mastery can often be achieved more efficiently than the 10,000-hour benchmark suggests.

Lasting success isn't about isolated efforts; it's a lifelong commitment to preparation. Whether you're an athlete, musician, or a chess enthusiast, training helps unleash your innate potential. Stay alert to the present while being rooted in your future goals. Circumstances might demand a change in tactics, but the vision remains constant.

For instance, if your objective is fitness and your plan is gym-centric, unforeseen situations like a pandemic might necessitate a shift. Options abound hiring a personal trainer, digital workouts, or group exercises with peers.

One client insightfully noted, "Balancing the present with the future is essential. Discipline becomes the bridge. If I lack discipline or if my current discipline doesn't align with my goals,

I must recalibrate my aims or amplify my discipline. It's crucial to remain cognizant of what keeps me aligned with my goals and what deviates me from them."

8. CONTROLLED AGGRESSION

“The will to survive is not as important as the will to prevail.”

JEFF COOPER

Most people can access passion, and many can transform it into purpose. They adeptly craft strategies, prepare diligently, and maintain their poise. However, the next challenge lies in implementing the strategy, driving the future forward and getting things done. This phase demands controlled aggression to break free from inertia, sidestepping procrastination and churning. Controlled aggression encompasses enhancing intensity, leading the way, accelerating the future, and getting it done by harnessing willpower without overt hostility.

Consider GOYA, not the renowned artist, but an acronym for 'Get Off Your Arse. It's the call to convert plans into tangible actions – to get things done. Lest we forget, missing out on opportunities is the cost of inaction. In my estimation, passion, planning, preparation, and composure form the foundation, contributing about 20% towards achieving one's preferred future. Execution, beginning with controlled aggression and culminating in commitment, makes up the rest.

General Patton, a legendary U.S. Army commander during World War II, was renowned for his bold and decisive leadership style. He famously declared, "A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed next week," reflecting his belief in the power of swift and resolute action. In the high-stakes environment of war, delays could mean lost opportunities or lives, making Patton's philosophy a practical necessity. This principle extends beyond the battlefield: in business, customers often value efficiency and results over perfection, and in sports, fans celebrate victories regardless of the margin. Patton's insight is a reminder that timely, focused execution often outweighs the endless pursuit of perfection.

Understanding Controlled Aggression

Controlled aggression implies upscaling your intensity as needed to tip the scales in your favour. It entails outperforming adversaries, confronting challenges head-on yet maintaining restraint and discipline.

Key facets of controlled aggression include:

1. Executing and implementing to get things done.
2. You use divine discontent to drive the vision forward and achieve continuous improvement. If you are winning you are not satisfied and want to perform better. If you are losing, you are not satisfied and want to perform better.
3. You increase urgency and intensity to a level where your effort is greater than the opposition's. When you win you are not satisfied and want to improve on that performance and when you lose you are not satisfied, you want to improve on that performance.
4. Raising the intensity of your competitive advantages and outworking the opposition.

5. Being a credible threat to divert adversaries - pressurizing them to make them uneasy.
6. Pioneering new competitive advantages to add to your current advantages.
7. Harmonizing aggression with self-restraint.

In essence, controlled aggression asserts, "I am equipped to work harder and better than my rivals."

While raw aggression might work in some contexts like military operations or contact sports, it's crucial to apply it judiciously. Aggression or intimidation should be holistic and not used in isolation, as it can motivate the opponent.

Driving the vision forward

It starts with divine discontent to get better. You have a great vision of a better future, now you adopt an emergency mindset – you execute and make things work. Ada Hegerberg's action in 2019 was a stellar examples of bringing an improved future forward. The Norwegian soccer star and first-ever Ballon d'Or Feminine winner took a stand for gender equality by refusing to play for Norway's national team in the FIFA World Cup due to unequal treatment and lack of support for women's soccer. Her action brought global attention to the pay disparity and overall conditions for women soccer players, sparking important conversations and inspiring changes toward better pay and treatment in women's soccer worldwide.

Elevating Intensity of your competitive advantage

Success is rarely achieved without escalating the intensity of your existing advantages but also you need to win the no talent effort. You probably recall the anecdote – hard work beats talent when talent does not work hard. The importance of intensity was evident in the 2016 England rugby team's underestimation of Ireland's capability to escalate their intensity, leading to England's defeat.

To ascend in your endeavours, it's essential to align the culture of the individual and the team with the organization's strategy. An example in 2025 is the UCT rugby team that won the Varsity cup. Their coach, Robbie Fleck, claimed they won by escalating playing exciting rugby.

Once you have a competitive advantage you can portray yourself as a formidable force. By magnifying your strengths, you sow seeds of doubt in adversaries, unsettling them. Boxing legend Muhammad Ali mastered this art of controlled aggression to ensure his opponents lost their calm.

To be seen as a genuine threat, you must establish credibility. A quintessential example is the late Shane Warne, whose incredible skill set and reputation instilled fear in opponents.

Sledging, the art of using taunts or psychological tactics to unsettle an opponent, has been famously employed by sports icons like Shane Warne and Muhammad Ali. When done

effectively, sledging relies on subtlety, wit, and timing, serving as a strategic mind game rather than mere provocation. Crucially, it must be supported by genuine skill to maintain credibility and impact. However, overuse or poorly executed sledging can backfire, motivating the opponent and damaging the sledger's own focus and reputation.

Being combative shifts the opponent's focus, potentially causing them to overlook other crucial elements. This can lead them to exert too much, resulting in critical errors, offering you an advantage.

Controlled aggression can be used ethically and legally to overpower and thus intimidate opponents. This tactic, when applied strategically, can yield a significant competitive advantage.

Being able to handle the pressure and strategies employed by opponents is equally crucial. It's not just about dishing it out but also enduring what's thrown your way.

Controlled Aggression: Adapting for Mental Toughness

Historically, the Springbok rugby team has anchored their gameplay in intimidation by aggression. This aggressive approach led to numerous victories.

However, Aggression, if unchecked, can overshadow other essential skills. The Springboks' use of overt aggression in 2007 worked in their favour, but it arguably became their weakness in 2011.

Recollecting a 2014 interview with Jason Leonard, former England prop, his assessment was that the Springbok's primary strategy was to intimidate the opposition by brutalizing, pressurising, winning penalties and mauling over the opponent's line. When pressed about a secondary strategy, Leonard humorously remarked that it would simply be to double down on their primary one.

In high-pressure situations, it's often challenging to pivot. The springbok coach in the 2015 Rugby World Cup, vowed to adopt varied approaches, yet they leaned into their signature overtly aggressive style and failed. The next coach promised more flair, but when tested, the team reverted to their traditional intimidation approach.

Tim Harford's insights from his *Cautionary Tales* podcasts resonate deeply in this context. He warns of the dangers of becoming overly attached to a single strategy, emphasizing how such rigidity can blind us to alternative solutions and lead to avoidable failures. Flexibility and openness to change, he argues, are essential for navigating uncertainty and achieving success.

In *Adapt* (2011), Harford highlights the critical importance of embracing criticism, learning from failures, and extracting valuable lessons from setbacks. He advocates for adaptability in strategies, recognizing that success is often unpredictable and rarely follows a straight path. Harford underscores the necessity of maintaining flexibility and preparing multiple avenues to achieve one's objectives. When plan A falters, the key is to pivot quickly to plan B, then plan

C, and beyond—transforming setbacks into stepping stones through resilience and resourcefulness.

Implement new competitive advantages

The 2019 Rugby World Cup saw the Springboks triumph. My observations inform me that the Springboks gained a new advantage from the change in selection strategy introduced by SA Rugby. This allowed worldwide selection of players, thus increasing their on-field options. It introduced two advantages into their game plan. Firstly, they had a bomb squad of reserve players that could produce a late surge in the game when exhaustion was often a major issue (instead, they could go up a gear). These players also enabled them to raise the intensity of their intimidation through obsessive aggression. You need only listen to the coach's team talks in *Chasing the Sun 1* to appreciate the level to which he inspired the team to intimidate the opposition.

However, in 2023, in the quarter finals, semifinals, and finals of the World Cup tournament, their bomb squad and intimidation game plans met with their match. I observed a new advantage emerging, in the form of willpower to stay in the fight and be better in all areas, which arguably gave the Springboks their three one-point victories. In the second documentary *Chasing the Sun 2*, their success was attributed to themes of inspiration, resilience against adversity, and celebrating the nation's diversity, will power, and the collective spirit of overcoming challenges.

For those aspiring to use controlled aggression as an additional distinctive difference, Visualization techniques, trigger words, or hand signals can be employed. Importantly, it's vital to modulate this aggression so that it stays within the boundaries of humane behaviour.

This requires being able to differentiate between harnessing aggression and getting overly excited and righteous. As you navigate the realm of controlled aggression as a competitive advantage, it's crucial to be aware of extreme hostility or reactionary aggression. It is about channeling aggression with intent and purpose, but steering clear of "naked" aggression, in particular harming others in pursuit of what you believe to be your right.

Historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Wangari Maathai serve as profound examples of this principle. Each has harnessed mental strength and purpose to drive transformative change without resorting to unrestrained aggression. Gandhi famously stated that true strength arises not from physical force but from an indomitable will—a sentiment reflected in the lives and legacies of Mandela and Maathai, who used their inner resolve to confront systemic injustices and champion environmental and social causes.

Willpower is often the engine of achievement. American actor Will Smith, celebrated for his exceptional work ethic, expressed this through his relentless dedication to outworking his peers. However, his actions at the 2022 Oscars highlight the importance of exercising controlled aggression—demonstrating that even the most disciplined individuals can falter without it. True success lies in a balanced blend of willpower, hard work, and judiciously applied aggression, ensuring actions align with purpose and principles.

Applying controlled aggression requires a nuanced understanding of when to apply intense force and when to exercise restraint. Achieving this balance through a holistic approach, i.e., body, mind, and humaneness, is paramount to ensuring long-term success and dominance in any field.

9. COMPOSURE

"Regardless of your expertise, the hours you've devoted to practice, or the training you've received, without composure in high-pressure scenarios, you cannot fully harness your potential."
MICHAEL JORDAN

Composure serves as a haven during the tempests that we face ranging from over eagerness to anxiety; panic attacks or anger and frustration that's triggered from being baited by some event or person. Composure puts you at the eye of the storm, guiding you and enabling you to calmly acknowledge and observe while sticking to the process. Although distraction and chaos are almost inevitable, composure enables us to realize that our interpretations of these events can amplify or reduce our stress, affecting our moods, effectiveness and efficiency. Composure lies between the extremities of panic and complacency.

While panic is fuelled by exaggerated or frantic perspectives, complacency stems from overconfidence or arrogance. So, true composure means being attuned to your emotions, ensuring that extremes such as rage, fear, and frustration to heartache, sorrow, and indifference, don't dictate your actions.

Composure begins with immersing yourself in your predetermined process. You have a calm determination that focuses on doing not getting. Think of it as achieving a flow state, where you're attentive, emotionally balanced, and disciplined. Neither panic nor complacency capture you, so your focus sharpens, reducing distractions and overreactions. You are clear eyed and can benefit from VUCA, and importantly you have bounded rationality and use reasoning to rise to the occasion. With composure, skill execution under pressure becomes natural, and errors become scarce.

Highlights of Composure

1. Focussing on the process that will assist the implementation of the planned outcomes.
2. Accessing calm determination by regulating emotions to a state of readiness as evidenced by being in the zone.
3. Appropriate management of emotions like fear, anger, and resentment.
4. Under pressure not letting your primordial brain mind capture you into fight or flight irrationality – and you make more mistakes.
5. Under pressure not letting your rational brain mind capture you into "choking" overanalyses and hesitancy irrationality – and you make more mistakes.
6. Celebrating victories modestly and accepting defeats graciously.

Embrace this philosophy: *My reaction to events, not the events themselves, defines my experience*, therefore, stay engaged with the process. If you are following my notes, you've already tackled concentration, and controlled aggression by honing your passion, crafting a strategy, being prepared, and attempted to bring the future forward, by raising your competitive

advantage to creating a few new ones, your next step is to immerse yourself in the intricate details of executing your plan methodically and effectively.

Errors will occur but they should not define you. With composure, you're able to be more adept at steering pivotal moments in your favour, minimizing poor decisions and subsequent mistakes. Composure is also your bridge to the emotional 'sweet spot', that optimal emotional intensity for your peak performances.

Focussing on process - being 'In the Zone'

When you are in the zone you are able to use calm determination to get things done. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi argues that composure facilitates entering 'the zone' - a state of serene alertness. Here, you pre-empt change, sidestepping panic, and overreaction. Csikszentmihalyi defines this state as one of profound, relaxed concentration - so engrossed in the moment, that time becomes irrelevant, distractions fade, and pure, unbridled talent shines through (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

Yet too much challenge or too little of it, can obstruct this flow. So, the goal is to find the balance that pushes you just beyond your current limits, enabling you to be comfortable with being uncomfortable.

The Ideal Performance State (IPS) closely resembles the coveted 'zone' - that state of being - where emotional arousal is perfectly calibrated to achieve peak performance. This state transcends mere superficial calm, embodying a profound inner equilibrium and it can even be measured through physiological indicators such as heart rate variability, providing tangible insights into mental and physical alignment.

Not thinking too fast and not thinking too slow

Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011) explores the interplay between two cognitive systems: intuitive (fast) thinking and deliberate (slow) thinking. Composure relies on the ability to balance and leverage both modes effectively, depending on the situation.

In the world of sports, competitors will use every trick to throw you off balance. For example, in the 2006 Football World Cup final, Zinedine Zidane had a momentary lapse in judgment, induced by Marco Materazzi's words, putting him under pressure leading to a head-butt seen by billions. The subsequent red card Zidane denied France of its World Cup dream and demonstrating that even seasoned professionals can lose grip on their emotions under intense pressure.

Thinking too fast often leads to impulsive decisions. This is usually driven by emotional reactivity, overconfidence, or the brain's tendency to rely on mental shortcuts (heuristics). Discipline is lost because you bypass deliberate reasoning — acting before processing. Mistakes here stem from *overreaction or assumption*.

From the seemingly benign to the extreme, a lapse in composure can occur across many spectrums e.g. the mild-mannered individual resorting to road rage, the celebrated individual voicing intolerance, or the elite athlete succumbing to the lure of performance-enhancing drugs. Each instance hints at the same thing: the fragile nature of our self-control, but, while we cannot control others' actions, we can have dominion over our own reactions.

When footballer Asamoah Gyan of Ghana was under extreme pressure when he stepped up to take that fateful penalty kick against Uruguay in the 2010 FIFA World Cup, the weight of the moment was palpable. It's conceivable that the gravity of the situation led him to seek solace in prayer. But did this reflection disrupt his concentration, impairing his honed skills? Had prayer been a part of his regular pre-kick routine, it would be unjust to equate the miss with overthinking. So, what is the key takeaway from this? In sports, when executing a skill that has become second nature through years of practice, simply act and rely on your training. Composure isn't just for the sporting world. It's a daily challenge. Whether it's a sudden jolt of anger in response to a reckless driver or the myriad other provocations life throws at us, our emotions can easily take the driver's seat. True composure means pausing before reacting, taking a moment to consider the alternative to rash actions or words.

