



# MATCHFIT

THE COMPLETE MANUAL TO GET YOUR BODY AND  
BRAIN FIT FOR WORK AND FIT FOR LIFE

ANDREW MAY

WITH DR TOM BUCKLEY

# 1

# THE PERFECT STORM

When I was a kid, we listened to our music on cassette tapes. (Millennials may need to Google this . . .) Each cassette had an A side and a B side. The A side featured the artist's best tracks – usually the ones they were famous for – while the B side had songs that, in many cases, simply weren't as good or hadn't been released yet.

When we introduce ourselves to people, we naturally emphasise our A side – but we all have a B side too. Let me explain.



## MY STORY

### The A side – jock, nerd and entrepreneur

I had a charmed life growing up in country New South Wales. I did well at rugby union, touch football and tennis, but running was the sport that ‘chose’ me. I won a number of state titles as a junior, went to uni to study exercise science and sports coaching, and at age 21 moved to Hobart and trained with the Australian Institute of Sport’s high-performance coach, John Quinn. I learned a lot from John and it wasn’t long before I became an assistant coach, working with junior Australian athletes.

Moving back to Sydney, I became the fitness trainer for both the men’s and women’s New South Wales netball teams and the Sydney Flames basketball team. I worked as a trainer in tennis, hockey, rugby league and golf. I was the strength and conditioning coach for the New South Wales cricket team for seven years and worked with David Misson when he was the physical performance manager for the Sydney Swans AFL side. Next I got the chance to work with the Australian cricket team, and I travelled the world as their physical performance manager.

Back in Hobart one winter after a tough (and freezing) training session, one of my running mates, Shagger, told me I

was a walking oxymoron – an athletic nerd. I'd always done well academically; in Year 12 I topped the state in Modern History. After finishing with the Australian cricket team, I completed a Master's in Coaching Psychology.

I've always been interested in business as well. As a young man in Hobart, I wasn't making much money in track and field and I was too poor to afford a dog, so I began taking 'big blokes' for walks. This evolved into what is now called personal training, and I set up my first business focusing on personal training, injury rehabilitation/compensable insurance and corporate health. Many of these 'big blokes' were managers in business or government and as they turned their lives and their fitness around, my business grew rapidly by word of mouth.

I sold this business at age 26 and moved back to Sydney and launched another wellbeing enterprise, Healthy Business, running in-house fitness facilities and a corporate health centre. Within two years this business was bought by the ACCOR hotel group, eventually becoming Good Health Solutions (now trading as Executive Health Solutions), Australia's largest provider of executive health assessments.

I wrote Flip the Switch and as a result of that success, I was asked to speak at conferences and work with senior executives. I launched a keynote speaking business, which morphed into a wellbeing consultancy (The Performance Clinic), which I sold to KPMG in early 2016. For the past three years I was a partner at KPMG but I am now back running my own business again and loving it.

So these last 20 years have been pretty successful. I've done a lot and learned a lot – in particular, I developed the set of principles that help non-athletes improve their performance, which is the essence of the MatchFit program.

But as I hinted earlier, my life hasn't all been A side. Let's flip the cassette over.

### The B side – my own perfect storm

As I say, the first 39 years of my life were great. I had a successful career running various businesses and was a fit

and healthy overachiever. My wife had a high-profile job in the media, and we had two beautiful, healthy kids and lived in a massive house on Sydney's lower north shore. We employed a full-time nanny and drove fancy European cars – you get the picture.

But just before I turned 40, things took a turn for the worse. The storm had been building for a couple of years, but I failed to recognise or acknowledge it. My head was buried in the sand. My wife scored a new high-profile job, which meant she was getting up at 4.00 am and going to bed at 7.00 pm. As a result, we were sleeping in separate rooms, we stopped prioritising quality time together and had little meaningful connection. We were soon more like flatmates than husband and wife.

I had been so caught up in the quest to be successful that I had let everything else fade into the background. What was driving me was ego – I wanted to impress everyone with what I could do. And when the going got tough, I sought emotional support outside my marriage. What remained of the limited trust between us unravelled like a ball of string.

I stayed in the marital home for another five months; we had a monster mortgage and I couldn't afford to rent an apartment. When I did move out, I felt like a poor university student all over again, struggling to make ends meet. Each night after work I'd come home to my empty apartment and burst into tears. No kids. No wife. No dog. No backyard. No garden. No company. No purpose. Anyone who's gone through a divorce or separation will know this feeling, and it's even worse when you have young children. I felt like my heart had been ripped out of my chest, and the emptiness of my life was only making things more painful.

I was 'functioning depressed'. I was getting by at work and still being physically active, but I'd lost the mojo, the spirit, the energy and the spark I'd always been known for. I thought I was convincing those around me that I was fine, but I wasn't. And those closest to me knew.

Lying in bed one morning, I heard about the suicide of an athlete I'd known since we were kids. I felt helpless and couldn't get myself moving to go and meet friends for an early-morning

cycle. I made up an excuse that I was sick (my good friends know I never get sick!) and just lay there in bed. I remember thinking: For the first time in my life, I understand how people get so down, so desperate, that they think the best way out is to take their own life.

The breakdown of my marriage had hit me harder than I'd thought possible. Like a lot of people – especially Irish Catholics – I had an overwhelming sense of failure about my divorce. I thought people would judge me. After all, I was the 'high-performance guy' who helped executives, business leaders, sporting teams and world-class athletes be their best. How could I possibly fail, flop, crash? What would people say if they knew I couldn't keep a marriage together?

I'd always believed that if you worked hard, you got results. But I'd never really been tested, and as a result hadn't developed any 'scar tissue' – the resilience and the grit that allows you to put things into perspective, pick yourself up and bounce back. I was stuck at rock bottom.

## GOING OFF THE RAILS

I was struggling big time, but at first was too proud/embarrassed to admit it. And the 'therapy' I came up with is what a lot of us turn to (especially men) when we're stressed and feeling depressed. I tried to numb my emotions with alcohol, fast food and a procession of short-term relationships.

### Booze, crappy food and speed dating

Potato chips (or crisps) were my junk food of choice, and I was eating a large packet a night, washed down with two or three cold Asahi beers. My gorgeous mum was travelling from Newcastle to Sydney and staying with me a few nights each week to help out with the kids. She cooked plenty of cakes and apple pies. Now, everyone loves Suzie May's apple pies – the problem was that I was loving them way too often. And I was slathering them in ice cream and cream. Mmm.

In an effort to make myself feel better, I started going out a



lot more and combined my newfound elixir of alcohol with a procession of ‘transactional relationships’. Late nights, booze and sex were enough to put a band-aid over my wounds for a while. But this band-aid had also created a by-product – the dreaded middle-aged spread.

I’d become addicted to sugar and was having a coffee and a chocolate bar or sugary muffin as an ‘energy boost’ to get through each afternoon. I was still cycling a few times a week, but I wasn’t doing any flexibility training, and my body wasn’t bouncing back from injuries like when I was in my 20s or early 30s. The one bodyweight circuit I did each week was nowhere near heavy or intense enough to build muscle or stimulate my flagging hormones.

The human body has an amazing way of letting us know when we are looking after it – and when we are treating it like an amusement park. I was treating my body like Disneyland and some days it was open 24 hours. I was sustaining more injuries than ever before, even when I was training as an athlete. I had bags under my eyes and my body was in a state of inflammation due to my new ‘diet’.

### Floating in that river in Egypt

Looking back, I was in complete denial. I knew what I ‘should’ do to maintain a good level of health and fitness, but I was stuck in a cycle of poor habits, poor choices and poor mental health. I remember drinking and partying one night with two friends who work in travel, powered by more than just testosterone and the premise of having a good time, and the next day rocking up at 6.00 am for a 100-kilometre bike ride and thinking, *I love how I can burn the candle at both ends and get away with it!* I was still able to beat most of my mates on the bike, so I convinced myself I was still fit.

But I wasn’t really fit. And I certainly wasn’t healthy either. Time and poor habits were catching up with me and I wasn’t getting away with it as much as I wanted to believe.

I went to see my good friend Paddy Farhart, a physiotherapist I knew from our days working together at New South Wales

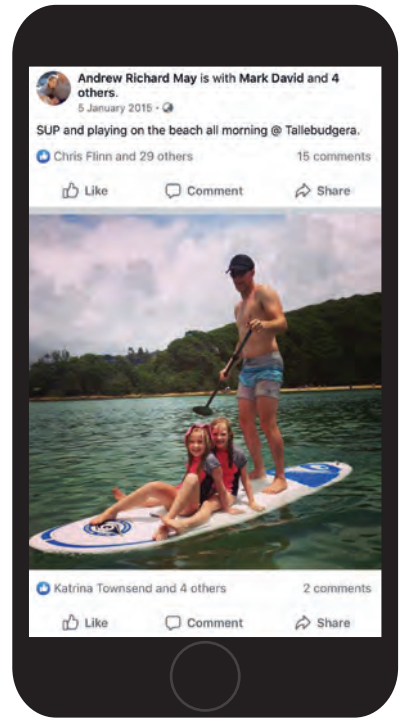
Cricket. He took one look at me and said, ‘You don’t look well, Mayhem. What’s wrong with your body?’

‘Where do I start?’ I replied. ‘I have an inflamed Achilles tendon, tendonitis in my right thumb and impingement in my left shoulder. Plus, my lower back is really sore. Apart from that, I feel awesome!’

We both laughed, but then Paddy gave me the kind of look that only a really good mate can give – a look that said: *You need to start looking after yourself, because you’re really not in a good way.*

In late January 2015, my sister Sarah posted a picture on Facebook of me, my daughter Mikaela and my niece Zahara on a stand-up paddleboard on the Gold Coast. Reality hit me like a hard slap across the face. *Oh my God, I realised with a sick feeling, I’ve got a dad gut. How did that happen?*

The alcohol, chips and sugar; the late nights partying and lack of sleep; along with the stress, lack of strength training, inflammation, and hormonal imbalances had caught up with me. I lay in bed that night and thought, *This has got to change.*



## REDISCOVERING MY HEALTH

I realised that I had to transform my approach to my physical and mental health, my fitness, and my personal and social wellbeing. It had all gone wrong, and it was all interlinked. I needed to put it right.

This was the insight that, ultimately, led to me developing the MatchFit program, writing this book and now sharing the program with you.

The first step was a systems reboot and knowledge update. I had always prided myself on being able to help people improve their fitness and performance. The state I’d let myself get into was



a classic example of knowing what to do, but not doing it. I had to swallow my pride and seek help. I also did extensive research on the latest scientific insights into neuroscience, strength training, cardiovascular conditioning, hormones, nutrition and ageing; along with recent findings in loneliness, connection, social wellbeing and adult play.

I made an appointment to see Jill Macnaught, an executive coach and clinical psychologist. Over several months, we addressed my feelings of failure stemming from my divorce. Jill helped me unravel my limiting beliefs that, because I'd had a 'marriage failure', I had failed in all parts of my life – that no one would take me seriously again, and that I had let my kids down. It took me a long time to learn to live half of the time without my children. Jill also helped me take accountability for my actions and to be honest with myself.

Christian, a former client of mine, likens 'functioning depression' to being stuck in a basement car park. We know where the exit is, but for some reason we drive around and around in circles. I used this analogy to explain to Jill what I was feeling. We all make mistakes – about whom we go into business with, about our career choices, about whom we hook up with, and about how we approach marriage. Jill taught me the power of internal storytelling, and how, especially at challenging times, we need to dig deep and actively rewrite our story to come up with stronger narratives that will power us through the next chapter of our lives.

The two years I spent with high-functioning depression were exhausting and traumatic, but also eye-opening. When I look back now, I see it was a life-changing experience. Until that time, my career and my studies had equipped me with 'textbook responses' to dealing with trauma. If someone told me they were feeling really upset or depressed, I'd immediately think about models and scales, rather than leaning forward and truly understanding and listening. These days, when someone sits down with me and says they're struggling, I can look them in the eye and say, with genuine empathy, 'I understand – I know exactly how you feel.'

## HIGH-FUNCTIONING DEPRESSION

Statistics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare suggest that 45% of the population aged between 18 and 85 will experience a mental disorder at some time in their lives. What is known as 'high-functioning depression' may be the most elusive form to recognise: although it can often be debilitating, it can also be suppressed enough to carry out daily responsibilities. It is important to recognise that *high-functioning* is not the same as *fully functioning*.

Depression has many forms, each with slightly different symptoms. Depression that still allows a person to live a high-functioning life is often referred to as low-grade depression; or *persistent depressive disorder* (PDD). In high-functioning depression or PDD, symptoms are generally less severe, may be present on most days and for most of the day, usually last for a minimum period of two years, and may include two or more of these symptoms:

- Decreased appetite or overeating
- Insomnia or oversleeping
- Lack of energy and fatigue
- Lowered self-esteem
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Feeling sad and hopeless
- Decreased activity, effectiveness and productivity
- Avoidance of social activities
- Feelings of guilt and worries over the past

A person with high-functioning depression may also meet the criteria for major depression; diagnosis should be made by an appropriate healthcare professional. Although it can be difficult to unmask the disorder, high-functioning depression can be effectively treated.<sup>1</sup>

I also began seeing Paddy each week to get to the bottom of my injuries, but we both knew that reducing stress, winding back the crappy food, cutting back the sugar, alcohol and late nights, and adding strength training and mobility to my fitness program would make a big difference.

## MY MAKEOVER

The following week I made an appointment with Teresa Boyce, a nutritionist and naturopath. I explained my situation and asked her to keep me accountable.

That same day a colleague took a picture of me. Okay, I know I don't look morbidly obese, but I definitely wasn't going to get a call-up for the cover of Men's Health with that flabby midsection and stooped posture. And I was still feeling really sad on the inside too.