Under excessive pressure, the mind can also fall into the trap of overthinking by scrutinizing every minor decision to the point of paralysis. This phenomenon, often referred to as 'choking' in sports, occurs when heightened self-monitoring disrupts instinctive, well-practiced actions, leading to hesitation, reduced fluidity, and errors at critical moments. However, it's important to recognize that fear and doubt are universal experiences.

Thinking too slowly, leads to over analysis (also called *analysis paralysis*). The cause isn't a lack of discipline, but often fear of making the wrong choice, perfectionism, or lack of confidence. You hesitate, second-guess, and lose momentum. Mistakes arise from *inaction, missed timing, or diluted clarity*.

For 34 years, the Proteas carried the burden of promise unfulfilled. They dazzled in group stages, thrilled in quarters, battled through semis—but stumbled when it mattered most. The word “*chokers*” hung over them like a sword, cutting deeper with every near miss: 1992, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2024, 2025... moments frozen in heartbreak.

Yet they never stopped believing.

At Lord's, June 14th, 2025, the spiritual home of cricket, the script finally flipped. In a tense final against arch-rivals Australia, they held their nerve. Every catch stuck, every run counted. When they scored the winning run, it wasn't just victory—it was vindication.

The Proteas had broken the curse. No longer the nearly-men. Champions, at last. Words of caution though: *Uneasy rests the head that wears the crown!*

The key to composure is not waiting for fear to vanish but actively confronting it and regaining focus. Mastering this balance allows for peak performance, even in the most high-stakes situations.

In his book *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*, Nichola Taleb presents the idea of systems that don't just survive chaos but actually thrive in it. Such resilience, or antifragility, mirrors the tenets of mental toughness so to truly benefit from disorder, one should seek guidance from experts, amplify strengths, address weaknesses, and continuously reimagine and reinvent their approach to life.

A belief or mindset worth addressing in the context of composure is the notion of 'zero-sum game', the idea that one person's gain is another's loss. Although this might apply in some games like poker, it's essential not to default to a zero-sum perspective, especially within teams. Instead, we should aspire for positive-sum scenarios, where innovative approaches can benefit all parties involved. Breaking free from a zero-sum mentality begins with embracing abundance thinking. Social norms often narrow our perception of choice, framing decisions as binary and forcing an 'either-or' mindset. Yet, with composure and a broader perspective, we can see beyond these constraints, recognizing that choices can often encompass 'and' as opposed to 'or'.

Roger Martin, a leading business strategist, emphasizes that there are a range of options available to us is often far greater than we initially perceive and by choosing 'and' over 'or', we can unlock a wealth of possibilities, fostering innovation and progress. Equally important is maintaining a balance between what we hope for in the future and what we are dealing with in the present. Sacrificing one for the other undermines our ability to thrive, and just as rationality and intuitive thinking coexist to guide our decisions, so too should our attention to the present and our plans for the future. By integrating these perspectives, we create a framework for navigating life with clarity, achieving immediate results while building toward our long-term goals.

Do you remember the craze surrounding power bracelets? These ubiquitous wristbands adorned the arms of everyone, from sports stars to schoolchildren. The marketing behind these bracelets was steeped in pseudo-scientific jargon, touting holographic capabilities with claims of enhanced athletic performance through the alignment of the body's "natural energy" field. The bracelets promised to access life's energy force at a "quantum level". Now while the realm of energy treatment shouldn't be dismissed out of hand, the claims about these bracelets seemed to venture into the territory of pseudo-science or magic. Deepak Chopra, a prominent figure in holistic health, has also been known to employ grandiose claims about "quantum healing" to describe approaches to health and wellness – language that scientific journalist Michael Shermer, describes as "woo-woo", implying that such narratives are used to make unsubstantiated claims sound scientific but intelligible. The allure of Chopra's claims may captivate some, but it also begs scrutiny.

Returning to the topic of power bracelets, those who wore them often cited reasons such as "balancing my energy" or "feeling more energetic, promoting strength and fitness." When challenged about the absence of independent scientific studies corroborating these claims, the common response was, "I've heard that, but it works for me - maybe it's the Placebo Effect – but I'm fine with that".

The Placebo Effect is a phenomenon whereby people report genuine improvement after taking a fake or non-existent treatment, but this raises the question: are people willing to pay good money for something they acknowledge may rely solely on the Placebo Effect for its results? Are they inadvertently caught up in “woo-woo” with their brains being hijacked into attributing healing or health improvements that are not possible with a wrist bracelet, a health potion or a magic spell.

Consider the story of a South African witchdoctor using Doom insecticide to drive out evil spirits from his congregants. Such actions seem to fall squarely into the “woo-woo” category that Shermer described. These individuals using such ‘magic’ present themselves as gurus with mystical insights, peddling treatments or detoxifiers as if only *they* possess the secret knowledge. So, while the idea of magic remedies may be tempting, Richie McCaw, the former All Blacks rugby captain, once asserted, "I don't believe in magic. I believe in hard work. I believe in putting everything on the line." Mental toughness, therefore, rather than irrational beliefs, encourages evidence-based thinking.

Losing composure

Losing composure can often result in a whole range of self-sabotage acts due to emotionally charged reactions and without composure, impulse control falters and self-regulation becomes challenging. Loss of composure can manifest in reckless gambling, maxing out credit cards, vilifying others, and catastrophizing, to name a few examples.

The human brain has evolved over centuries, with legacy instincts hardwired into our biology. These instincts, which include the fight, flight, or freeze response, have their roots in our survival as a species. However, beyond these instincts, we've absorbed various beliefs and mindsets through our upbringing and socialization, potentially undermining our self-regulation. Personal mastery and a calm demeanour, integral to composure, involve controlling or rising above our aggressive tendencies and maintaining an optimal emotional state for effective thinking and action.

Thomas Edison, the American inventor, is reputed to have claimed, “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.” Disputed or not, it makes good sense to appreciate that we will often fail. When we think about performing a skill, it begins in the thinking part of our brain. The neurons get excited, and they activate nerve cells connected to the limbic system. This area of the brain is associated with emotions such as fear, anxiety, elation, and satisfaction, and is tied to the motor cortex, which controls the muscles. If thoughts concerning fear of failure, disappointing others or being unworthy enter your mind, anxiety levels increase. The process involves the release of adrenalin that sets the heart racing, primes the muscles for action, and puts all the senses on high alert. In other words, the fight or flight response comes into play and fear of failure is now making you experience the symptoms of the failure you fear. Positive thoughts can help you stay focused, but if thoughts or words stray into the realm of fearing failing, they become counterproductive. Mentally tough people become aware that it is the fear itself that has the power to scare you, not actually the thing you fear.

A big obstacle to people achieving their intention is fear of failure. This can be defined as being terrified of making a mistake because of the negative consequences associated with failure, such as the loss of status or disappointing family and friends. Fear of failure is likely to be present in people who have experienced success early in their lives or careers. Performing well in a small community isn't as difficult or challenging as it is to prosper as a senior executive in a large corporation, as a national athlete, or as a star performer. You would actually expect that most people want to be successful at whatever they attempt to do. Yet, curiously, many people unwittingly, sabotage their success even when it may be very close. The problem is that they undermine their chances so that they can avoid dealing with the fears that come with doing well.

Former England football players Wayne Rooney and David Beckham had huge successes early in their careers. Yet, with this success, they each had to deal with many problems. Both were under the scrutiny of the public; they were recognised wherever they went and had to handle the high expectations of their performances and behaviour. If they were not winning, the community wondered what was wrong with them. If they behaved inappropriately, they were condemned. Some people might have welcomed their problems because of the celebrity status they achieved, but for others, the fear of success and the complications that come with it is as strong as that associated with failure.

Others fear increased expectations or have a deeply rooted belief about the evil of money and being rich. You can expect a huge surge in anxiety if you have been acknowledged for a particular ability, feel the pressure of high expectations, and are publicly put to the challenge of performing to an expected ability. The expectations of others that you will deliver, or your expectations for yourself to do well, can pressurise you to the point where it hangs over you like a dark cloud and negatively affects your performance.

Phobias originate from extreme aversion. The difference between a phobia and simply being afraid is a higher level of fear. In addition to feeling emotionally uneasy, people who suffer from phobias show greater physical symptoms of fear, like increased heart rate, sweating, feeling faint, and even feeling that they are choking. A typical example of phobia development is a fear of poisonous snakes that get translated into a phobia for all snakes. In most circumstances, people have well-developed mental skills and enough self-complexity to be aware of their instinct's ability to delude them. Consequently, with a bit of professional help and therapy, they can free themselves from the chains of this mental slavery. However, if we constantly feel under pressure and experience chronic negative stress, our arousal levels stay elevated, and even with well-developed mental skills and self-complexity, we start to fail as we feel more threatened.

Like many other feelings, anger is an emotion and can be justified and even appropriate at times. However, when we experience extreme pressure or have developed emotional 'hot buttons', our brain uses a short-circuit option that puts us in an implicit mode – the unconscious or automatic system of the brain - and we can lose control over our ability to reason. We can behave unreasonably angry or unacceptably. This is colloquially labelled as a 'rush of blood' to the brain because the neural circuit for rage is faster than the speed of thought. The downside

to this is that we can become highly reactive where we think too little, forget the lessons we have learnt, and do the wrong thing in a difficult situation. At the other end, our brain can be hijacked into an explicit mode where we think too much, take too much time, become robotically deliberate, and lose fluidity.

Arousal and anxiety

We all have to perform under some pressure, so we need to endure pressure and its consequential increased arousal from a range of demands and mishaps, including physical, mental, emotional, familial, and financial pressure. However, chronic anxiety is the likely end-product of excessive and sustained levels of arousal, and the modern-day problem is that this arousal response does not distinguish between perceived threats and real life-threatening threats. Our physiological response is identical whether feeling threatened by losing a sporting competition; losing a relationship; being in an intense sales meeting; getting stuck in traffic or being involved in a near car collision. Naturally, there would be some level of arousal. But you need to be aware that traffic is not hostile, but that it's your subconscious mind projecting hostility and motivating you to act. However, it's necessary to experience an amount of measured, psyched-up excitement when dealing with competitors, and being somewhat anxious about doing well is fine.

Nevertheless, it becomes debilitating to continually experience high levels of arousal and anxiety and one of the physical symptoms of sustained high levels of arousal is an elevated heart rate. When the heart rate increases above 145 beats per minute, a person's complex motor skills become less efficient, vision becomes restricted and hearing diminished. When your heart rate gets to 175 beats per minute, reasoning processes start to fail, and behaviour becomes irrationally aggressive. As blood is withdrawn from the outer muscle layer and concentrated in core muscle mass, you also become clumsier. Anxiety, driven by pressure, may come from a variety of sources, ranging from recognising the importance of an activity, competitor activity, time commitments, continuous change, and the uncertainty of an outcome. When you press the key to send an email, ask a difficult question, release an arrow, kick for a goal post, or face the bowler – the outcome is uncertain. The challenge, therefore, is to regulate your arousal within an optimal zone so that you can generate creative tension without debilitating anxiety. As explained previously, the arousal process is essential for motivating action. However, overstimulation is accompanied by mental and physical limitations, and these detrimentally affect your performance. When you are over-aroused, particularly when this is coupled with chronic anxiety, you cannot make appropriate alternate decisions because you do not see everything that is happening in the moment, and you are prone to making mistakes so, you are probably coming to the wrong conclusions.

In geological terms, extreme pressure can turn a lump of coal into a flawless diamond. In a human scenario, extreme pressure can turn ordinary people into complete basket cases. When heavily burdened, we can experience excessive arousal, which can cause neural hijacking. This causes primordial reactions to dominate. In Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Dr Jekyll, representing the conscious mind, is a good citizen with many friends.

However, Mr. Hyde represents his shadow side and it's this subconscious personality that is capable of evil and murderous deeds when he is let out.

It is widely believed that when we experience excessive arousal, we behave differently to the way we normally would. Under these conditions, we often make poor, out-of-character choices, becoming strangers to ourselves. Increased anxiety heightens arousal and magnifies emotions, particularly anger, fear, greed, lust, and jealousy. Under these conditions, our ability to make rational decisions is short-circuited, as previously explained. These conditions are associated with poor decision-making.

In his book, *Predictably Irrational*, Dan Ariely wrote about the experiments he conducted on his students' attitudes towards sex under normal conditions compared to their attitudes when sexually aroused. The outcome was that students claimed to have one set of values and taboos when completing questionnaires under normal circumstances, but when sexually aroused, most participants gave different information to the same questions. The research indicated that they had fewer taboos and much riskier attitudes and values in the second test (Ariely, 2008). You could say hyperarousal let 'Mr. Hyde' out for each of them. Similarly, being under pressure, stressed, and aroused at work or in competitive sport causes us to behave differently to our perceived normal conduct. Everyone has hot buttons. If someone or some event pushes the hot button, we react predictably. In sport, 'baiting' and 'sledging' are used as ploys to push players' hot buttons to increase pressure on them and drive up their arousal. The expectation is that, in this state, their opponents will make more mistakes. It is particularly effective for people who struggle with impulse control and cannot restrain themselves when they are provoked. I am sure you can think of examples of people in your favourite sports team who fall into this category.

I have referred to losing composure due to pressure, but self-righteous beliefs act similarly, as they move us away from fact-based reality. We assert hegemonic or moralistic convictions in contradiction to the beliefs of others. In his book, *Radical: My Journey out of Islamist Extremism*, Maajid Nawaz writes, "Cruel, selfish things are so much easier to do when in the delusion of self-righteousness" (Nawaz, 2013).

The Entanglement of Mindsets and Reality Perception

Our mindsets shape our reality. They are akin to lenses, granting us the perspectives we adopt in life, but these ingrained viewpoints can sometimes function as invisible shackles, dictating our experiences and reactions unconsciously. For example, a victim mindset traps individuals in a narrow vision of the future, where proactivity is stifled, and a victim identity is adopted. Individuals with this mindset expect negative outcomes, attributing blame externally rather than assuming personal responsibility. This mindset arises from an instinctual fear that resources are limited, and others may be conspirators or adversaries. Strengthened by our tendency to recognize patterns, this outlook solidifies into a victim mindset, which is very challenging to dissolve in favour of an abundance mindset. Such individuals may echo the defeatist sentiment "they are out to get me".

Composure is the ally of performance and success, minimizing the pitfalls of reactionary and emotionally driven errors. It fosters an acute awareness of our internal and external environments without being derailed by them. Composure is the art of balancing temptations and grievances. Under standard conditions, achieving this state is within most individuals' grasp, yet the true test of composure arises in the crucible of adversity, when under duress from stressors like physical, emotional, or financial turmoil, or even from the languor of monotony. So, through composure, we can discern between fears and tangible threats, recognize actual weaknesses, and differentiate between controllable and uncontrollable factors.

Composure allows us to embrace the unpredictable without succumbing to despair or anger, steering clear of the temptation to blame external forces. It enables action that is calm yet passionate, aligning decisively with our intentions. With composure, we can approach the world with critical self-reflection, navigating our emotional landscapes without being ensnared by them. We learn to update our knowledge and views consistently, observing the dramas of the world without becoming entangled in them.

Composure aligns with Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory by helping reduce bias, enabling better and objective decision-making. This is particularly important because our social identities and group affiliations can often influence our emotions and actions, sometimes to our detriment. By cultivating composure, individuals can maintain clarity, which enhances both performance and interpersonal interactions.

In practice, composure ensures precision in executing technical skills, whether in sports or business. It allows individuals to focus on the task at hand without being overwhelmed by emotional distractions or overthinking, which can impair performance. Moreover, composure simplifies the process of reconciling life's inherent paradoxes—balancing instinct with rationality or being welcoming yet challenging. It enables people to navigate these contradictions with equilibrium and control.

Another critical aspect of composure is its ability to moderate the natural desire to win. While the drive for success is innate, an over-fixation on outcomes can create stress and hinder performance. Composure shifts the focus back to the process, helping individuals perform skilfully and with precision, rather than being derailed by pressure or emotional overdrive. It is this balance that makes composure a cornerstone of high-performance behaviour and emotional regulation.

Composure challenges us to move beyond extreme reactions of idealization or demonization in response to events outside our control, such as the outcomes of sporting events.

Planning is integral to composure. A 'rolling plan' acknowledges the fluid nature of life, adapting and revising with the ever-changing tides, as opposed to rigidly adhering to static goals influenced by societal expectations.

Accessing composure is a proactive endeavour. Techniques such as relaxation, mindfulness, and martial arts can foster a composed state, training the mind to filter out distractions and focus on peak performance.

To be 'in the moment' is to engage fully with the now, a concept that has become almost cliché but is profoundly important in the pursuit of composure.

Relaxation and Mindfulness Practices

Through consistent practice of relaxation techniques, be it meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, or deep breathing exercises, we can alleviate anxiety and embrace calmness, particularly in high-pressure scenarios. Mindfulness - the practice of observation and remaining present and non-judgmental - allows for a focused engagement with the task at hand, mitigating distractions and maximizing performance and there are online resources, such as the mindfulness meditation app Waking Up by Sam Harris or other meditation apps such as Headspace or Calm, which can serve as valuable tools in cultivating a mindful approach to life's challenges.

Aikido enthusiasts often extol the virtues of relaxation as a pathway to harnessing greater strength. While I hold a degree of scepticism regarding the scientific grounding of this assertion, the resilience of their philosophy is undeniable. One illustrative practice is the "unbendable arm" test, which is readily accessible online. The premise is simple: when your arm is rigid, an opponent of comparable strength can bend it with ease. In contrast, an arm that is relaxed and coupled with focused visualization resists bending with surprising tenacity.

This exercise, Aikido practitioners argue, is proof positive of the potency inherent in relaxation paired with a constructive mindset. The concept of wielding strength through tranquillity may present a conundrum to some, provoking debates that perhaps prior muscle priming contributes to the increased resistance observed in subsequent attempts. Regardless of the rationale, the symbiosis of relaxation and focus stands as a cornerstone of martial arts discipline.

Routines and rituals are time-honoured strategies to attain 'the zone', that mental state where focus is heightened and whether it's a particular sequence executed before a critical event, like the measured bounces of a tennis ball by Novak Djokovic before his serve, or consistent stretching routines, these actions instil a sense of control and diminish anxiety. Consider the player poised to kick a vital penalty goal; a well-rehearsed routine can provide the tranquillity necessary for success. The meticulous packing of a kit bag or the ritualistic dressing before a match is all part of this psychological armament, affording athletes a fragment of constancy in the unpredictable world of competitive sports.

Imagery is a potent tool for refining and correcting performance, leveraging an individual's capacity for visualization. Not only does it encompass several mental toughness categories, but it also underpins many success stories. Jack Nicklaus, the golf legend, famously stated, "I never hit a shot, even in practice, without having a sharp, in-focus picture of it in my head." He envisioned the entire sequence: the end position of the ball, its flight, and even its behaviour upon landing. This mental preparation was akin to a vibrant cinematic experience, setting the stage for the physical enactment of his visions.

Beyond performance enhancement, imagery aids in analysing and revising one's experiences. By imagining alternative strategies for less-than-ideal outcomes, one can refine their approach.

Figure skaters who mentally rehearsed their routines showed significant improvements over those who did not, suggesting that just like muscles, the brain's imagery capabilities require regular exercise to prevent atrophy.

Imagery is also an invaluable tool for anticipating and moderating over-arousal responses to crucial or unexpected events. By visualizing a performance within the actual competition setting, using all senses, and incorporating relaxation techniques, one can cultivate the mental and physical patterns necessary for skilful execution under pressure.

The technique of thought substitution can be an effective weapon against persistent worries or negative ruminations. This method involves a physical or visual cue such as saying 'stop', snapping fingers, or picturing a stop sign to redirect attention to critical performance elements and away from unconstructive or distracting thoughts.

'Centering' is a psychological technique designed to direct one's focus on the present task. It is particularly useful in regaining composure amidst distractions or stress. Like intermittent periods of intense exercise, intense focus cannot be sustained indefinitely. The art of focusing is predicated on living in the moment, unshackled from past failures or future anxieties. By commanding their ability to stay mentally present, high achievers methodically advance through their plan, step by step, maintaining composure through a state of calm, present awareness.

Trigger words are another practical form of imagery, serving as mnemonic devices for key performance cues. Phrases like 'Focus' or 'Let it go' can anchor an athlete's attention in the present, crafting a mental barrier against external distractions and heightening performance focus. Additionally, there are breathing exercises, such as box breathing, which is a foundational practice for accessing a composed state. By engaging the parasympathetic nervous system, these methods promote calmness, aiding performers in achieving the necessary poise for their endeavours.

Another technique called 'bracketing' involves mentally compartmentalizing major disappointments or traumas to maintain effective functioning. This doesn't belittle the traumatic event but rather contains its impact. This ability to emotionally detach, is about maintaining supportive yet non-engulfing relationships, establishing boundaries across various facets of life—physical, emotional, spiritual, social, intellectual, financial, and sexual—to safeguard against feeling overwhelmed or manipulated by negative emotions.

10. CONFIDENCE

“Believe you can, and you’re probably halfway there.” – Theodore Roosevelt

Confidence is the catalyst for action. Without it, hesitation wins. With it, you step forward, even when you don’t have every answer. Confidence is not arrogance; its conviction rooted in preparation, resilience, and the belief that you can find a way through.

Not everyone displays the bravado of the late Muhammad Ali or the poise of elite achievers, but everyone can cultivate confidence. Its roots lie in childhood—shaped by family, education, culture, and chance events—and it matures through lived experience. Some inherit a steady belief in themselves. Others carry scars: labelling confidence as arrogance, replaying failures, or fearing exposure. That baggage corrodes self-belief. Building confidence requires acknowledging individuality, recognizing the role of chance, and reshaping limiting beliefs.

Defining Confidence

Confidence is self-belief with humility. It’s the capacity to navigate complexity while integrating multiple perspectives.

Key aspects of confidence:

1. Going beyond ordinary confidence to supreme confidence with humility.
2. Balanced self-belief that excludes arrogance.
3. Projecting presence and authority without domination.
4. Leading situationally, not clinging to outdated hero models.
5. Resilience—the ability to rebound after setbacks.
6. Comfort with multiple perspectives, both central and peripheral.
7. Creating high-performance teamwork through collaboration.

Mantra: *I will be the main actor in the decisive scenes of my existence—whether epic or tragic.*

Confidence is not the same as social charisma. Many public figures—teachers, speakers, athletes—are naturally shy yet summon deep belief when it counts.

Supreme Confidence

Supreme confidence allows individuals to take centre stage in life’s decisive moments. Ali’s “*I am the greatest*” sounded arrogant, but he trained until he could back it up. Supreme confidence looks brash to some, but its core is conviction, preparation, and intent.

True confidence lifts performance. Arrogance diminishes others. Confident people back themselves without belittling teammates. Arrogant people condescend and declare victory too early. Supreme confidence is conviction plus humility, never superiority.

Losing Confidence in Public

At what should have been a high point in my speaking career, I faced one of my worst moments. I prepared a multimedia presentation for a major bank's annual conference—polished slides, sharp videos, and carefully designed audio. Yet, when I stepped onto the stage, the technology collapsed. Audio failed, visuals skewed, videos froze.

Standing before a large audience, my confidence shattered. I had trusted the venue's "standard setup" (a central perspective: proven practice) but ignored a peripheral safeguard—bringing my own kit and running a full stress test.

For days, I questioned my speaking career. Was I cut out for this work? I nearly gave up. But reflection turned humiliation into growth. I rebuilt my confidence with redundant systems, stricter checklists, and a five-minute rehearsal ritual: *fail in practice, not on stage*.

That disaster taught me confidence isn't bravado. It's preparation plus adaptability. And it showed me the value of blending central perspectives (follow the AV brief) with peripheral perspectives (anticipate failure, design backups).

Situational Leadership

Confidence is a pillar of mental toughness, but not the brittle kind that clings to control. In Red Ocean contexts—ruthless competition, scarcity—leaders default to crisis leadership. They behave like control driven rulers valuing compliance, and drama. They hoard credit, breed fear, and create us-versus-them fear cultures. The leader "wins" while the team watches.

Mentally tough leaders act differently they practice transformative leadership. They reduce posturing, share credit, and shed outdated authority. They build Blue Ocean environments based on humility, inclusion, and shared purpose. They know when to anchor on **central perspectives** (tested routines) and when to embrace **peripheral perspectives** (fresh, disruptive insights).

Blue Ocean leaders grow autonomy, trust, and innovation. They adapt with intention, choosing clarity over chaos, inclusion over isolation, and collaboration over compliance.

Confidence and High-Performance Teamwork

Little of lasting value is achieved in isolation. Confidence fuels teamwork, where the quality of decisions depends on trust in self, teammates, and management.

True teamwork isn't dependency ("you" mindset) or independence ("I" mindset). It's interdependence: the "we" mindset. Interdependence emerges when teams combine **central perspectives** (mainstream, proven practices) with **peripheral perspectives** (outsider insights that challenge convention). The centre anchors trust; the edge sparks innovation. Together, they create new value.

Even elite teams can falter when central and peripheral voices fall out of balance. Some suggest the fading results of the Red Bull Team in 2024 and early 2025 were linked to teamwork breakdowns—blame, mistrust, and sidelining diverse inputs.

Conflict Management Styles

Conflict is inevitable. People differ in beliefs, values, and opinions. It escalates when we defend positions as absolute.

Mental toughness demands managing both external disputes and internal dilemmas: Should I speak up or keep the peace? Push or yield. Five styles provide options:

1. **Avoiding:** Low assertiveness, low cooperation. Sometimes wise, often avoidance of discomfort. Lose–lose.
2. **Competing:** High assertiveness, low cooperation. Decisive but toxic if habitual.
3. **Accommodating:** Low assertiveness, high cooperation. Preserves harmony but risks hidden resentment.
4. **Compromising:** Moderate assertiveness, moderate cooperation. Pragmatic but rarely optimal—still zero-sum.
5. **Collaborating:** The positive sum game. High assertiveness, high cooperation. The gold standard. Not splitting differences but co-creating new value.

Collaboration blends **central perspectives** (trusted norms) with **peripheral perspectives** (creative edge ideas). It transforms lapdogs into hunting dogs—working in sync, not waiting for command. Conflict becomes a catalyst for innovation.

Safe Off-Ramp – Creating Space to Reflect

Not every conflict can be resolved in the moment. Sometimes the tough choice is to create an off-ramp safe space to pause.

This isn't retreat but strategy. Safe spaces preserve dignity, de-escalate tension, and allow people to re-engage with more openness. Here, both central stability and peripheral novelty can re-enter the conversation. Resolution matters, but recovery is vital.

Confidence and Communication – Johari's Window

Communication underpins confidence. Johari's Window offers a framework of four quadrants:

1. **Open Area (Arena):** Known to self and others. Enlarged through openness and feedback.
2. **Blind Area (Blind Spot):** Known to others but not to self. Peripheral perspectives are crucial here, exposing what we can't see.
3. **Hidden Area (Facade):** Known to self but concealed from others. Shrinks with disclosure and trust.
4. **Unknown Area:** Unknown to both self and others. Exploration and collaboration unlock hidden potential.

Confidence grows when teams enlarge the Open Area, shrink blind spots, and explore the unknown together. Balancing central clarity and peripheral challenge expands awareness and trust.

Confidence and Change Resilience

Change is relentless—technological, political, and personal. Emotions often override reason. Mental toughness doesn't remove emotion but prevents paralysis.

The Kübler-Ross model of grief shows how people move through emotional stages in change. Confidence reduces the threat perception, accelerating adaptation. It grows from concentration, composure, competence, commitment—all components of mental toughness.

Confidence is not innate; it develops through deliberate practice, reflection, and mentorship. Role models, whether intentional or accidental, shape our self-belief. Supporting others also builds confidence in ourselves, as seen in the military's "battle buddy" system: mutual reliance strengthens resilience.

Loss of Confidence

Confidence can collapse suddenly. A botched project, a failed exam, or—as I experienced—a public disaster.

Loss differs from lack. Lack is long-standing and rooted in self-doubt; loss is sudden, often triggered by a specific event. But if unaddressed, loss can spiral into chronic lack. Recovery requires reflection, small wins, and gradual rebuilding.

Limiting Beliefs

Beliefs define limits. Before Roger Bannister, the four-minute mile was "impossible." Once he broke it, dozens followed. Confidence is the bridge between limitation to aspiration.

Motivation and Desire

Aristotle argued that desire fuels achievement. Without it, effort collapses. Motivation combines desire with the belief that action is worthwhile.

Maslow highlighted needs that drive behaviour. Self-determination theory emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Short wins build momentum and confidence. Positive self-talk reinforces belief—provided it maintains composure, not frenzy. We hear ourselves more than anyone else; our inner voice can either undermine or reinforce us.

Confidence grows when belief and motivation align. It allows us to move from hesitation to execution, from limitation to possibility.

Summary

Confidence is not arrogance, nor is it static. It can be nurtured, lost, and rebuilt. At its best, it balances **central perspectives** (proven stability) with **peripheral perspectives** (fresh challenge).

Confidence enables leaders to create Blue Ocean cultures, teams to innovate through interdependence, and individuals to recover from setbacks. It is the bridge between limitation and aspiration—and it is always within reach.

11. CALCULATED RISKS

“Taking calculated risks is a way to become successful. This means riding your confidence, living on the edge and doing what others might view as reckless.” RICHARD BRANSON

Extreme sports specialists and entrepreneurs are known for pushing the boundaries and embracing high risks. However, many individuals perceive such risk-taking as reckless. In this chapter, we explore the concept of taking calculated risks as a fundamental component of mental toughness. Unlike extreme risk-taking, calculated risks are strategic and measured, allowing individuals to seize opportunities and create new ones.

Taking Calculated Risks

People who excel in taking calculated risks begin by acknowledging that to attain something they've never had; they must be willing to do things they've never done before. They understand that avoiding risks can sometimes lead to even greater risks in the long run. Calculated risk-takers recognize that opportunities often demand a degree of risk, whether to capitalize on existing possibilities or to generate new ones.

Renowned entrepreneur Richard Branson offers valuable insights into calculated risks. He advises that when presented with an incredible opportunity, even if you doubt your ability to tackle it, you should say yes and then figure out how to succeed. Waiting until you feel entirely prepared may result in perpetual hesitation.

Additionally, Branson emphasizes the importance of capping the downside when taking calculated risks. For example, when expanding into the airline industry in 1984, he negotiated a condition with Boeing to allow him to return the airplanes at the end of the first year if the business did not attract enough customers. This precaution prevented a single failure from jeopardizing his other ventures and ensured job security for his Virgin Records employees.