Together, the photo and the metrics were a reality check. It was clear to me how I'd let my health and wellbeing slide. I decided to map out where I needed to be, how I wanted to feel, and how I was going to re-engineer my life.

Teresa and I put together a 'renovation plan' for my body. We worked out where I needed to be in three and six months, and exactly what I needed to do to get there. At the same time, Jill and I worked on a plan to get my brain healthy again.

Let's look at the elements my 'makeover' included.



Here are my measurements before I started the program:

**Bioage:** -3 years  
**Weight:** 93.5 kg  
**Body fat:** 20%  
**Waist:** 94.5 cm  
**Lean muscle mass:** 24.5 kg  
**Flexibility and ROM:** 11/20

## Reconnecting with purpose and community

I'd lost track of what drove me – and the reason I was on the planet. Working with Jill (and, more recently, with Richard Burton) helped me redefine my purpose and link this to all parts of my life. Prioritising my relationships also made a big change to my wellbeing and sense of belonging.

## Rewiring my brain

With Jill's help, I made three specific changes to how my brain worked. First, I stopped beating myself up over my divorce, and started being a lot nicer to myself. I wasn't a failure – I'd just had a marriage that didn't work out. I also decided that pretending I had my life together all the time was doing me no favours. People make mistakes – that's just part of life. What's important is how we learn from them. And I discovered people connected with me a whole lot more when I showed vulnerability and was much more authentic.

Second, I was now over 40, so I had to accept that I couldn't out-run or out-cycle a bad diet. I needed to rewrite my 'fitness

story' and change the way I thought about looking after my body.

Third, I started learning again. When I was stressed out, the last thing I felt like doing was learning or trying new activities. My brain had become stale. I was in a rut and had been playing the 'Same Game' for a number of years. I set myself new goals including learning to play the guitar (still a work in progress!), shaking up my fitness training and challenging myself to swim the English Channel (more on that 'experiment' later) and learning about technology and digital business models (so I could launch StriveStronger.com).

## Changing how I move

Before starting my new program, I was what I refer to as a 'cardio pig' and would always go for cardiovascular activities like running, cycling or paddling rather than strength training. I thought stretching exercises and yoga were about as exciting as a trip to the dentist. The research I did and the expert advice I received made it clear things had to change. I booked a personal trainer and started doing strength training three times a week. I also started weekly yoga classes and learned to (made myself) enjoy them. I still cycled, but I cut back the long 'junk' miles and replaced them with shorter sessions at higher intensity. I also started swimming and dusted off my surf ski.

## Learning a better way to fuel

I cut out the chips, the sugar and the alcohol. I had to acknowledge that I was addicted to sugar, and that meant getting rid of my primary 'dealers'. I also needed to eat more protein, fresh vegetables and good fats. Teresa and I worked on a nutrition plan, including a specific approach for when I was travelling.

## Prioritising sleep

For so long I had been able to get by on little sleep. I used to pride myself on it. Now, I make sleep a priority and instantly felt so much better. My goal was to get seven hours (or as you'll learn, more specifically four or five 90-minute cycles) most nights. To do that, I had a goal of lights-out before 10.30 pm.

## Building in activities to recharge

Through additional research and personal experience I rediscovered the benefits of physical and psychological recuperation. Along with yoga, I incorporated mental skills training like imagery and visualisation, relaxing activities like massage, and ways of disconnecting psychologically. I went back to having regular mini-breaks and holidays throughout the year.

## Rediscovering the value of play

In my darkest days I lost the ability to have fun, so I now booked in different types of play each and every week. These could include being totally present and engaged with my kids, participating in different fitness activities like dragon boat racing or snow skiing, and booking fun getaways (including a few fitness getaways each year) with friends or family. Most importantly, I tried not to take myself too seriously and began laughing and smiling again.

## Living a Better Week

I'd fallen into a number of bad habits at work. My diary was full of non-productive meetings, I sent and received countless emails, I was addicted to the social media dopamine hit and there were constant distractions as we shifted to an 'agile' working environment. I had to learn to cure my mobile phone addiction and get back to focusing on doing what really mattered. I reintroduced physicality to my work life, ensuring I accumulated 10,000 steps and had at least one 'walk-and-talk' meeting every day. And I went back to the 'Better Week' construct that now forms the accountability framework for the MatchFit program.

## Staying accountable and on track

The final component was sticking to it. With my background as an athlete, I was pretty good at self-regulating once I had a plan in place, so I applied the new program like I was preparing for a race. But I also developed a range of other strategies to help me stay focused, like visualising my 'Ideal Day', tracking my Better Week, locking in an Annual Recovery Plan and making myself accountable to my Personal Board.

## RESULTS

The program worked – and much better and more quickly than I initially expected. I adjusted and refined it over time, of course, but it gave me a structure and a method for rebuilding my wellbeing and pushed me to improve in all areas. I was striving for a healthy mind in a healthy body, and the program helped me get there.

How did I know this? It was simple – the metrics told me. Here's my measurements, taken just before publishing this book:

- Bioage:** -10 years (down 7 years)
- Weight:** 88 kg (down 5.5 kg)
- Body fat:** 9% (down 11%)
- Waist:** 84.5 cm (down 10 cm)
- Lean muscle mass:** 31.6 kg (up 3.0 kg)
- Flexibility and ROM:** 17/20 (up by 25%)

The metrics showed that I had reduced my body fat from 20% to 9%, increased my lean muscle mass by more than 3 kilograms, and significantly improved my flexibility and range of movement. Together, these changes had reduced my weight by 5.5 kilograms, and my waist size by 10 centimetres. Most importantly, I had lowered my biological age by seven years.

Of course, there was another simple way to find out whether the program had worked – by looking at me! Here's a photo of me taken just before this book was published, after my 6 Week Shred experiment.

While I was proud of what I'd achieved physically, I was even more pumped about the way I felt. I was happy, energetic and engaged. My relationships were stronger than ever. I felt fitter and more balanced, and stronger than I'd been 15 years earlier. I was more engaged, more creative and more productive at work. Maintaining my physical and psychosocial wellbeing had become a way of life. I would set up my diary every week (even during the busiest of times) to keep me aligned to my purpose and accountable to staying on the program.





## THE GENESIS OF MATCHFIT

As we've seen, I approached fixing my health and wellbeing as a strategic project. I realised there were three distinct stages.

First, I measured exactly where I was, and established a set of clear metrics that would indicate my progress.

Second, I re-educated myself and engaged in the program with a specific plan for aligning my purpose, fitness, nutrition, sleep, recovery, mindset and play.

And third, I put in place an accountability process for myself, one that mapped out what an Ideal Day, a Better Week and a sustainable year looked like. I also kept track of my key data through wearable technology, and with regular fitness sessions with colleagues and friends.

Later, I came to see that the knowledge I'd gained and the strategies I'd devised could help others. Every day I receive emails or messages via social media, or talk to people after a presentation or media appearance, or have coffee with a colleague or friend who is also struggling to stay MatchFit. I also know there is a massive need for the scientifically verified content (telling people what works and what is bullshit) in this book.