Calculated risks involve venturing beyond your comfort zone to attain new value. This endeavour requires risk assessment. To take calculated risks, you must break through self-imposed and conventional barriers, employing curiosity courage, agility, innovation, and improvisation to challenge barriers and navigate uncharted territory.

Essential Aspects of Calculated Risks

1. Most people perform better when they have something to lose.
2. Reach beyond your grasp – drawing on curiosity and courage to live on the edge.
3. Calculated risk-takers do not eliminate fear; they learn to keep it under control.
4. Continuous innovation and improvisation are essential when facing challenges.
5. Willingness to accept failing but fail fast, learn from it, and bounce back better.
6. Ambition Over Sloth: If you fail, let it be due to ambition, not a lack of effort.
7. Get it done, working as fast as you carefully can.
8. Realise that success is often dependent on being a person of action and swiftness.

Reaching beyond your grasp

To reach beyond your grasp you enable courage by using mental toughness. Courage is a skill that can be cultivated. Much like a muscle, courage strengthens with practice. By taking incremental steps outside your comfort zone, you can build the reserves of courage needed to navigate calculated risks. Expect some fear and resistance, especially from stakeholders who may not share your risk appetite.

Your risk-taking disposition may range from extremely risk-averse to accommodating. Risk aversion can hinder you from pursuing opportunities with uncertain yet potentially higher rewards. Calculated risks strike a balance between caution and adventure, allowing you to embrace uncertainty and complexity responsibly.

Most people tend to follow the herd and settle for incremental improvements through common or best practices. However, calculated risks offer the opportunity to leap ahead of the pack and stand out. They require discipline, daring, and the willingness to challenge familiar boundaries to create new value. This requires stepping out of your comfort zone, accepting discomfort, and venturing into the unknown. Just as a grizzly bear risks a treacherous river to catch salmon, you must navigate the metaphorical deep waters where potential rewards await.

Trial and error are fundamental aspects of calculated risks. Instead of relying on a single approach, embrace criticism and failure as opportunities for learning and improvement. Adapt and iterate, testing various options to determine what works best for your intended outcome.

Examples such as isolated Japanese rugby team's victories and Leicester City Football Club's Premier League win in 2016 illustrate the power of punching above one's weight. These successes underscore the potential for calculated risks to lead to exceptional achievements.

Reference points play a crucial role in shaping your behaviour. To take calculated risks, you must change your mental reference point regarding how tough your life has been and how tough you perceive it to be. By gradually crossing self-imposed limitations, you establish new boundaries and expand your capabilities.

Calculated risks offer a path to transcend self-imposed limitations. Often, limitations are rooted in painful memories that we hold onto. By exercising courage and determination, you can move past these self-imposed barriers and unlock your true potential.

Taking calculated risks is a pivotal aspect of mental toughness, requiring a blend of courage, innovation, and adaptability. When done thoughtfully and strategically, these risks can lead to substantial personal and professional growth.

Did Springbok rugby have a good track record of crossing barriers?

In 2001, there was a bold attempt to modify the default intimidation game plan of the Springboks. The incumbent coach, Harry Viljoen, wanted to introduce a more situational and creative game-plan. To start with he wanted to initiate a groundbreaking shift. Traditionally, the Springboks, like all other teams, used kicking as a default attack and defence tactic.

He discussed this with the players, and jointly they decided to experiment by reducing their dependence on kicking towards a more holistic gameplan. This change aimed to encourage a more imaginative and adaptable ball in hand style of play.

The idea became an experiment in the test match against Argentina. They agreed on no kicking in the game! This approach immediately raised eyebrows among supporters and the press.

The option of running the ball into spaces where they would historically have kicked, seemed reckless. Yet, despite the criticism of their no kicking approach they won the game. Unfortunately, negative feedback from stakeholders, including journalists and rugby fans, influenced the coach's commitment to this calculated risk. Consequently, the team reverted to their traditional 'subdue and win' approach for the next game and shelved the no kicking experiment from then onwards.

Assumptions can often masquerade as facts, limiting our potential for innovation. In one memorable instance, early in my career as a production manager overseeing a canned dog food factory, I encountered a pervasive assumption. It was widely accepted that producing canned dog food inherently resulted in a foul smell permeating the factory.

The process involved preparing, mixing, and cooking ingredients before filling cans, sealing them, and sterilizing them in high-temperature retorts for seventy minutes. The factory's staff, me included, found the smell unbearable, and the finished product had an unpleasant odour when opened.

The assumption to challenge was that canned dog food manufacturing inherently produced a foul odour. Despite initial setbacks, experimentation led to a breakthrough. By leaving enough headspace in the cans and injecting steam into that space just before sealing, we created a vacuum that prevented can distortion during sterilization. This innovation revolutionized canned pet food, eliminating the foul odour, and improving the product.

Coca-Cola's shift in perspective in the 1980s serves as an instructive example. Instead of focusing solely on increasing their share of the cola market, the company's leadership, under Roberto Goizueta, aimed to capture a more significant share of consumers' overall beverage consumption.

This change in perspective expanded their competition from other cola brands to water, milk, coffee, and more. As a result, Coca-Cola's opportunities grew, fuelling creativity, determination, and financial success. This strategic shift illustrates the power of viewing challenges and opportunities from diverse angles.

Innovate and improvise

Innovation and improvisation are critical components of taking calculated risks and pushing boundaries. While many individuals and teams have access to similar resources and intellectual property, what sets them apart is their ability to innovate and adapt.

Creating a culture that fosters optimism, creative imagination, invention, innovation, re-invention, and improvisation is paramount. To achieve this, it's essential to commit to these

principles in your business strategy. While the specifics of innovation and improvisation may not always be predictable, they are not random. They come into play when seizing opportunities and ensuring business sustainability.

Calculated risks are about inventing, reinventing, promoting, or refining offerings. Sometimes, innovation involves reconfiguring and adapting existing ideas rather than creating something entirely new. Benchmarking and imitation, while useful, cannot lead to true originality or excellence.

Maintaining high standards is crucial when promoting a culture of calculated risk-taking. In bureaucratic environments, innovators need protection from red tape and excessive constraints.

Elon Musk's journey to becoming the world's richest person provides a compelling illustration of innovation and calculated risk-taking. Apparently, after selling his share of PayPal for \$180 million, he invested in SpaceX, Tesla, and SolarCity, even borrowing money for rent in 2002. By 2018, Musk had received a \$55-million bonus. By 2020, he was the second richest person globally, and by 2022, he became the richest and has since maintained a position among the richest. He recently, for a short while, became a close ally of the American president.

This incredible rise to prominence underscores how great innovators who are risk seeking and show up with entrepreneurial audacity are rewarded, demonstrating the transformative potential of calculated risks.

Korean singer Psy's viral hit, "Gangnam Style," serves as an example of the impact of improvisation. The music video unexpectedly became the most-watched video on YouTube. Psy's parody of old-style rodeo dancing captured global attention, showcasing the potential for improvisation to yield remarkable success.

Taking calculated risks necessitates creativity and imagination. It requires both doing things differently and doing different things. The least beneficial risk is one that ties up resources and hampers progress. Developing creative options is crucial.

Everyone possesses creative potential that can be nurtured and improved. Our subconscious minds can provide creative ideas when we prioritize creativity in our lives. When facing challenges, consider the perspectives of individuals you admire for their creativity and innovation, such as Nelson Mandela, Napoleon, or Helen Keller.

Taking calculated risks doesn't mean endorsing miscalculated and poorly understood risks. There's a significant distinction between calculated risk-taking and recklessness. A healthy fear of disastrous consequences can be a prudent guide.

The global financial crisis of 2008 serves as a stark example of the dire consequences of poorly understood and mismanaged risks in the realm of complex financial products. Centralized debt obligations and similar financial instruments triggered a crisis, where those taking these risks, primarily the leaders of the financial sector, often came out unscathed while their consumers suffered immense losses. The documentary "Inside Job" provides valuable insights into this financial crisis.

Sometimes, life presents situations where taking calculated risks becomes a necessity for survival. The remarkable story of British adventurer and ship's captain, Sir Ernest Shackleton, vividly illustrates this concept.

In 1914, Shackleton embarked on an Antarctic expedition with the aim of crossing the continent from one coast to the other via the South Pole. However, disaster struck when his ship, *Endurance*, became trapped in pack ice and was slowly crushed before the shore parties could be landed. Shackleton and his crew faced extreme challenges and were ultimately forced to make heroic escapes to safety. Remarkably, no lives were lost, cementing Shackleton's legacy as a true hero.

Shackleton's story has been immortalized in books and a movie featuring Kenneth Branagh. While watching a film can be engaging, reading offers the opportunity for active engagement with the material, stimulating creative imagination and enhancing one's ability to express ideas effectively. I believe that reading good books create a mind that has many rooms - like a mansion. Whilst not reading and relying on social media creates a mind that is like a single room apartment.

The tragic story of the late Dan Osman (1963 – 1998), an extreme sportsman, renowned for his fearless exploits in rope jumping and rock climbing without safety gear, underscores the significance of protecting against the extreme downside when taking calculated risks. Osman's life was characterized by pushing the boundaries of extreme sports, particularly those involving great heights.

However, Osman's ultimate demise was not a result of the risks he took but rather a failure in his equipment. The rope that snapped during one of his jumps had been exposed to harsh weather conditions for an extended period. This tragic incident emphasizes the wisdom of Richard Branson's advice regarding risk management—protecting against the extreme downsides is essential even for the most daring risk-takers.

These insights from visionary leaders underscore the value of taking calculated risks and challenging the status quo. While the path of innovation may entail uncertainties and setbacks, it is often the road less travelled that leads to remarkable discoveries and achievements.

Steve Jobs captured the idea of innovation perfectly when he argued that true innovation transcends conventional wisdom. He challenged us to anticipate needs people couldn't yet articulate, famously saying, *"People do not know what they want until you show it to them."* Henry Ford echoed this mindset decades earlier, recognizing the limits of sticking to the familiar. As Ford quipped, *"If I'd asked customers what they wanted, they would have told me, 'A faster horse.'"*

Learn from mistakes, fail fast and bounce back better

In the pursuit of bold action, one undeniable truth stands out: we regret the things left undone far more than the things we dared to attempt. Calculated risks are about taking decisive steps, knowing that life rewards action over hesitation. The fear of failure often looms larger than

failure itself, yet it is failure that offers the most valuable lessons. Mistakes are not the end; they are stepping stones to growth, resilience, and success.

Calculated risks are not reckless, they are about embracing failure as part of the journey, learning quickly, and bouncing back better. To move ahead, you must act, fail, reflect, and adjust.

12. COMPETENCE

“The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.” Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (1970)

Unlocking Competence: Transforming Talent into Mastery

Talent is a common thread, but what sets the exceptional apart is their ability to transform that talent into a rare level of competence. Tim Notke famously claimed, “hard work beats talent when talent doesn’t work hard”. Improving competence calls for the relentless pursuit of learning – gaining knowledge and skill, bridging the chasm between the known and the unknown. It is the key to operating effectively and efficiently in the present while securing a pathway to thrive in the future. If one looks at skills development from a mental toughness point of view, it’s additionally important to learn and execute skills under stress. One must break down the chain reaction of negative stimulus which generates a negative emotion followed by negative thought and finally expressing a negative action i.e. a loss of skill.

I recall being on tour with the Springbok team and observing the coach, intervening during a kicking practice. He challenged the fly half. “I will give you a thousand rand for every successful kick, but you must give me a thousand rand for every missed kick.” At the time I thought that was a good example of learning to execute skills under pressure i.e. Teaching your emotions as well as your skills.

Key Aspects of Competence

1. You understand the teaching of the Dunning Kruger effect.
2. You learn, unlearn, and relearn.
3. You challenge norms and beliefs that may unconsciously restrict your growth.
4. You actively review the psychological and perceptual tools gathered from your past.
5. You get in the game, becoming relevant through qualifications or experience.
6. You get ahead in the game, becoming remarkable through more learning.
7. You get ahead of the game, becoming rare through unlearning and relearning.

We all have moments when competence eludes us, not because we are incompetent, but rather because our perceived competence is created by levels of confidence. We could have an illusion of knowledge on one end mainly because we are overconfident, or we become the victim of a lack of confidence on the other end. A major step towards developing competence is recognizing where over or under confidence is our problem.

But a word of warning from the late Stephen Hawking’s reputed claim; Confidence driven by the illusion of knowledge propels you to the top of mount stupid.

In a 1999 study, Dunning and Kruger from Cornell University revealed that many highly skilled individuals underestimate their abilities, grappling with illusory inferiority. Competent individuals may erroneously assume others possess equivalent skills, occasionally leading to

under-confidence. During the 2015-2017 international rugby seasons, the Springbok rugby team's under-confidence was a primary factor in their performance decline. Lack of confidence can precipitate a performance downturn, as opponents sense vulnerability, leading to unexpected defeats.

The Dunning-Kruger effect is characterized by a cognitive bias that causes unskilled individuals to overestimate their abilities, leading to poor decisions and erroneous conclusions. Over-confident individuals often suffer from illusory superiority, believing their abilities far exceed the average. Over-confidence manifests in inaccurate predictions and poor planning. In various fields, individuals may hold positions based on titles, potentially suffering from competence delusion.

Eric Hoffer's insight becomes especially pertinent here: "The learners will inherit the earth; the learned will find they are beautifully equipped for a world that no longer exists." In other words, your ability to adapt and learn must outpace the rate of change in your domain. Failure to build competence leaves you perilously vulnerable in an ever-evolving world. We need to learn, unlearn, and relearn.

Becoming Relevant (getting in the game)

Imagine competence as three scaffolds, your first learning scaffold is to become relevant through formal learning or applicable experience. This opens the door for active participation in a chosen field. For many, this initial scaffold takes the form of the type of learning, that provides a foundational repository of knowledge. It's like possessing an 'access card' to your domain. Your first scaffold can manifest as a skill, a physical advantage, a network of connections, or a particular attitude. The key is to become relevant and get your foot in the door.

While some are self-taught or acquire knowledge through personal experiences, General James Mattis' wisdom reminds us of the price of learning through experience—the hard way. Reading, on the other hand, allows you to learn from others' experiences, often a quicker, more advantageous approach.

Yuval Harari's insight underscores the evolving landscape of learning: "The initial struggle in the 21st century will be about becoming relevant, so that you are not fixated on being exploited."

To operate at your peak, you must adopt a deep approach to learning, which leads to a profound understanding of your environment.

Becoming remarkable (getting ahead in the game)

To become remarkable, you construct the next scaffold of your competence journey. This entails questioning your acquired answers and adding more answers to your inventory of knowledge and skills than you acquired from surface-level learning where you prioritized memorization over understanding.

Becoming rare (getting ahead of the game)

Becoming rare requires deep learning and is fuelled by curiosity about how things work, why they work or could work. Often it calls upon identifying and challenging past norms and beliefs. It seeks diverse perspectives, values feedback, engages in scientific inquiry, and constructs new realities.

As we delve into this scaffold of competence, we venture into the realm of going beyond relevant, past remarkable and accessing rare. This position requires us to challenge the questions themselves to help us evolve and enable the creation of new value. When we commit to being rare, we become aware of any mind capture that is trapping us in the past and no longer serves our environment or is plain wrong. This process unleashes our self-authoring minds, allowing us to unlearn and relearn, particularly where we embrace the notion that we don't know we don't know.

In this quest to become rare, you question the very questions that have defined your understanding. This process empowers you to break free from prior learning and societal conditioning – you do not allow the fumes of the past to cloud your judgement. The objective is clear: create new value by redefining the questions that result in seeing the world through new eyes, with this vision you weave the threads of your present, figure out what the next moment is and ensure that you create novel, better answers.

Consider how critical thinking and technology can be harnessed to cultivate rarity? Those well-versed in technology often possess immunity against falling prey to advertising's siren call. When you attain rarity, you ascend to a level where you can outmanoeuvre the competition, unveil uncharted territories, and unravel the unimaginable. You explore avenues others overlook that were obstructed by self-imposed assumptions and boundaries imposed by the fear of the unknown. It's also useful to take on the notion that you must not see this moment from this moment.

The legendary Freddy Mercury, renowned for his fronting of the band Queen, provides a compelling illustration of conquering the fear of the unknown. He believed that the element of danger was an essential ingredient in the pursuit of excellence. As he boldly reconfigured his mindset to embrace danger, he undertook a rare journey that pushed the boundaries of music and performance.

Despite resistance from his management and naysayers, Mercury took career-re defining risks. One of his most notable feats was fusing commercial rock music with opera, exemplified in the iconic "Bohemian Rhapsody." His courage in transcending established norms and blending genres epitomizes the path to rarity.

Michael Lewis, acclaimed author of "Moneyball" (2003), underscores a pervasive human trait—we often remain oblivious to areas where we can enhance our game. Our daily routines and habits can obscure opportunities for improvement. Furthermore, we often unquestioningly accept conventional wisdom, limiting our potential.

Lewis opens his book with a quote from athlete Mickey Mantle: "It is unbelievable how much you don't know about the game you have been playing all your life." This statement resonates with the idea that self-awareness and an openness to learning are keys to growth.

Billy Beane, former general manager of the Oakland Athletics baseball team, introduced a paradigm shift in the world of sports with "Moneyball." He embraced a new approach to using statistics for performance analysis. Beane challenged the prevailing wisdom of insiders, such as players, managers, coaches, and scouts, recognizing its limitations and flaws.

His revolutionary approach emphasized the importance of statistical reasoning in player recruitment and performance evaluation, surpassing the conventional expertise of so-called "experts." This approach also allowed teams with fewer resources to outsmart richer competitors by leveraging technology—a paradigmatic shift in the analysis of sports performance.

Michael Lewis further explores the theme of unquestioning acceptance in his follow-up book, "The Undoing Project" (2016). The passages that captivated my attention emphasize the need to be sufficiently indifferent to the opinions of experts. Moreover, the more we are paid, the more costly our sloppy decisions become. The allure of charm can mask a deep disinterest in hard work.

Critical Thinking and Unlearning

While many are open to learning but unlearning remains a challenge, especially when it involves shedding norms and beliefs deeply ingrained over time, particularly those that are restricting the boundaries of your imagination. Identifying what needs to be unlearned is itself a daunting task, as most individuals are unaware of their mental captures. Nonetheless, the journey to rarity (creating new value) demands unlearning, then relearning paving the way for continued growth and transformation. Another way of looking at it is to accept "When you start looking for something, you will find a lot more than when you were not looking".

To embark on the journey to rare competence, we must first recognize the critical role that education plays in our development. As Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman wisely notes, "We are often blind to our blindness," highlighting our inherent limitations in self-awareness. Education serves as the beacon that dispels this blindness and propels us forward. To become rare, you must cultivate critical thinking to unlearn, and research combined with new technology to relearn.

Critical thinking challenges what shaped how you feel about the world. It emerges as a paramount skill in the ever-evolving landscape of competence. As Isaac Asimov aptly states, "The saddest aspect of life is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom."

Mark Cuban, the billionaire investor, and Shark Tank personality, predicts that excelling at critical thinking will become the most sought-after skill among job candidates.

Critical thinking is the process of scrutinizing the validity of your thoughts, opinions, and beliefs. It involves identifying areas where you may need to unlearn past assumptions and mind capture. This crucial skill requires acknowledging your biases and the tendency to favour information that confirms your existing beliefs.

Socratic questioning, widely regarded as the origin of critical thinking, centres on disciplined inquiry to unearth the origins of your thoughts, leading to a deeper comprehension of your context. Metacognition, an essential component of critical thinking, revolves around your awareness of thought processes and the influence of pattern-seeking tendencies.

Metacognition involves asking questions such as: Does my curiosity challenge my certainty? Why do I think the way I do? Why do I hold the beliefs I do? Have I learned from past – even present mistakes and ceased their repetition? Do I stay blind when confronted with evidence conflicting with my beliefs? Have some of my beliefs become puppeteers, trapping me in a self-righteous delusion?

This practice enables you to contemplate your thought processes, identify patterns, and discern commonalities and differences beyond surface-level elements. It equips you to transcend overdramatic and catastrophic worldviews, conquer irrational fears, and regain mental control. Insight, characterized by a profound understanding based on external realities, empowers better decision-making, stress management, and alignment with genuine priorities.

Critical thinking, combined with the rigorous examination of causal evidence, often leads to the realization that certain deeply held beliefs have mind captured us and need to be unlearned. These beliefs fall into the category of "Mega Misconceptions," encompassing notions that require revision and refinement in light of newfound understanding.

Embracing critical reflection of both positive and challenging experiences can be instrumental in personal growth. Adversity, especially during times of stress, presents unique opportunities for growth and transformation. By embracing adversity and leveraging critical thinking, we can catalyse personal development and move closer to mastery.

In the pursuit of mental toughness, we confront a formidable adversary: confirmation bias. This inherent tendency leads us to seek validation for our existing perspectives and convictions. Every one of us is susceptible to the subtle grasp of cognitive biases, as our beliefs are deeply interwoven with societal norms. Consequently, we vigorously defend our viewpoints, often dismissing opposing ones. This inclination often leads us to embrace comforting lies over inconvenient truths. To break free from this cognitive trap, we must embark on a transformative journey.

Start this journey by asking yourself: Are some of my convictions a product of social conditioning? Do I struggle to make ethically independent decisions that diverge from my tribe's beliefs? These questions serve as crucial signposts on the path to intellectual growth.

I vividly recall a conversation with my Ph.D. supervisor, Professor Paul Avis, who shed light on the challenges of our era, marked by fiercely contested realities. He emphasized the tendency of individuals to approach hypotheses in a one-sided and affirming manner. Instead of impartially exploring all relevant evidence, we often seek confirmation of pre-existing beliefs. Our questions are crafted to elicit affirmations, reinforcing our viewpoints. Professor Avis admonished, "Do not let opinion triumph over facts."

Researching, not just searching

"One thing a person cannot do, no matter how rigorous his analysis or heroic his imagination," the Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling once observed, "is to draw up a list of things that would never occur to him." And yet hard choices usually require us to make those kinds of imaginative leaps: to discover new possibilities that had not been visible to us when we first started wrestling with the decision; to find our way, somehow, to the unknown unknowns lurking outside our field of vision." (from "Farsighted: How We Make the Decisions that Matter the Most" by Steven Johnson)

A significant challenge to research lies in the prevalent mistrust and, at times, distrust of science. History is rife with examples of society's reluctance to accept scientific claims, often clinging to deeply ingrained beliefs. Galileo's ordeal, condemned for heresy in 1633 for challenging the Earth-centric view of the universe, serves as a stark reminder of this resistance. Nevertheless, we are prompted to research when we hear dubious claims. This leads to wanting substantiated explanations and prioritizing credible sources over hearsay. The importance of research in acquiring knowledge cannot be overstated, as evidenced by Ben Goldacre's commitment to addressing problems, dispelling myths, and distinguishing effective from ineffective practices.

The scientific method remains the gold standard for substantiating or falsifying claims. It involves proposing hypotheses and subjecting them to rigorous testing and retesting over time. As Steven Pinker aptly puts it, "Science is not a game with an arbitrary rulebook; it's the application of a method of reason to explaining the universe and ascertaining whether its explanations are true."

Fareed Zakaria underscores the fundamental essence of science as a method of inquiry. It is a process of asking questions and rigorously testing hypotheses, leading to new and improved conclusions based on better data.

Yuval Harari, in "21 Lessons for the 21st Century" (2018), underscores the collective responsibility to unearth biases and scrutinize information sources. He acknowledges the impossibility of investigating everything firsthand, making it imperative to critically assess our favored sources—whether they be newspapers, websites, TV networks, or individuals. Harari

offers a simple guiding principle: If you seek reliable information, be willing to invest in it. Free news might come at the cost of being the product itself.

Motivated reasoning poses a significant obstacle to acquiring new knowledge. This cognitive bias compels us to construct arguments that lead to predetermined conclusions. Instead of challenging our beliefs, we actively seek evidence to affirm what we already hold to be true. This insidious process perpetuates confirmation bias and stifles growth.

Embrace Intellectual Humility

George Bernard Shaw once remarked, “Those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.” That’s the essence of unlearning—letting go of beliefs that once served us but may now confine us.

Think of the elephant, once chained by the ankle, who eventually stops resisting—even when the chain is removed. Like the elephant, we can become mentally immobilized by old narratives, unaware of how they limit us.

John Stuart Mill’s observation, “He who knows only his side of the case, knows little of that,” reminds us to seek out opposing views—not to weaken our arguments, but to sharpen them. Confirmation bias, a well-known psychological trap, blinds us to inconvenient truths and reinforces what we already believe. This is why mental toughness requires intellectual humility and the courage to examine what shaped us.

Ask yourself:

- Do dogma and tribal ties trap me in the past?
- Have I become a prisoner of ideology—perhaps even carrying ancestral hatred?
- Am I so confident I’m right that I twist facts to prove it?
- Do I recant earlier positions when new data emerges—do I have scientific integrity?
- Could proper research help me see with new eyes?

These questions aren’t signs of doubt—they are signs of strength. They echo Yuval Noah Harari’s view that our identities are often shaped by inherited stories. To grow, we must learn to see beyond them.

Matthew Syed’s *Black Box Thinking* highlights how progress comes from confronting failure. The aviation industry made air travel safer by studying black boxes, not by ignoring them. We must do the same in our lives—treat mistakes as data, not disgrace.

Competence grows like scaffolding—step by step. This is the “Matthew Effect”: those who have, gain more. But as Steven Pinker and Oxfam point out, the global wealth gap is widening. We must resist the false comfort of zero-sum thinking. Growth and fairness can coexist—if we’re willing to challenge the status quo.

In a changing world, staying static is not an option. We must update our internal software. That might mean unlearning habits, upgrading skills, or just reading more. When focus is low, listen to podcasts. Keep the input flowing.

Competence also depends on emotional intelligence (EQ) -reading others and managing ourselves. This matters most in moments of conflict or relationship strain. EQ gives us a margin of control.

Finally, like South Africa's underperforming Olympic swimmers in 2008, we must reassess our competencies. What once worked might no longer be enough. The most competent people aren't overloaded—they have "spare capacity." They rise to meet challenges with an abundant mindset and relentless curiosity.

AI's Impact on Competence: Hype, Hope, and Healthy Skepticism

The growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI) represents a transformative force, inspiring both hope and skepticism. To navigate its impact, we must become or remain lifelong learners. In times of change, those who embrace learning inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves ill-equipped for a world that no longer resembles the past.

In the dawn of this era profoundly influenced by AI and Biotechnology, Fareed Zakaria contends that to thrive in this evolving landscape, we must cultivate "human savvy" alongside "techno-savvy." This entails nurturing attributes such as critical thinking, unpredictability, warmth, and intimacy, which distinguish us from machines. Amidst the digital surge, our ability to cherish and enhance humanity becomes paramount.

While dystopian fears of AI-controlled robots abound, there is an equally compelling vision of AI as a tool for monumental progress. Tools like CHAT GPT provide an opportunity to augment our competencies. AI's influence on the professional world promises significant transformations. Some jobs may disappear, while new roles emerge, but the majority will be significantly altered. Adapting to this evolving landscape is vital for sustained learning and therefore competence.

Scaffolding our learning should be unconscious and conscious as well. The conscious learning begins with education and extends to embracing change, continually dispensing with some knowledge and simultaneously renewing knowledge, and other forms of intelligence.

As Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) looms on the horizon, promising capabilities beyond human intelligence, navigating this frontier requires a deep understanding of its implications and for those eager to delve deeper into AI's complexities, Mo Gawdat's "Scary Smart" offered a thought-provoking exploration of the subject, encouraging readers to contemplate its ramifications. There are many other sources, and I include Trevor Noah interviewing Sam Altman, CEO of Open AI. The most profound way for me was the notion that the human spirit would counter any existential threat that AI may provide in the future.

In the realm of formal education, the age of AI necessitates a shift in pedagogy. Higher expectations of students and a focus on real-world applicability are crucial in preparing individuals for an AI-influenced future.

Finally, as AI reshapes our world, Yuval Harari claims there is an unprecedented upside to using AI. Developing competence in using AI demands more than skill. – it demands humane values. He claims – “otherwise, ethically, critically, and consciously – if we don’t AI will echo our worst traits louder and wider.”

Ultimately, competence is our compass in an ever-evolving landscape, guiding us toward growth, success and even a little more joy.

Relearning with AI: From Blind Automation to Conscious Competence

AI is not neutral. It reflects the values of those who code it, and the data of those who train it. If we don’t build guardrails rooted in wisdom, it won’t just echo our weaknesses, it will weaponize them.

As Yuval Noah Harari cautions in *Nexus*, “We must use AI ethically or it will amplify our worst traits by deepening inequality, bias and misinformation” (Harari, 2023). AI systems learn from us, reflect us, and, if left unchecked, reinforce the very flaws we hope to overcome.

Tristan Harris, co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology and former Google design ethicist, takes it further. In his TED talk about *Why AI is Our Ultimate Test*, he warns:

“Deployed AI systems already exhibit self-preserving behaviours. We must relearn how we teach machines before they teach us back the wrong things” (Harris, 2023).

These aren’t just philosophical musings—they’re already playing out. Consider TikTok’s algorithm. It doesn’t simply show you what you like; it subtly trains you to like what it shows. A teenage user might start watching fitness tips, but within days be exposed to eating disorder content. That’s not intelligence, it’s a feedback loop optimized for engagement, not wellbeing.

To thrive in this new era, we must develop what I call critical competence—a form of mental toughness rooted in humility and discernment. It’s the ability to question what we feed AI systems and the outcomes we expect. We need to unlearn reflexive behaviour, relearn ethical reasoning, and challenge the convenience of automation when it undermines human values.

13. COMMITMENT

“One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time.”

ANDRÉ GIDE

The Fragile Bonds of Commitment

A vivid memory comes to mind of a man sharing his distress about his wife’s lack of commitment in their marriage. Despite vows made in church and court to stay together “till death do us part,” they parted ways. The reasons were complex— it could have been a slow dissonance through a loss of excitement in the relationship or a growing enthusiasm to be with another. He struggled to pinpoint whether the change was gradual, like a stone slowly eroded by a river, or an abrupt event.

He wondered if small, changes crept in over time. Did conversations grow shorter, was laughter less frequent, and had moments of connection dwindle into silence. At the same time, he wondered if there had been a specific turning point, such as a heated argument about trust. Was this the final straw or merely a catalyst for a breakdown that was already inevitable?

Change, whether gradual or sudden, forces people to confront the unexpected. It disrupts what they believe to be stable and unshakable, exposing vulnerabilities they may not want to face. For this man, the end of his marriage was not just about the relationship itself but also about the loss of the story he had told himself—a narrative of stability, commitment, and shared purpose. He was left questioning everything he once thought was certain.