What emerged was the MatchFit program.

I call the three strategies at the heart of MatchFit CALCULATE, ENGAGE and TRACK, and they make up the remainder of this book.

What gets measured gets done. I track my daily steps, sleep, resting heart rate and exercise intensity. I have a DEXA scan and check blood performance markers and hormone levels each year. I check in with Teresa and have a personal trainer for accountability.

Its fair to say I invest a significant amount of time, energy and money into wellbeing, but its also possible to track the essential elements at lower cost – and we'll explore these later in the book.



# 10

# THINK

You *can* change the way you think. A healthy, positive, adaptable mindset stretches our brains throughout life and allows us to be open to new challenges.

**U**ntil the late 1990s it was believed that our brains changed and grew throughout our childhood and teenage years, but then stopped when we reached early adulthood. Neuroscience has since found that the brain is ‘plastic’, meaning it can continue growing and adapting throughout our lives.<sup>1</sup>

We have seen already how physical activity, good nutrition and quality recovery can improve the brain’s performance. Now we will explore how the reverse is also true: learning mental skills and training your brain to embrace challenge and growth contributes to healthy decision making and your physical wellbeing. THINK is a vital lever in the MatchFit program.

While the majority of this chapter is based on performance psychology and what you can do to improve brain function and performance, first I want to introduce you to what I refer to as being ‘above or below the line’.

## **1. FLOURISHING OR LANGUISHING?**

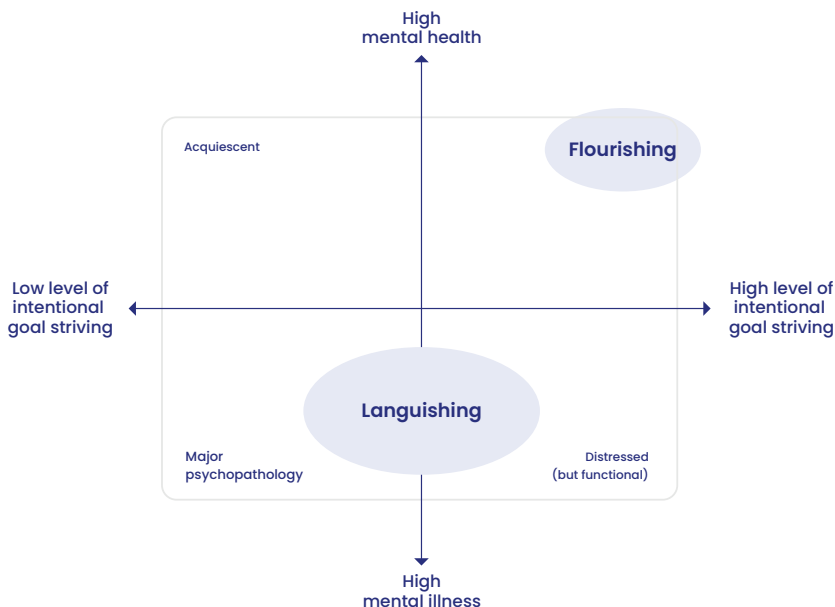
When it comes to your work and life generally, would you describe yourself as flourishing? As the model below illustrates, *flourishing* means that you have a high level of mental health and wellbeing, including high satisfaction with life and a high level of intentional goal setting. This model shows that it can be useful to think about how you are tracking according to two measures: how your mental health and wellbeing is (the vertical axis), and how engaged, purposeful and connected you are (the horizontal axis). When you score negatively on the horizontal axis, that’s a sign that you are *languishing*.

After presenting hundreds of workshops over the years I put together a table to help participants think about the behaviours and traits that best described them. Where do you sit on the flourishing/languishing chart?



Languishers	Flourishers
Fatigued	Energised
Lonely	Socially connected
Constantly distracted	Focused and attentive
Overwhelmed	Productive
Empty and sad	Fulfilled and joyful
Bored and stale	Creative and innovative
Listless and flat	Playful and fun
Unexcited	Excitable and optimistic
Things seem hard	Things seem easy

Research by psychologist Corey Keyes revealed that at any one time only 17.2% of people met the criteria for flourishing and 57% reported ‘moderate’ mental health.<sup>2</sup> The fact that only 17% of people are in the flourishing category alarms me and underpins my personal vision to ‘wake people up to a better way of living, working and leading’. You don’t have to accept that life is just okay, and you definitely don’t have to accept that there is nothing you can do about it. There is so much you can do, and this starts with the premise that you can change the way you think.



## Moving up the scale

Take another look at the flourishing/languishing chart and you'll see that the MatchFit program focuses on improving your performance on both the horizontal and the vertical axis. The MatchFit levers CONNECT and PLAY are specific to the horizontal axis. If you find yourself below the line in the languishing zone, one of the key skills to focus on is identifying negative thoughts and attempting to have more positive, optimistic thoughts. Developing a flexible, agile mindset that prepares you with the necessary skills to survive in this crazy, yet highly opportunistic world we inhabit.

### IT IS OKAY TO NOT ALWAYS BE OKAY

Towards the end of the 2015 AFL season, one of the leading (and highest-paid) players, Sydney Swans star Lance 'Buddy' Franklin, acknowledged that he was struggling with mental health issues. The way the board, coaching staff and players reacted was exemplary. They acknowledged that big, strong men like Buddy can experience depression – and that it's not a weakness, but is treatable.

At first Franklin felt 'inhibited and embarrassed to seek help', according to an article in *The Age*. 'It had been an issue for a little while with me,' he said, 'but ... I wasn't able to talk about it and I was a little bit embarrassed. Being able to speak to the football club, my partner and my family was the best decision I ever made.'<sup>3</sup>

The message is clear: if you find yourself feeling sad, down or miserable for more than two weeks, seek professional help. I learned this the hard way during my perfect storm. I was in denial for more than 18 months, and I spiralled into a deeper and deeper hole until I put my hand up for help and acknowledged that it was okay to not always be okay.

## 2. THINKING SKILLS FOR THE NEW WORLD

The world has changed: the Old World of Work, with fax machines, rotary phones, thermal overhead transparencies and typing pools has been consigned to history. The way we work and live today is busier, constantly changing and more complicated than ever. With the focus on streamlining business systems, processes and technology, we are achieving a lot more in less time. Think back to a busy day 10 years ago; an equivalent day today would feel like a rest day for most of us.



## I HAVE A DREAM

Imagine this: you sit on the solitary black chair in the medical clinic (they always have black chairs) and your doctor asks, 'So, why you are here today?' You respond, 'Well, doc, I've been feeling really flat lately. Tired. Listless. Lack of joy in my life and I've had no energy. In the words of Austin Powers, I've lost my mojo.'

Before pulling out the prescription pad, your doctor leans forward in a caring manner and says, 'I'm going to ask you a series of questions to try to get to the bottom of why you are feeling so flat. Let's go. In the last month, have you been:

- Moving and exercising on a regular basis?
- Eating healthy, nutritious food, low in sugar, and predominantly fresh produce?
- Drinking alcohol in moderation and having regular days with no alcohol?
- Avoiding drugs and other stimulants to pick you up?
- Laughing, playing and having fun on a daily basis?
- Having regular (ideally daily) doses of nature?
- Connecting with colleagues, friends and loved ones in a truly meaningful way?
- Intimate and had physical contact/sex with your partner, significant other, or other people?
- Conscious of sitting down and reflecting about parts of your life that you are grateful for?
- Building in regular periods of relaxation where you do activities that help you calm your mind and slow down?
- Waking up each morning feeling rested and ready for the day ahead?'

After getting over the initial shock, you realise your doctor understands that a healthy, balanced, active, connected, playful and engaged life is the platform for flourishing psychologically.

While the speed at which we do business has accelerated, most people have done little to reboot their body or brain to adapt and survive, let alone thrive, in what I call the New World of Work. Constant change, digitisation, artificial intelligence and global competition have transformed the skills we need. The next section sets out the psychological frameworks and strategies you need in order to flourish in the new world. We're going to explore a number of topics, including:

- Building a growth mindset.
- The importance of grit/perseverance.
- The power of positive psychology and learned optimism.
- How gratitude can improve your thought processes.
- The difference between happiness and fulfilment.
- The importance of adopting a strive philosophy.

## Building a growth mindset

A question regularly asked in the corporate world is: should you focus on employing people based on their IQ/intelligence or their attitude? Talent scouts in sports across the world constantly debate exactly the same thing.

Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck and her team discovered that people's core attitudes categorise them as having one of two types of mindset: either a 'growth mindset' or a 'fixed mindset'. Having a growth mindset is a much better predictor of success than IQ.<sup>4</sup>

Dweck has been studying mindsets for years and argues that 'success in life is all about dealing with failure'. And failure, she explains, is really just information – about what didn't work, and therefore about what might work better the next time.

People who have a fixed mindset consider that their abilities, intelligence and talents will not change. People with a growth mindset, by contrast, believe that most things can be improved with additional training and/or effort. They overtake those who have a fixed mindset, even when they have a lower IQ, because they embrace each challenge and treat it as an opportunity to learn something new.

Your success in life is closely linked to how you deal with challenges and setbacks. And developing a growth mindset is the best way to turn setbacks to your advantage and use it to improve. And the good news? You are not born with a growth mindset – it is learned.

## The power of grit

Grit is the combination of passion and perseverance in the pursuit of long-term goals.<sup>6</sup> The good news is grit too can be learned, regardless of your past. One way to foster grit is through developing a growth mindset.<sup>7</sup>

University of Pennsylvania psychologist Angela Duckworth spent years analysing the short- and long-term effects of grit on people's performance in multiple domains including investment banking, education, the military, football, swimming and chess. In the process she discovered 'common denominators that successful



## MITFREUDE = JOY THROUGH OTHER PEOPLE'S SUCCESS

Taking pleasure in other people's success is a key component of fostering a growth mindset. I'm sure you've heard of the German term *schadenfreude*, which translates as 'pleasure in other people's misfortune'. But do you know about *mitfreude*? When I work with elite athletes, one of my greatest joys is seeing them qualify to play or compete for their state or country. When Ed Cowan was presented with his baggy green (by one of his batting childhood heroes, Dean Jones), it was the culmination of years of hard work and practice. Seeing Ed achieve his dream made me proud. Part of fostering a growth mindset is taking pleasure in the success of others. And inadvertently, when you develop other people, it has a way of coming back to potentially benefit you through social connectedness with stronger relationships, higher change of success and greater sense of wellbeing.<sup>5</sup>

people had distinguished themselves in overcoming multiple challenges over multiple years to sustain the pursuit of something important to them'.<sup>8</sup>

'Most of the research and psychology says that people change much more after childhood than you first would think. There are all these Biblical phrases like "show me the child at seven, and I'll show you the man," or Freud, who thought everything interesting happened in

## GRIT WINS EVERY TIME

Over the years I have met hundreds of 'braniacs' who, despite their intellect, have not lived up to their potential. I have also worked with loads of talented athletes who thought that their victory in the genetic lottery would take them to the top. Board rooms, athletic tracks, football fields, netball courts and swimming pools are awash with missed opportunity. Those who do reach the top get there because they work hard.

On the flip side, we all know people who may not be applying for Mensa but who have still achieved phenomenal success in life. There are countless stories of athletes, academics, politicians, actors and entrepreneurs who, through hard work and discipline more than through intelligence or skill, got to the top.

We read about inspiring examples of people like Oprah Winfrey and Larry Ellison (the founder of Oracle), who have overcome very tough childhoods or extremely difficult periods in their lives to carve out successful careers and build successful companies. What about you? When have you used grit – which is to say, passion and perseverance – to overcome obstacles?

childhood, that there was no growth after that. Neuroscience and longitudinal research suggests that people change a lot, and they change sometimes in dramatic ways,' Duckworth said in a 2018 interview.<sup>9</sup>

## The power of positive psychology

A lot has changed in psychology over the last 10 years, due to pioneers like Martin Seligman in the United States, Robert Holden in the United Kingdom and my good friend Dr Timothy Sharp in Australia. One development has been the emergence of the concept of 'positive psychology'.

Positive psychology teaches us to look at the world in a new way. Instead of studying past mistakes or delving into things that make us unhappy, you're encouraged to see the bright side, asking yourself questions like, 'What do I have going for me?' or 'What

did I do right today?' or 'What new skills can I learn to help me get a new job or a promotion?'

This new science is legitimising the idea that fulfilment is more than something to wish for temporarily – it's something we can work for and consciously gain through changing the way we think about ourselves.

When we practise positive psychology, we:

### POSITIVE THINKING IS NOT POLYANNA THINKING

When I teach positive psychology, I always see some people sitting in their chairs thinking, 'Next he's going to click his shiny red heels and tell us that "there's no place like home"!'. But positive thinking isn't a 'don't worry, be happy' attitude, nor is it about being unrealistically optimistic. Thinking with positivity means choosing to focus on the range of positive emotions available to us. Crucially, it involves having a *realistically* optimistic attitude that triggers positive emotions, which, like negative thoughts, spark a chain reaction of powerful feelings, actions and behaviours. But unlike negative thoughts, which narrow how we think and feel, positivity broadens our outlook, increasing the resources available to us.

- Focus on what's *right*;
- Learn about *signature strengths* and about weaknesses too, so we can channel more energy into what we do well and less on those things we don't do well; and
- Pick ourselves up during the tough times, maintain perspective and focus on the good times ahead.

Positive psychology teaches that changing the way we think is like learning a new skill, like playing the guitar or ice skating: we need to keep practising until we become competent and eventually gain mastery.