This raises questions about what might have saved their marriage. Could they have taken longer before committing or managed change better? Could they have taken responsibility instead of blaming? Might they have navigated the obstacles and gritted longer? Perhaps, rather than giving up, they could have compromised for an agreed period to create space for collaboration, paving the way for letting go of or modifying what was not working, then use the parts that worked to launch a reinvention of their relationship.

The lesson here is clear: relationships often fail, not only because of one event, but to an inability to manage the challenges that cumulative change brings. Success, whether in relationships or other areas of life, often depends on adapting, taking ownership, and being open to grit and reinvent.

Defining Commitment: A Blueprint for Resilience

Commitment, a pivotal facet of mental toughness, means refusing to play in a blame-game and therefore not making excuses. This is the art of shouldering the responsibility of intentions (sometimes implicit), the accountability for the outcomes envisioned and remaining steadfast in the face of challenges, transcending the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of life (VUCA). To be committed is to circumnavigate obstacles, drawing on wellsprings of resilience, patience, and adaptability within the ever-changing landscape. It is the art of viewing

problems as yardsticks of our capabilities. Commitment asks us to summon our inner grit, urging us to be dogged in our pursuit and in adversity. While some may entertain the notion of compromise or surrender if grit does not work, I claim that wisdom leads us down a different path of reimagination and reinvention when we encounter an impasse or difficult changes. When we invoke wisdom and embrace a mindset of abundance, countless avenues unfold before us.

Key points on commitment

- Do not get into a victimhood competition – blaming and making excuses.
- Accept responsibility and accountability.
- Grit to stay in the game (or as sports people often say - to stay in the fight).
- When gritting does not lead to improvement, you reinvent a new advantage.

Your commitment mantra is:

I know when to grit, and when gritting does not work anymore, I don't have to compromise or quit, I can continue to grit whilst I reinvent a new advantage to help me rise again.

Commitment is, at its essence, about making the most of the life you have. It beseeches you not to squander your days yearning for an alternate existence or regretting what you have done. Seize the reins of your life, whether navigating the pitfalls of your present circumstances or carving a path towards a brighter future, guarding against paralysis in the face of uncontrollable situations, because it often leads to rumination and despondency.

Commitment disavows the practice of chronic remorse and of blaming external circumstances or seeking solace in excuses. It implores you to acknowledge the past but refrain from dwelling in it. Instead, focus on making amends and the relentless pursuit of growth.

Do not get into a victimhood competition – blaming and making excuses

“There is an expiry date to victimhood (blaming and excuses).” Adapted from J.K.

Rowling's Harvard speech

Commitment begins when excuses end. In a world where blame is often the default setting, it's tempting to join the chorus of complaints. But mental toughness demands that we *resist the victimhood arena*—because blaming and excuse-making might win sympathy, but they lose momentum.

Blame is a seductive narrative. It feels palliative in the short term. But it delays responsibility, growth, and ownership. Every time we say, “They are ripping us off,” or “They caused this mess,” we hand over our power.

Commitment reframes victimhood with empowerment:

Victimhood Claim

Empowerment Response

They are taking advantage of us **I** don't make excuses or sound like a victim.

They are to blame for this mess. **I** don't blame, nor weaponize victimhood – I rebuild.

This reframing is a cornerstone of *mental toughness*. It shifts energy into action. It doesn't mean denying injustice—it means choosing to lead forward *despite* it.

The Self-Serving Bias: Owning the Outcome

When we succeed, we often attribute it to our own abilities or decisions. But when we fail, we're quick to look outside ourselves—pointing to bad luck, political challenges, or the actions of others.

This self-serving bias is deeply human. It protects our ego but limits our growth. If we can't own the problem, we limit our ability to fix it.

A Cautionary Insight: Victimhood as a Lens, Not an Identity

Throughout history, many have suffered under real oppression, and the legacy of those injustices still echoes today. Recognising these truths is essential for healing and progress.

In South Africa, the ruling party draws its roots from a struggle against apartheid—a system that inflicted deep and lasting harm. The impact of that era is still felt. However, after decades in power, a continued framing of challenges through the lens of past injustice can sometimes stall forward momentum.

On the other hand, some members of historically privileged groups may also perceive themselves as victims of new dynamics. For example, a small group of white South African farmers have sought asylum in the USA, citing fears for their safety. While individual fears are real and should never be dismissed lightly, broad claims such as "genocide" have not been supported by data.

The point here is not to invalidate any group's experience. Rather, it's to highlight a psychological trap: when any group—regardless of its history—adopts a victim identity as its primary narrative, it can become stuck. Victimhood should never become a competition, nor should it replace action, agency, or accountability.

Commitment is a daily decision

Mental toughness does not deny pain—but it refuses to let pain be the final word.

Victimhood is not a tattoo; it's a choice you make again and again. Every time you resist the urge to blame or excuse; you reaffirm your commitment to growth. And in that moment, you can move from surviving—and start thriving.

Responsibility and Accountability

Consider the South African men's football team and their enduring struggles, their inability to perform at a world cup level serves as a striking example.

When faced with a recurring problem, it is essential to investigate your own contribution to it. This axiom rings true: "If the problem you are having now is the same as the problem you have had previously, you need to carefully investigate your contribution to it."

This largely fails within the domain of accountability. Commitment requires us to be accountable for results and go well beyond responsibility for doing the work.

A compelling testament to commitment is exemplified by the late Queen Elizabeth II who despite her initial reluctance, embraced her unexpected role and discharged her duties with unwavering commitment. Accountability reigns supreme in the realm of commitment, transcending job descriptions and personal preferences. Commitment is not synonymous with mere promises because it demands that you be accountable for agreed-upon outcomes.

Commitment necessitates effective planning, choosing the right goals and executing them efficiently. It underscores the need to remain agile, recognizing that plans can swiftly become obsolete, because plans are like a marathon, requiring periodic course corrections as circumstances evolve.

Commitment warns against the allure of incessant pursuit of new opportunities when facing adversity. Dan Ariely's research in *Predictably Irrational*; often explores how human behaviour is influenced by irrational tendencies, particularly in decision-making. The idea that an abundance of choices can lead to indecision, a phenomenon known as "choice overload," is discussed in his work. Ariely emphasizes how too many options can overwhelm individuals, leading to decision paralysis or less satisfaction with the eventual choice. By contrast, commitment, as Ariely suggests, can help individuals stay focused and align their actions with their original intentions, fostering better outcomes.

Commitment also underscores the importance of adhering to societal rules and agreements. It distinguishes between conforming to the social fabric and resisting obligations, and a lack of commitment to rules often curtails success in both personal and professional realms.

In the embroidery of commitment, following instructions diligently is crucial. Much like novice water-skiers must hold tight to the bar to prevent a fall, our commitment relies on adhering to the guidelines we set for ourselves, even in the face of fear.

Steven Covey's "tyranny of the urgent" Covey's book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* under Habit 3: "Put First Things First." illustrates how pressing matters often overshadow the truly important. Commitment urges us to discern between the urgent and the significant, dedicating our efforts to prefer the latter.

As we embark on this exploration of commitment, we open the gateway to mental toughness — a world of resilience, accountability, and unwavering determination. It is through commitment that we navigate the labyrinth of existence, emerging fortified and empowered.

Our journey in understanding commitment as a vital component of mental toughness begins with a prevalent adversary: procrastination. Initially, we set forth with the best intentions, yet we often find ourselves ensnared in the procrastination trap. Tasks like crafting a personal plan, embarking on a study program, adopting a fitness routine, working on our relationships or committing to a healthier diet tend to languish in the realm of deferred action. We offer various justifications for our delays, attributing them to unforeseen mishaps, familial dynamics, or a spectrum of injuries and illnesses. Procrastination becomes the saboteur, causing a rift between immediate gratification and long-term well-being.

The allure of present comfort often takes precedence, leading us to postpone critical endeavours. It's akin to a cycle where, in the moment, we feel inclined to indulge in leisure, deterring essential activities until an elusive "tomorrow." Yet, as tomorrow arrives, the cycle repeats, and our postponed responsibilities accumulate. It's worth noting that we do not advocate for the compromise of cherished moments but rather challenge the habit of perpetual procrastination.

A poignant tale, attributed to Zen Buddhist teachings in *The Art of Living: Peace and Freedom in the Here and Now*, serves as a reminder of the emotional baggage we sometimes carry. Two Buddhist monks embarked on a journey, one a seasoned monk named I-hsiu, and the other, a humble student. Along their path, they encountered a young woman standing at a riverbank, fraught with worry about crossing to the other side without drowning. She implored the monks for assistance. Without hesitation, the student proceeded to cross the river, disregarding the woman's plea. Contrarily, the senior monk, I-hsiu, lifted the woman and carried her across the river. Following this act, they continued their journey separately.

Later, the young student grappled with unease, his mind plagued by questions. "Are we not instructed to maintain distance from women? How could my senior monk disregard this teaching?" The incident gnawed at him, and he eventually confronted I-hsiu with his concerns. To the student's surprise, I-hsiu simply smiled and said, "I placed the woman down after crossing the river, but you, my friend, have been carrying her with you all this time."

This tale conveys a valuable lesson – the student needlessly bore the emotional burden of what transpired at the river crossing. Life imparts lessons, both positive and negative, but it also compels us to release the baggage of the past. Experiences, whether good or bad, should not become excuses that shackle us in inertia. The past is unalterable; we can only move forward and strive to create a new and compelling future so it's paramount that we refrain from letting old problems, however valid they may seem, become the anchors that hold us captive.

Raising awareness through self-reflection or heeding feedback from those who care about us allows us to identify the problems that undermine our progress. Regardless of whether these challenges stem from chance occurrences or deliberate actions, blaming external factors or using them as excuses for inertia or underperformance proves futile. Instead, we must contemplate how deep we are willing to descend into despair before harnessing our problems as sources of motivation, rather than frustration, immobilization, or debilitation.

It is possible to coexist with and adapt to our problems while maintaining our passion and commitment. The acute pain of a problem belongs to the past, because we exist in the present. In this present, we can forge a path toward a new future, even while acknowledging the existence of past problems. To grow stronger despite harm, we must reduce negative judgments about our problems and those we feel have wronged us.

Obstacles are an inevitable part of life's landscape and when we encounter them, we have a choice. We can flow around them, seeking alternative solutions like a resilient river negotiating a rocky outcrop. Water, fluid and unyielding, does not engage in a futile battle with the rock. Instead, it finds a way around, over, or under the obstacle. The rock remains, but the water moves forward, leaving the obstacle behind.

However, should we fail to navigate life's obstacles adeptly, they may burgeon into significant problems. When unaddressed, they can escalate into debilitating crises. Consequently, when confronted with an obstacle that could transform into a painful problem, an unresolved conflict, anxiety, injury, illness, substance abuse, financial hardship, or a broken heart—our metaphorical flame of passion may flicker and wane. In such moments of apparent impasse, when no immediate resolution presents itself, we may seek ways to numb the pain. Many resort to quick fixes like painkillers, alcohol and drugs providing temporary respite but often compounding the harm caused by the original emotional distress.

Once we accept obstacles as a reasonable assumption, we must contemplate our response to significant setbacks, losses, and moments of despair. Do we fixate on the perceived unfairness of our predicament, or do we navigate these obstacles with a mindset of adaptability and growth?

From the perspective of mental toughness, our initial step is to summon composure. With emotional stability, we can embark on reflective self-assessment. When we find ourselves in the metaphorical eye of the storm, we can critically examine our passions. Even if we've lost touch with our initial enthusiasm, we can embark on a systematic journey to rekindle or discover new passions. Through self-experimentation, embracing variety, and volunteering to help others, we may unearth what truly stirs our souls.

Intention serves as the compass that guides us to our future. It is a broad vision of an inspiring outcome. For example, financial freedom may be paramount and breaking free from economic constraints is non-negotiable. This intention can then evolve into a detailed personal plan focused on generating sufficient income to liberate us from financial burdens and debt.

Our life journey has many departures, journeys, and arrivals, continually disrupted by financial, physical, emotional, and mental obstacles within the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world. Commitment, a central component of mental toughness, allows us to transcend chaos, it sustains our interest in our goals, enables us to adapt, and reminds us of the 'why' behind our endeavours. Commitment empowers us to rise above the ever-changing details of our context, embracing the mantra "that was then, and this is now."

When obstacles thwart our progress, they can escalate into insurmountable problems and these problems often result from unforeseen events, poor choices, mistakes, abuse, betrayals, setbacks, randomness, or simply bad luck. In response, we grapple with emotions such as fear, anger, anxiety, grief, pain, disappointment, or remorse. These emotional wounds can fester, causing us to feel like victims, and rendering it difficult to find a way out. Our emotional wounds unintentionally become our default narratives, hindering us from accepting help or discovering the path out of despair.

Commitment beckons us to harness our problems as catalysts for redemption. This journey requires humility, as we seek the wisdom of those better informed to help us untangle emotional knots that trap us in despair. Commitment propels us forward, away from victimhood, and toward a future we craft with intention and resolve.

Gritting through catastrophic events whilst we create new differentiators to rise again.

I believe one of the key indicators of mental toughness is changing before you must – before you are symptomatic – before your difficulties force a reactive change or put you in a position where it is too late to change. Before you experience a dip in your surviving or thriving status it's time to relaunch – set up a new curve to longer and sustained thriving.

However, to address problems most of us persist in upping the ante by applying old solutions – often working harder- and it mostly works in the short term.

But when we are faced with a catastrophic black swan event. (a black swan moment, as described by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, is where an unforeseen event leads to significant consequences. (Taleb, N. 2007).

In such situations we need to review the mental toughness model to create new differentiators that help us open doors to more possibilities and forge new, creative paths.

Begin with concentration to reevaluate your passion for your intention. If the fire of passion still burns despite the challenges, move forward with planning, avoiding blind determination. Next, engage composure and reward yourself with mindful reflection. Consider intensifying your efforts, building confidence through small victories, and taking calculated risks. Gradually scaffold and compound your competence with new differentiators to continue discharging your passion.

If, despite following these steps, your original passion remains elusive, embark on a journey of self-experimentation. Explore new facets of life, embracing variety and volunteering. Through these experiences, you may rediscover your passion or stumble upon a new one.

In pursuit of a newfound passion, define a new intention that resonates with your aspirations. Intention serves as your compass, guiding your actions and plans. For instance, consider organizing your financial affairs to create income streams, as exemplified by South African Peter Cilliers, a fitness enthusiast from Cape Town, gained prominence by sharing home-recorded workout videos on his YouTube channel, SixPackFactory. His content attracted up

to 100,000 daily views, earning him approximately \$100 to \$200 per day from advertising revenue.

Cilliers began monetizing his channel in 2010, utilizing basic equipment to produce his fitness videos. He emphasized the importance of starting without waiting for the perfect idea, highlighting the potential of online platforms for income generation.

Adventure can become part of your intention, as demonstrated by individuals like Ian Usher, an English traveller, author, and public speaker. He gained international attention in 2008 when, following a divorce, he listed his "entire life" for sale on eBay, including his house, car, and job. The auction concluded with a final bid of \$399,300. After the sale, Usher embarked on a journey to accomplish 100 goals in 100 weeks, a quest he detailed in his book *A Life Sold*. His adventures included meeting Richard Branson, visiting the Great Wall of China, and participating in the Running of the Bulls in Spain.