Psychologist Barbara Frederickson's research shows that individuals, marriages and business teams that are flourishing have a positivity ratio of 3:1.<sup>10</sup> That is, for every negative emotion, there are three or more positive emotions. People who become chronically stuck in the languishing category due to poor thinking skills, whose relationships flounder, and who are in business teams that are unproductive and unprofitable, tend to have ratios of around 1:1. Toxic business teams have a reverse ratio, with more negative interactions than positive.

Developing positive psychology – or learned optimism – lays the foundations for optimal performance. Optimists focus on opportunities rather than on things that could go wrong, and don't get bogged down with things that haven't gone right in the past. They think about their strengths and qualities, and they look for the positives in others too. Because they believe things will work well, they take action to ensure that they do.

Thinking like this is a skill, and like any other skill you need to first learn how to do it, and then put in plenty of practice – until you become an expert. The more optimistic you are, the better your performance will be. Later in this chapter we'll explore strategies to do exactly that.

## Gratitude

If your impression of gratitude is Hallmark-worthy quotes on Instagram, you might think it's insufferable. But gratitude isn't about gushing expressions of mushiness. Gratitude – the act of appreciating the good in life – is a powerful practice that boosts the feel-good neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin and the hormone oxytocin. It can improve our relationships, enhance recovery from illness, foster resilience, boost self-esteem and our sense of wellbeing, and even give you a better night's sleep.

Like positive psychology, gratitude is often misunderstood as starry-eyed optimism, but gratitude does not mean denying life's

spectrum of experiences and emotions. Rather, it is a choice you can make, even in your darkest moments, to acknowledge that good also exists.

Robert Emmons is a professor in psychology and an expert in gratitude research. He proposes that gratitude has two parts.<sup>11</sup>

First, it's an affirmation of goodness. We affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we've received. This doesn't mean that life is perfect; it doesn't ignore complaints, burdens and hassles. But when we look at life as a whole, gratitude encourages us to identify some amount of goodness.

The second part of gratitude is figuring out where that goodness comes from. We recognise the sources as being outside of ourselves. 'It didn't stem from anything we necessarily did in which we might take pride. We can appreciate positive traits in ourselves, but I think true gratitude involves a humble dependence on others: we acknowledge that other people – or higher powers, if you're spiritual – gave us many gifts, big and small, to help us achieve the goodness in our lives.'<sup>12</sup>

Author Deepak Chopra agrees that in gratitude we experience the spiritual.<sup>13</sup> This makes sense on several levels. Whether or not we are religious, we can intuitively understand the 'spiritual' feeling of being connected with something greater than ourselves. Gratitude, a social emotion, connects us intimately with others – so it is through the act of gratitude that we can become one with something greater than ourselves: each other and the world around us.

## The importance of striving

I love the word *strive*. It represents something we all need more of in our lives and is interwoven with psychology frameworks on growth mindset and grit. Striving also links with gratitude, as taking time to reflect on accomplishments, especially the challenging ones, is a big part of ensuring a healthy brain and a flourishing mind. Striving is connected to our sense of meaning/fulfilment and to our sense of purpose. To strive is to embrace change and step out of your comfort zone.

Striving is about the sense of pride you get from struggling



## HAPPINESS VS FULFILMENT

The word *fulfilment* comes from the Old English for 'making full' or 'providing a sense of completion'. Compare that to the word *happy*, which has origins in the Old Norse for 'luck' or 'unforeseen occurrence' – which suggests that how you feel can be very much a matter of perspective.

Research by psychologist Roy Baumeister found that people are happiest when their needs and desires are met in the present moment. A sense of meaning and purpose, on the other hand, comes from considering the whole of our lives, including the past and future. When people speak about 'happiness', it tends to be about leading an easier life, having fun and being able to buy what they want. Having a 'meaningful' life tends to be related to fulfilling social relationships, being charitable and engaged in the community, and caring for children/others.<sup>14</sup>

There is nothing wrong with feeling happy – it is a pleasure that should be enjoyed. An ice cream, sex, \$25 million can make you *feel* happy – but the thing about happiness is that it is *fleeting*. You get that lovely, pleasurable sensation that lasts a moment, a minute or a month, and then it subsides.

It becomes perilous when we try to make happiness our permanent state of being. When we cultivate the inner satisfaction of fulfilment, however, we have a foundation for handling the natural fluctuations of happiness, along with the full range of the emotional experience, including the discomfort inherent in striving towards our goals – when we do that, we temporarily forgo happiness in order to gain nourishment that lasts. Fulfilment through purpose and meaning is a baseline we should all be striving for.

towards and achieving something you long for. When you ask people what achievements they are most proud of, it is rare to hear answers like 'winning \$100,000 in the lottery' or 'when daddy bought me an expensive new car'. Instead, it's about the challenges people have overcome. The success that comes from hard work. You appreciate something a lot more when you have to work hard for it.

When I think of the times I have felt proudest, it is when I have gone to my edge, been truly tested, and pushed through and come out the other side.

- It was when I felt sad, depressed and alone after a marriage breakdown, and had to fight my way out to become a better dad and a happier, more connected human.
- It was when reporting to a temperamental manager who actively tried to block myself and the efforts of my team to build a robust business. I had to stay committed to my compelling vision of making a difference to people's lives, and not allow the toxic environment to

extinguish the flame inside me or to douse my passion to build an innovative technology offering.

- It was being in pitch-black, freezing waters while I was training to swim the English Channel and had to breathe my way through an anxiety attack and keep going even when my brain was yelling at me to bail out.

### Our greatest growth comes from pain

While it definitely does not feel like it at the time, challenging, even negative events are linked to surprising benefits in people who have experienced a moderate amount of adversity in life. They're predictive of lower global distress, lower functional impairment, and increased satisfaction.<sup>15</sup> In one study of 1500 adults, researchers reported that those who overcame adversity in the past were more likely to savour the present,<sup>16</sup> and experience better overall subjective wellbeing.<sup>17</sup>

I have a real issue with kids getting a ribbon for coming ninth in their school carnival. I think this is wrong and creates a softening and a sense of entitlement that even if I don't work hard, I still get rewarded. Then the child who has had a cushioned existence enters the workforce and receives robust/honest feedback about their (lack of) performance and they break down in tears. We all have our ups and downs in life and learning how to strive and set goals, even in the most challenging times, is an essential part of being MatchFit.

## 3. PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY

Now that you understand why a growth mindset, fostering grit, positive psychology, practising gratitude, focusing on fulfilment (over short-term happiness) and adopting a philosophy of 'strive' helps you have a more flexible brain that can adapt and change and grow throughout your life, it's time to explore the pointy end of performance psychology.

There is a reason I teach in this sequence. If you start with performance psychology techniques too early, they can seem too hard, or you may not be in the right headspace to implement

them. If you're feeling sad or depressed, or have low self-esteem, affirmations can actually make you feel worse.<sup>18</sup> Starting at performance psychology without focusing on building a solid base is like putting the icing on a cake you haven't baked.

## Training for mastery

I love watching someone who has mastered their trade – an elite athlete playing for their country, a dancer performing on main stage in an opening-night production, a CEO holding a press conference announcing annual results with absolute clarity on why the company outperformed the market. In each of these examples the performance coach in me is mesmerised, in total admiration, at the thousands of hours of practice that have gone into perfecting these skills.

That is where performance psychology can take you to another level. While you might not want to become a world-beater in your sport, your dancing or your presentation skills, investing time towards training your brain and learning how to effectively respond to stress has a big impact on your wellbeing, your relationships and your career. In fact, the biggest differentiator between a great performer and an okay performer is the ability to manage stress.<sup>19</sup> It's about teaching people to shift into the right psychological (and physical) state before important Performance Moments, then to switch off and relax, conserving energy as they transition.

Sports psychologist Michael Gervais says that, 'There are three things you can train. Your craft, your body, and your mind.'<sup>20</sup> What excites me about performance psychology is that you really *can* train your brain to react calmly and methodically in high-pressure situations.

But it doesn't just happen by luck: you need to invest the time to effectively 'front-load cognitive skills that you can draw on when needed', as Gervais puts it.<sup>21</sup> When I work with clients at the pointy end, I draw heavily upon what my coaching psychology masters taught me about the 'canon of sports psychology skills' (including relaxation, self-talk, imagery goal setting and concentration); along with what I learned as an athlete and a coach in the world of elite sport.<sup>22</sup> Here is my approach:

Relaxation	Reducing arousal and anxiety levels through relaxation techniques has been shown to successfully combat 'choking', and help people get into a state of flow. Relaxation techniques reduce the stress hormones in our bodies that make performing at a high level unsustainable. Finding ways to shift gears between energy expenditure (stress) and energy renewal (recovery) is also called 'arousal control'.
Self-talk	Self-talk specific to peak performance is an umbrella term for a variety of skills that counterbalance the negative consequences of anxiety-producing and disrupting thoughts. <sup>23</sup> Self-talk is utilised to combat negative and self-defeating internal dialogue; like any other skill, it requires intentional practice. Knowing how to respond when your inner voice starts to take over is key to winning the internal dialogue game here.
Imagery	Imagery involves mentally rehearsing aspects of your performance. It allows you to practise in your mind before you perform, and to see yourself perform at your best. The skilled use of imagery helps you clear your mind of distractions, think positively about what you are going to do, and be fully prepared. Effective use of imagery engages as many of the senses and emotions that can be invoked and is more inclusive than mere visualisation. <sup>24</sup>
Visualisation	Research has shown the brain doesn't differentiate between a real memory and an imagined one. <sup>25</sup> Visualisation has been shown to program the subconscious brain and can be as effective as real practice. <sup>26</sup> It is one of the primary techniques used in sports psychology.
Goal-setting	A primary performance-enhancing technique and precursor to success, goal-setting focuses our attention, is an act of commitment, can incentivise us and foster persistence, boosts confidence when we achieve our goal, and helps us break large tasks down into bite-size pieces. Dr Edwin Locke was a pioneering researcher on goal-setting and motivation in the late 1960s and his findings are still applicable to us today. <sup>27</sup>
Pre-performance routines	A pre-performance routine is a 'sequence of task relevant thoughts and actions which a performer engages in systematically prior to his or her performance of a specific skill'. <sup>28</sup> I teach two methods relating to this, which we'll look at later in this chapter.

## Performance flip: stop playing the Same Game

There is a juxtaposition between high-performance rituals/routines and getting stuck playing the Same Game. The mental skills detailed above make a massive difference to high performers. However, I noticed that after a sustained period of success, a number of my athletes, sporting teams, executives and organisations became stale and lost the energy, vigour, passion and drive that had catapulted them towards their original success. I call this ‘playing the Same Game’.

The Same Game is the tendency to do the same thing in the same way every day, which can create monotony, boredom and a lack of spark. It’s vital to fire the neurons in the brain in fresh ways to keep learning, stretching and growing.

You wake up in the same house, in the same bed, next to the same person (highly recommended, if you are married). You get ready for work in the same way, eat the same breakfast and travel the same route to get to work each day. You order the same coffee from the same barista. You have the same greetings and the same meetings with the same people in the same rooms, and you talk about the same things. You order the same lunch from the same location. You finish the day in the same way, then stick it in reverse – travelling the same way to home with the same routines as soon as you walk in the door.

And then you freak out when there is a transformation program at work or massive change in your personal life.

One of the reasons why I struggled so much when my marriage broke down is I had been playing the Same Game for many years, and then when my life was tipped upside down my brain didn’t know how to respond.

I see this every day in the corporate world. We talk about change and about AI and disruption and digitisation. But when big changes happen in the workforce, many people (especially those aged 40+) struggle, because while they have been waxing lyrical about change, they have done nothing to train their brains for change.

So here’s a sixth high-performance strategy to mitigate against that:

### Micro-doses of change

Training our brains to stay flexible and ready for daily challenges – as well as being open to radical change at times – enables us to make the changes necessary to be successful in both our personal and business lives.

Note: When you do find yourself stuck on a plateau, which invariably happens to everyone, it is vital to stimulate change and get off it as quickly as possible, before *this* becomes your new norm.

## QUIRKY PRE-PERFORMANCE SPORTING ROUTINES

In his autobiography, Rafael Nadal explains his pre-match routine: 'Freezing cold water. I do this before every match. It's the point before the point of no return. Under the cold shower I enter a new space in which I feel my power and resilience grow. I'm a different man when I emerge. I'm activated. I'm in "the now", as sports psychologists describe a state of alert concentration in which the body moves by pure instinct, like a fish in a current. Nothing else exists but the battle ahead.'

Former Australian wicketkeeper Adam Gilchrist had specific pre-performance routines. 'Gilly' would walk for over an hour on the morning of a Test match. 'Walking is an underestimated exercise. I do it most mornings and you can get a good sweat going.' Before a game of cricket the players do a generic warm-up consisting of an easy jog or a game of football, followed by stretching and mobility exercises. Then they do their own thing – batting, bowling, fielding. Just before play starts the coach would give a brief plan/pep talk. The first time I was with the Aussie team and John Buchanan did this, I could hear a loud *whack, whack, whack* from the back of the room. I looked over and Gilly was throwing a cricket ball really hard from one of his gloves to the other, getting what he calls a 'feel for the ball'. He'd then throw the ball to the coach (or to another member of support staff) who had to catch it. Then he was ready to play.

So there you have it. Our THINK goal is to build a mindset to better embrace the challenges of each day and find fulfilment in life – in other words, to flourish. The keys are developing a positive psychology by building a growth mindset, cultivating grit, being willing to strive by pushing through and/or taking on new challenges; and practising specific performance psychology tactics, including relaxation training, self-talk, imagery and visualisation, goal-setting and concentration.





## THE FIELD GOAL THAT SANK A NATION

In the final of the 2003 Rugby Union World Cup, Jonny Wilkinson orchestrated a captivating moment of sporting theatre. With only seconds of extra-time left, he struck a field goal on his weaker right foot that sailed through the uprights and secured a World Cup win for England.