In 2011, Usher purchased a small island in the Bocas del Toro archipelago off the coast of Panama, where he lived a self-sufficient lifestyle. This experience is chronicled in his book *Paradise Delayed*.

Usher's story attracted significant media attention, leading Walt Disney Pictures to acquire the movie rights to his life story.

When embracing intention as a broad vision of an inspiring future, it's important to continuously adapt to the dynamic nature of life. Commitment, woven into your intentions, empowers you to transcend the chaos and uncertainty of the world, reminding you "that was then, and this is now." In the face of adversity and problems, commitment becomes your guiding light, sustaining your journey toward your idea of a better future. It encourages adaptability and growth, allowing you to navigate the ever-changing landscape of life with resilience and resolve.

Mentally tough individuals try not to let setbacks define them. Instead, they access grit—the determination to keep going even when faced with adversity. Grit is the inner strength that fuels persistence and resilience. So rather than letting perfection become the enemy of progress, mentally tough individuals understand that their path is often littered with mistakes and failures. They view setbacks as opportunities to learn and grow, not as reasons to give up.

Accepting pain is another hallmark of becoming mentally tougher. It means being willing to endure short-term discomfort. Living a fulfilled life often requires sacrifices and stepping out of one's comfort zone. Patience and persistence are crucial when facing challenges that seem insurmountable. It's about being willing to wait for results, even when progress appears slow. Mental toughness enables individuals to keep trying, to keep pushing through.

The power of determination is not about convincing yourself that you can achieve something beyond your capabilities; rather, it's about believing in your potential and taking actionable

steps. Determination is a driving force behind overcoming self-doubt and pushing past limitations. For example, concerns about inadequacy can be reframed through determination, and instead of accepting limiting beliefs, individuals can focus on developing their skills and knowledge, continuously pushing their boundaries.

In some situations, most people will feel a tipping point where they feel they must decide whether to grit it out or seek a new path. I do not believe this is an optimal way. I suggest we grit, whilst we create a new differentiator that helps us rise again – rising again may be following a new path! This is where the concepts of reimagining and reinvention come into play. It involves effectively thriving in changing circumstances.

So, reimagination and reinvention acknowledges that life is dynamic, and what worked in the past may not work in the present or future. It requires a willingness to adapt, to explore new possibilities, and to identify new differentiators that can set you apart.

For those grappling with setbacks and when life's burdens prove overwhelming, seeking appropriate help is a high priority. imperative. If you are trying to assist someone in such a predicament, providing a safe emotional space for recovery and rediscovery is invaluable. In this nurturing environment, the distressed individual may be able rekindle their passion, loosen their defeatist beliefs, and over time, faint embers of motivation may become discernible, gradually igniting into the flames of a satisfying life.

However, we must recognize that we might not return to the old reality we had before problems surfaced, and that may not even be desirable to go back there. Instead, we could try reimagination and reinvention, seeking new, better, mental, physical, and emotional realities. In many cases, this involves starting anew, akin to what J.K. Rowling alluded to when she declared that "rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life."

The core lesson on reinvention from *Reinvention: Accelerating Results in the Age of Disruption* by Shane Cragun and Kate Sweetman speaks to the necessity of adaptability and proactive transformation in the face of change. The authors argue that success in the modern world hinges on the ability to anticipate disruption and reinvent oneself or one's organization accordingly. They outline a reinvention framework that includes shedding outdated mindsets, embracing a growth-oriented perspective, and leveraging change as an opportunity for innovation. Their lessons are highly relevant to mental toughness. Using it to reinvent oneself requires resilience, self-awareness, and a willingness to take calculated risks. Mental toughness involves recognizing when existing approaches no longer serve you and having the confidence to pivot, even in uncertain circumstances.

Seth Godin's *Purple Cow*, Godin, S. (2007). *Purple Cow: Transform your business by being remarkable* highlights the importance of being remarkable in a world oversaturated with options and distractions. Godin argues that simply being good is no longer good enough; to truly stand out, individuals and businesses must embrace innovation and reinvention. This

requires the courage to step outside comfort zones and challenge the status quo. Reinvention involves identifying what makes you unique — the proverbial "purple cow"—and leveraging it to create a lasting impact. Just as Godin emphasizes that remarkable ideas and actions spark attention and engagement, I argue that mental toughness fosters the resilience and creativity needed to transform setbacks into opportunities for growth and distinction.

It's Never Too Late to Start Again

The example of Mahathir Mohamad, a former Prime Minister of Malaysia, who in 2018, at the age of 92, he returned to power for a second tenure, becoming the world's oldest sitting prime minister, demonstrates that it's never too late to reinvent oneself. Whether it's embarking on new adventures in your nineties or taking on leadership roles at an advanced age, there is always room for growth and transformation, and the key is to recognize that life's journey is not limited by age or past experiences. If you feel that your life has lost meaning or that you've been held back by self-limiting beliefs, determination (gritting), and the willingness to reinvent yourself can open new doors and opportunities.

This final chapter on the components of mental toughness will help you keep the doors of possibility open, underscoring the importance of commitment, determination, and the ability to adapt as integral components. It reaffirms that mental toughness is not an abstract concept but a real and tangible quality that can be cultivated and improved.

So, as you continue your journey through life, remember that tough times don't last, but tough people can. Your commitment, determination, and willingness to adapt will serve as your compass in navigating life's challenges and pursuing a better current and future life experience.

You can't change the past; you can shape a better future.

14. WELLNESS



I understand optimal wellness to be a state beyond medical health. It includes life satisfaction, purpose, and resilience. In the journey from surviving to thriving or experiencing more thriving, wellness is a force multiplier—it bolsters energy reserves and keeps us steady through life’s many trials and disappointments, fueling resilience, purpose, performance, and a sense of success and significance.

Yet, many trade health for success or soothe distress with habits that jeopardize their health. As a powerful verse puts it: “They squander their health in search of wealth; they sweat, they toil, and they slave. Then they squander their wealth in search of health—and only find the grave.”

Being a sportsman at heart, I, somewhat naively, liken some aspects of life to a rugby match. Both have structure and flow, with planned outcomes and unpredictability.

A rugby match is 80 minutes - Life is roughly 80 years, with the chance of an early ending or bonus time. Like a rugby team, we need a blueprint game plan that aligns our actions with our intended lifespan. Here I am not referring to time management – which at times is important, but I prefer to start with leading the life that you think is worth living before managing the time. Once you have clarified your strategy about how you would like to lead your life, managing your time and tactics come into play. With these in place you can negate having to wind down the clock as your term approaches its end.

The Wellness Continuum

Now, let's look at the wellness continuum, first introduced by Dr John W. Travis in 1972. At its center lies "surviving", a place that may appear outwardly healthy but sits precariously on the edge of change. Every choice nudges us left or right, toward decline or vitality.

Wellness is not static. It shifts with how we treat our bodies, guide our thoughts, express emotions, connect meaningfully, and remain aware of our fragile environment. It's less about where you are and more about where your choices and to some extent luck is taking you. To the right lies physical, mental, and social well-being—the space where life brightens and thriving becomes possible. To the left, pain and dysfunction manifest to remind us of the cost of neglect. Every decision moves you in a direction. The challenge is to remain intentional.

Intention

Let's begin with a simple idea: most of us want to move to the right side of the continuum, toward a more fulfilling life filled with purpose and promise. To do so, we need a North Star—an intention that is more than a passing thought. It should stir us, anchor us, and propel us. Think of it as your internal compass. Intention doesn't guarantee an outcome, but it increases your odds of getting closer to one that you have targeted and that matters.

A strong wellness intention involves striving to survive not just surviving through physical vitality, mental clarity, emotional resilience, medical stability, and environmental responsibility. It's not about how long we live, but how well we live. Yet, in our quest for success, we often sacrifice our health, chasing an elusive balance between life and work. The irony is that in treating life and work as opposing forces, we create a zero-sum game.

Let's reframe this. Let your intention forge synergy, not separation—where wellbeing is foundational to every life decision. This is not just healthier; it's smarter. And it sets you up for a life that works—mostly on your terms.

Awareness

Imagine soaring above your life, getting a bird's-eye view of your journey, seeing its patterns, detours, and potential paths. This is awareness. With it, we can examine not only

where we are but why we're there. We become witnesses and participants, stepping into a space of clarity.

Awareness also involves keeping a watchful eye on our thoughts. From this vantage point, we can shift our habits, releasing what no longer serves us and embracing what moves us closer to our intentions. If your thoughts are overwhelming, mindfulness can help. Accept the thoughts, let them pass, and return to what truly matters.

Bad habits often start subtly, cloaked in convenience or comfort. A cigarette to calm. A scroll through social media for distraction. But these small indulgences accumulate. The slope is gentle—until it isn't. On the other hand, wellness behaviours—exercise, nutrition, rest—may feel demanding at first, yet they pay dividends with consistency.

This truth plays out beyond our private lives. Consider a sports team sticking rigidly to a failing strategy. Lacking awareness—or ignoring it—they drift into defeat. Awareness is what enables mid-course correction. In life, it's no different. Stay awake to the signals. Adjust when needed. Use awareness as a compass, and it will guide you away from decline and towards vibrancy.

Signs

Wellness is a puzzle made of many parts: our genes, our luck, our habits, our thoughts, and our environments. Each part contributes clues—signs—showing which direction we're heading. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in."

Signs are often whispers, not shouts. They blend into the background noise, easily missed if we're not paying attention. But they matter. They're subtle indicators of drift—towards wellness or away from it. If we ignore them, we risk sliding into dysfunction. But if we listen, they can help us correct before symptoms emerge. Look for these signs. Let them inform you of your next step. They are early warnings—and silent gifts.

Symptoms

Symptoms follow signs. Where signs were subtle nudges, symptoms are louder alarms. They are your body and mind's way of demanding attention—indications that something needs to change. If signs are whispers, symptoms are shouts. In a sporting context you may remember the All Blacks beating the Springboks by 57 points to nil in 2017. This could be seen a symptom of poor rugby competitiveness in South Africa. SA Rugby reacted to this strategically by opening Springbok selection to all South Africans playing anywhere in the world. Consequently, the coach has had access to many more world class players enabling a bomb squad of players that could up the game in the second half. This is one of the drivers towards a much-enabled team that went on to win two consecutive world cup trophies.

But back to wellness. This is where the metaphor of the frog in boiling water becomes relevant. Drop a frog into boiling water and it leaps to escape. But heat the water slowly, and the frog stays, unaware of the danger until it's too late. Similarly, we can slip into dysfunction gradually, noticing as stress builds, energy wanes, or joy disappears.

This is why vigilance matters. Recognize the symptoms. Track their emergence. Act before they escalate. Symptoms might manifest physical fatigue, pain, disrupted sleep. They might show up mentally—as anxiety, forgetfulness, or emotional numbness. Whatever their form, they are not random. They are feedback.

And feedback, when used well, is a gift. It prompts us to act—to reverse our direction, seek help, or re-establish routines that nurture wellness. Ignoring symptoms is like hitting the snooze button on your health. Eventually, the wake-up call becomes too loud to ignore. The key insight is this: awareness alone isn't enough. You must act. Symptoms are signals, and they demand an action response.

Mindsets

Mindsets are the internal filters through which we experience the world. They shape how we interpret signs, respond to symptoms, and choose actions. When it comes to wellness, your mindset can be your greatest ally—or your biggest obstacle.

Some people fall into binary thinking: they believe they are either well or unwell, strong or weak. But wellness is a continuum, and thinking in absolutes can keep us stuck. A more useful mindset accepts nuance. You might feel physically strong but emotionally drained. You might be mentally sharp yet socially isolated. These nuances matter.

By shifting to a growth-oriented mindset, you gain flexibility and control. You stop waiting to feel 100% before acting and instead start where you are. This mindset invites critical thinking, experimentation, and learning. It encourages you to challenge assumptions, consult professionals, reflect, adapt, and evolve.

Wellness mindsets also respect the interplay between habits and health. They remind us that while not everything is within our control, much of it is within our influence. And even when life throws us curveballs, our response remains our domain.

Ultimately, cultivating a mindset of curiosity, humility, and resilience allows you to navigate complexity with clarity. It empowers you to make decisions that keep you moving rightward along the continuum—even if progress feels slow.

The mindset you bring to your wellness journey determines not just the outcome, but the experience itself. With the right mindset, the path becomes lighter, more purposeful, and far more rewarding.

Failure

At the far-left end of the wellness continuum lies failure—not the kind that teaches and transforms, but the kind born from prolonged neglect, eroded resilience, and lost intention. Here, relationships decay, meaning evaporates, and health—mental and physical—unravels. But failure doesn't need to be a permanent destination. It's often a waypoint, a moment of reckoning. It's where intention has faltered but not vanished. Even in failure, we can pause, recalibrate, and start again.

Failure can arise from insufficient mental toughness, the capacity to stay aligned with our intentions even in adversity. It's not the stumble that defines us, but the absence of response. If we linger too long in failure without reflection or action, we risk becoming its victim.

Yet, many who visit this place also find new resolve, a different path, a deeper or new meaning that becomes our why. Failure can be the nudge that shifts our trajectory rightward again.

Think of it as a rest stop on the journey. One that calls for honesty, humility, and renewed courage. If we listen to what failure reveals, it can become the very soil in which growth begins anew.

Attention Thieves

In our always-on digital world, attention is currency—and everyone wants a piece of it. Social media platforms, streaming apps, news feeds, have algorithms designed to hook us, and keep us scrolling. These attention thieves often masquerade as harmless entertainment or connection, but they subtly erode our wellness.

What makes them so powerful is their ability to prey on our biology. They trigger dopamine spikes, offering short-term pleasure while sapping long-term focus and fulfillment. Over time, our attention fragments, our presence diminishes, and our ability to focus on what truly matters starts to decay.

Worse still, many of these platforms thrive on outrage. Their algorithms push divisive content that reinforces biases and stokes fear or anger. The result is not just distraction but anxiety, disconnection, and diminished emotional health.

Mental toughness becomes a shield in this environment. It's what allows us to reclaim our focus, set boundaries, and choose intention over impulse. It gives us the presence of mind to notice when we've drifted—and the discipline to return to what matters.

To preserve your wellness, treat your attention as sacred. Create space for silence. Protect time for rest. Engage in conversations without glancing at your phone. And when you feel the pull of the scroll, pause—and ask yourself: is this serving my intention?

The battle for attention is one of the most urgent wellness challenges of our time. But it's also an opportunity—to practice awareness, assert boundaries, and anchor yourself in the present. Because the more present you are, the more fully you live.

Work

I want to start with a distinction between the mindsets of work and life balance and life and work harmony.

Work-life balance often implies a *trade-off mindset*—more of one means less of the other. That's inherently a zero-sum or even negative-sum game, where tension builds because people feel they're constantly sacrificing one domain to maintain the other.

Life-work synergy, by contrast, suggests integration rather than separation. It allows for personal fulfilment and professional performance to boost the other and vice versa. That's a positive-sum game: both life and work enhance each other.

Scholars like Stewart Friedman (Wharton School) advocate for "Total Leadership," argue for integration over balance. Harmony supports sustained wellness and avoids burnout better than balance.

It's not just semantics, it's a mindset shift that fosters mental wellness, purpose, and long-term engagement.

Work is more than a means to earn—it's a potential source of purpose, contribution, and personal growth. Yet it can also become a source of burnout, frustration, or stagnation. Work wellness arises when your efforts align with your values and when you maintain a sense of learning, agency, and social connection.

Studies by Dr Alia Crum show that your mindset towards work-related stress matters enormously. Those who view stress as enhancing—fuel for performance, growth, and resilience—handle pressure more constructively than those who see it as purely harmful.

Work-related wellness increases when you reframe stress as a challenge rather than a threat. Neglecting skill development, emotional intelligence, kindness, or relationship-building at work can signal a drift towards disengagement. Work wellness invites continuous renewal—of skills, relationships, and perspective.

Positive Intention: “I want to feel passionate about how I generate an income.”

Signs: Resistance to learning or change, frequent dread of the workday, relying solely on income for fulfilment, absence of a personal or professional development plan.

Symptoms: Working without passion, living for weekends and holidays, workplace conflict, chronic dissatisfaction, misalignment between personal values and job demands.

Wellness and Disease

Within the vast landscape of wellness and disease, seven categories stand out as crucial. These include the 'Four Horsemen of Death'—atherosclerotic disease, cancer, neurodegenerative disease, and metabolic disease—along with physical and sleep health, nutrition, and work-related wellbeing. To this list, we also add stress and anxiety, substance abuse, and mental illness.

The Four Horsemen of Death

Dr Peter Attia refers to the four most significant causes of death and declining quality of life as the 'Four Horsemen': atherosclerotic disease, cancer, neurodegenerative disease, and metabolic disease. These are chronic conditions that often develop silently and slowly, becoming increasingly dangerous over time. His preventative approach urges us to take control through early intervention exercise, nutrition, sleep, stress management, and medical check-ups.

Your Medical Check-Up

Routine check-ups are the unsung heroes of health maintenance. They help detect silent killers before they wreak havoc—high cholesterol, insulin resistance, early cancer markers, and neurological decline. Prevention beats cure. A regular medical review increases your capacity to manage or delay the onset of disease.

Atherosclerotic Disease

This refers to the hardening and narrowing of arteries due to plaque build-up, which can lead to heart attacks or strokes. According to Attia, it's driven by cholesterol-carrying particles damaging artery walls.

Positive Intention: “I want to be aware of any advancing circulatory disease.”

Signs: Family history of heart disease, poor sleep, inactivity, unhealthy eating, smoking, and absence of regular health checks.

Symptoms: High blood pressure, low muscle mass, and obesity.

Cancer

A word that evokes fear, cancer remains one of the top causes of death worldwide. Many cancers are preventable or treatable if detected early. Screening and genetic awareness are vital.

Positive Intention: “I want to be aware of any pending cancers.”

Signs: Family history, smoking, poor diet, and avoiding medical check-ups.

Symptoms: Unexplained weight loss, persistent fatigue, and blood in stools.

Neurodegenerative Disease

Conditions like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's gradually diminish cognitive and motor function. Prevention focuses on physical activity, mental stimulation, and good sleep hygiene.

Positive Intention: "I want to be aware of any failing mental health."

Signs: Family history, poor sleep, inactivity, bad nutrition, lack of medical screening.

Symptoms: Type 2 diabetes, memory loss, confusion, mood swings, and personality change.

Metabolic Disease

These include Type 2 diabetes and other disorders that affect how your body processes food and energy. Metabolic health is deeply tied to lifestyle—diet, movement, and sleep all play roles.

Positive Intention: "I want to know of any potential metabolic disease."

Signs: Family history, poor sleep, sedentary lifestyle, poor diet, and skipping check-ups.

Symptoms: High blood pressure, high blood sugar, excess weight, and low muscle mass.

Physical and Sleep

Physical wellness is the bedrock of daily vitality. It's not just about avoiding illness; it's about building strength, stamina, and flexibility that support a meaningful and energetic life. Dr Attia notes that 90 minutes of moderate activity per week reduces all-cause mortality risk by 14%. Cardiovascular fitness and muscular strength both matter—and being under-muscled is as dangerous as smoking.

Sleep, often neglected, is the hidden pillar of health. Less than seven hours per night can impair memory, immunity, mood, and metabolic regulation. According to Attia, great sleep is built during the day: with exercise, light exposure, minimal alcohol, and reduced work stress.

Positive Intention: "I want my body to have sufficient strength, fitness, mobility, and rest to live longer and better."

Signs: Thinking you don't need fitness assessments; believing you can thrive on fewer than five hours of sleep.

Symptoms: Poor muscle tone, frequent injuries, excessive or inadequate exercise, disturbed sleep, daytime fatigue.

Nutrition

Nutritional wellness is the foundation of energy, recovery, and disease prevention. It's about fueling your body with nutrients that optimize metabolism, immune function, and mental clarity. The goal isn't starvation or restriction but nourishment.

Restrictive dieting can backfire, leading to metabolic slowdown and psychological strain.

Dr Alia Crum's research highlights how mindset matters: if you believe a meal is nourishing, your body responds more favourably—even if the nutritional content is the same.

Nutrition isn't only physical, it's deeply psychological. Label a food "bad" and it becomes a source of guilt. See food as fuel, and your approach becomes empowering.

Positive Intention: "I want to maintain a healthy weight and energy level by consuming sufficient nutrients."

Signs: Believing you can eat instinctively without expert input; avoiding nutrition consultation; equating restriction with health.

Symptoms: Over-nourishment (excessive caloric intake), under-nourishment (deficient intake), poor micronutrient diversity, reliance on unverified supplements.

Stress and anxiety

Stress and anxiety are inevitable companions in modern life, but they need not be adversaries. When understood and managed well, they can sharpen focus, boost motivation, and build resilience. However, chronic stress, particularly the kind that feels uncontrollable—can compromise your immunity, impair decision-making, and drain emotional reserves.

Negative stress often arises from cognitive distortions: believing stress is inherently bad, expecting constant certainty, or over-identifying with outcomes. This leads to rumination—cycling through past failures and future fears—which erodes your present agency.

Dr Alia Crum's research repositions stress as potentially beneficial. When viewed as enhancing, stress can improve immunity, mental agility, and professional performance. In contrast, believing stress is purely harmful makes its physiological effects more damaging. When anxiety persists, it shifts from a useful alarm bell to a paralyzing fog. It undermines confidence and creates dissonance between your values and actions. Eventually, exhaustion sets in, and burnout follows—a state of emotional, physical, and cognitive depletion.

Uncertainty plays a role, too. In a volatile world, expecting stability can be futile. The key is to grow your capacity to tolerate ambiguity—to operate with what you know while adapting to what you don't. This is the hallmark of mental toughness.

Positive Intention: "I want to manage unrealistic expectations that cause negative stress while embracing the benefits of positive stress."

Signs: Believing stress is inherently bad; craving constant certainty; avoiding discomfort.

Symptoms: Feeling overwhelmed by change, struggling with deadlines, low confidence, social withdrawal, obsessive thinking, compulsive behaviours (e.g., overeating), fatigue, irritability, and poor focus.

Building Stress Resilience:

1. Reclaim agency—create new routines around sleep, nutrition, and exercise.
 2. Calm the nervous system—practice deep breathing or mindfulness.
 3. Restrict social media time.
 4. Strengthen social bonds—engage with others meaningfully.
 5. Practice altruism—help those less fortunate.
 6. Set small, achievable goals—progress builds confidence.
 7. Engage the parasympathetic system, use cold-water immersion, music, or nature.
 8. Reignite awe—watch documentaries or immerse yourself in natural beauty.
- Stress management is not about eliminating pressure but mastering your response. This mindset shift is where resilience is born—and wellness is restored.

Substance abuse and addiction

Substance wellness is a complex and often misunderstood component of overall well-being. It requires us to distinguish between the healthy use of substances for therapeutic or social purposes and the slippery slope of dependency and addiction. At the heart of addiction lies a compulsive pursuit of reward through substances that hijack our brain's dopamine system.

What starts as experimentation or a coping mechanism can spiral into a condition where personal values, relationships, and responsibilities are eroded. From caffeine and alcohol to opioids and recreational drugs, substances can be both tools and traps. The line between use and misuse is drawn not by legality but by impact.

Addiction is not merely a lack of willpower. It often roots itself in pain, trauma, isolation, or unfulfilled psychological needs. Once embedded, it alters brain chemistry and behaviour. Neuroplasticity, once our ally in learning, can become a double-edged sword—rewiring the brain toward destructive patterns and reinforcing dependency.

Beth Macy's *Dopesick* reveals how pharmaceutical greed, such as the Purdue Pharma opioid crisis, fueled an epidemic of addiction. Despite knowing the risk of dependency, companies promoted medications that left countless lives shattered.

Positive Intention: “I want to live a life free from destructive dependency.”

Signs: Rationalizing use despite negative consequences; secrecy; increased tolerance; avoiding responsibilities.

Symptoms: Mood swings, cravings, emotional detachment, dishonesty, deteriorating relationships, paranoia, depression, erratic behaviour, and repeated failed attempts to quit.

Supportive Actions:

- Recognize the problem—honest self-assessment or intervention.
- Seek professional support—therapy, rehabilitation, or peer groups.
- Rebuild identity—replace destructive habits with purposeful routines.
- Strengthen relationships—reconnect with those who support recovery.
- Educate yourself—understand addiction as a condition, not a character flaw.

Freedom from addiction is not a destination but a journey of awareness, intention, and support. It begins with recognizing the trap and taking the first brave step toward reclaiming one's life.

Mental Health

Mental health is more than the absence of illness. It is the presence of meaning, purpose, resilience, psychological flexibility, and, importantly, mental toughness.

Mental Illness

Mental illness covers a spectrum of conditions—such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia—and is accompanied by a loss of mental health. It arises from a complex mix of genetics, trauma, chronic stress, substance abuse, and neurochemical imbalances. It is not a matter of choice or weakness—it is an illness, just as real as diabetes or heart disease. We don't tell someone to will their pancreas into working better; likewise, we cannot expect the brain to self-correct without proper care. Mental illness deserves the same seriousness, empathy, and medical treatment we give any other health condition. You don't choose depression any more than you choose diabetes. Both require treatment, not shame.

In *Guilt, Shame, and Anxiety*, Dr Peter Breggin argues that legacy emotions—evolutionary remnants meant to inhibit aggression—can be maladaptive. Guilt, shame, and anxiety, once useful for tribal cohesion, may become barriers to personal growth in modern society. His solution: supplement fear-based and conspiracy thinking with reason, love, and responsibility. This echoes the ethos of mental toughness, building internal strength through awareness and emotional regulation.

Mental illness can begin with trauma or more subtly: a lingering sadness, a sense of purposelessness, or a disconnect from joy. Over time, this fog deepens. People may lose interest in what once brought fulfillment, feel overwhelmed by decision-making, or experience mood swings that strain relationships. Without intervention, these symptoms can spiral into debilitating conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, or psychosis.

A key component of mental health is a sense of agency—the belief that one's actions influence desired outcomes. When this sense of self is lost, individuals feel helpless. Their internal narrative becomes fatalistic, often reinforced by negative self-talk and social withdrawal. At the extreme, the lack of agency may lead to hopelessness, substance abuse, or self-harm.

Modern interventions include medication, psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based practices, physical activity, and social connection. Each plays a role in supporting a return to wellness. While medication can stabilize acute symptoms, long-term healing often comes from behavioural therapy aimed at cultivating purpose, building relationships, and cultivating habits that reinforce self-worth.

In the South African context, mental illness is often compounded by societal stigma, lack of access to resources, and historical trauma. Many communities still view mental illness through a lens of shame or secrecy, resulting in underdiagnosis and limited support. For this reason, public health campaigns and grassroots mental health initiatives—like SADAG (South African Depression and Anxiety Group)—are essential for bridging the gap between awareness and treatment.

Community healing, particularly in cultures with strong social traditions, can be a powerful complement to clinical interventions. Practices like storytelling, ancestral honouring, music, and movement often serve therapeutic functions, reinforcing identity and connectedness. Integrating these approaches with Western methodologies offers a more holistic model of care.

Neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to rewire—is both a promise and a warning. Positive habits can forge new pathways. But substance abuse or trauma can also entrench harmful patterns. The goal is to harness this plasticity for healing and growth. It's important to recognize that neuroplasticity doesn't discriminate between helpful and harmful input—it simply responds to repetition and emotional intensity.

Positive Intention: “I want to manage my mental health in a way that enables joy.”

Signs: Inability to imagine a solution for sadness or lack of fulfilment; reliance on substances to alter consciousness; emotional numbness.

Symptoms: Persistent guilt or shame, sadness, helplessness, indecisiveness, mood instability, emotional withdrawal, disordered sleep, loss of hygiene, social rejection, anhedonia (loss of pleasure), hallucinations, paranoia, delusional thinking, and thoughts of self-harm.

Supportive Actions:

- Seek help early—engage with mental health professionals.
- Rebuild agency—set achievable goals and celebrate small wins.
- Reconnect—spend time with trusted loved ones or community groups.
- Reflect—use journaling, therapy, or spiritual guidance to process emotions.
- Prioritize physical health—movement, nutrition, and sleep support mental wellness.
- Explore culturally appropriate interventions—like mentorship, and community support.
- Educate others—reducing stigma begins with conversation.

Mental health is not static. It fluctuates with life's events and our responses. By cultivating intention, awareness, and compassionate self-discipline, we build a foundation for enduring mental strength and emotional richness. No one is immune to mental distress. Even the most seemingly resilient among us can falter. What matters is not avoiding the lows but learning to navigate them with insight, courage, and support.

Happiness

"The purpose of life is not chasing happiness. It is to be useful, honourable, and compassionate."(Ralph Waldo Emerson)

I began the wellness chapter referring to joy and now turn to happiness—not as a fleeting emotion but as a deeper state of contentment with congruence. Happiness can be mistaken for excitement, novelty, or the rush of accomplishment. But these moments, while uplifting, are transient. Goal achievement can quickly fade into adaptation, leaving us craving the next win.

The real challenge is that the pursuit of happiness, when framed as an end goal or as an antidote to boredom, can become self-defeating. The more we chase it, the more it eludes us. We sacrifice our time, our health, and our relationships in pursuit of what we think will make us happy, only to discover that the feeling is brief, and the cost often high. This is the adaptation trap—where each new success becomes the new normal.

Instead of viewing happiness as a destination, try to see it as a by-product of living in harmony with what you have decided is your meaning, with decency, dignity and balance. In this light, happiness becomes a natural outcome of practicing mental toughness. It emerges when our inner life is not in conflict with our external reality.

In most South African cultures, we approach the happiness as something that is intricately tied to community well-being. "I am because we are." Here, happiness is not just personal, but it is a collective — found in belonging, in shared purpose, and mutual upliftment. This reframing of happiness can seem to counter a western notion of individual pursuit of happiness and reminds us that even in a western culture, our fulfilment is greater when intertwined with others' well-being.

To integrate happiness within our emotional spectrum, we need to normalise our full range of emotions: Sadness, frustration, suspicion and uncertainty aren't the opposite of happiness — they're part of a rich, textured life. So, our scope for happiness grows stronger when we make space for the entire emotional orchestra.

In closing, I do not want to pursue happiness as a stand-alone prize or end goal, but trust that it will arise from meaningful actions, habits, connections, contributions, and a life lived with the awareness that I have this one opportunity to utilize the life I have been given and there are a lot of opportunities to express myself and lead a varied, fulfilled life.

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