Was this a fluke, a flash-in-the-pan performance? Absolutely not. Jason Weber, who was the Wallabies' strength and conditioning coach at that time, told me that he used to watch Wilkinson in awe: the Englishman would come out at least 30 minutes before every other player in the pre-game warm up and practise kicking field goals, on both his left and right foot, from a range of positions around the ground. In high-pressure game situations, therefore, Wilkinson was effectively on autopilot. He also employed psychological skills in his training practice, so when the time came for him to perform, those abilities had been front-loaded in his brain.

Of the magical field goal, Wilkinson told *The Independent*, 'I knew I'd hit it in such a way that it wasn't going to be the most powerful kick, but it was going to be accurate. I knew from fairly early on it was going over. I actually got lost in that moment, I didn't know where I was. It felt like a surreal, dream-like situation. I had to ask "is this really happening?"'<sup>29</sup>

That is high-class performance psychology in action.





# RX FOR SUCCESS

Let's look at specific recommendations for THINK starting with thinking skills and moving to more advanced performance psychology techniques.

## 1. CHANGING THE WAY YOU THINK

You really can change the way you think, and that starts with identifying Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs) and learning to reauthor them. Here's how to do it.

### Think about how you think

This is about increasing your awareness of your cognitive processes – the way you think. Using the table on page 271, write down your thoughts and feelings in different situations throughout the day. Note carefully the relationship between certain types of thoughts and feelings. At this stage, don't worry about changing anything. Right now, you're becoming aware of how you think in different situations.

### Identify unhelpful ANTs

When under pressure or in highly stressful situations, you might find you are thinking about your circumstance in negative and unhelpful ways saying, 'I can't do this!' or 'Why does this always happen to me?' These are Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs).

ANTs make difficult situations worse, but it is possible to control them. Learning to identify unhelpful thoughts, and then

#### AUTOMATIC NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

Here are some common patterns outlined by Dr Timothy Sharp:

- **Over-generalising Ollie.** "I forgot to do that report on time. I never manage to do things right."
- **Filtering Freddy.** "My boss said most of the submission was great, but there were a number of mistakes so she must think I'm hopeless."
- **Black and White Bob.** "I won't be able to get all of this done, so I may as well not start it at all."
- **Personalising Paula.** "John's in a terrible mood. It must've been something I did."
- **Charlie Catastrophiser.** "What if I haven't turned the iron off and the house burns down?"
- **Emotional Eddie.** "I feel hopeless; therefore my situation must be hopeless."
- **Mind-reading Murray.** "I can tell he hates my shirt."
- **Fortune-telling Francis.** "This relationship is sure to fail."
- **'Shoulda' Sheree.** "People should be nice to me all the time."
- **Magnification Mary/Minimisation Martha.** "He noticed I spilled something on my shirt. I know he said he'll go out with me again, but I bet he doesn't call."

to challenge and change them, can significantly reduce negative emotions – whether or not you’ve managed to get yourself out of the situation that caused them. It’s about having more cognitive flexibility.

## Challenge your ANTs

Thoughts are not necessarily facts; just because you think something doesn’t make it true. If your ANTs are causing unnecessary distress, you need to learn how to challenge or change them. Next time you hear the little voice in your head saying something negative, ask a few questions: ‘Is that true?’ ‘Is that a helpful thought?’ ‘Is it really that bad?’ One of my favourite questions is: ‘What is the evidence for this?’ Asking yourself: ‘Am I just being governed by my emotions?’ will help you gain perspective too.

## Replace ANTs with POTs (positive optimistic thoughts)

Once you’ve begun the process of identifying and challenging negative thoughts, it is time to start planting more positive thoughts. That doesn’t mean they have to be unrealistic – in fact, they shouldn’t be. Here are some tips to help you do this:

- Actively focus on all the good things in your life.
- Look for good things to add to your life.
- Start seeing difficult situations as opportunities to learn.
- Tell yourself that good things will happen in the future.

Each of these steps is a separate skill, and mastery of them requires practice, time and perseverance. Becoming a more positive thinker will not happen overnight, but it will happen if you persevere.

Thought	Type of ANT	Why do I think like this?	Have I always thought like this?	Is there another way?

## 2. USE A THOUGHT JOURNAL

The act of putting pen to paper (or fingers to keypad) helps us clarify our thoughts and feelings, provides an opportunity for positive self-talk, and offers tangible evidence that moments which seem insignificant really do matter.

Research shows regular journal writing is a proven way to support people to better understand their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. In a psychological context, it helps you move from self-awareness (where you know the information) to self-regulation (where you act and apply the information to your life).<sup>30</sup>

## 3. PRACTISE GRATITUDE

Here are some exercises that will help you build gratitude into your life.

- Write down three things you are grateful for each day. (Try to think of new things each day.)
- Savour a positive moment each day and draw awareness to your senses – whatever you can see, feel, smell, hear and taste.
- Write a quick SMS, note or email to someone showing appreciation for them. It might be to a friend, your partner, a parent, child or colleague.
- Write for two minutes each day describing a positive experience you had in the past 24 hours.
- It's important not to shy away from the bad, as

remembering tough times can help you find gratitude and meaning in the present.

- **Keep it up!** Even if the only thing you feel grateful for on any particular day is your toes, make time to appreciate them. Practise smiling and showing your appreciation to others. By practising gratefulness, we trigger it in ourselves.

## 4. DEVELOP A GROWTH MINDSET

Building a growth mindset is a key factor in staying open to new ideas, challenges and personal development. How do we do it? Well, it's all about attitude and persistence.

### DAILY GRATITUDE RITUAL

When I sit down with my children for the evening meal (with no mobile phones and the TV turned off), we do a gratitude exercise. This began three years ago when I started asking Archer and Miki what the best part of their day was. Then one night, Archer, who was just four years old, said, 'Dad, can we also do the not-best part of the day? Because that makes the best parts even better.'

I love this idea! Ever since, we've talked about the best and the not-best parts of our day. I also do this gratitude activity with friends and other family members when we have dinner together, and I know a few CEOs of large organisations who now do it every night with their families.

- *Seek challenges and be open to constant learning:* Learning to embrace challenges and not become overwhelmed by them is critical for managing a busy work schedule and having the energy to engage fully in life. The sense of achievement we feel when we persevere and overcome challenges builds confidence and creates momentum in all parts of our lives. Being curious and interested in learning new things keeps our brains flexible, adaptable and open to new ideas.

- *Stay passionate and persist when obstacles appear:* Choose something you love. People

who are not as naturally talented as others can make up for this with passion. Passion drives the pursuit of excellence. Being knocked back can be testing, which is one reason why focusing on the MatchFit levers

that keep you energised (specifically FUEL, MOVE, RECHARGE and PLAY) is so vital: it gives you the capacity to dig deep and keep striving. When we view setbacks as being temporary, this can motivate and strengthen us.

- *Focus on mastery and effort:* When I worked with national cricket coach John Buchanan, every day he used to remind his players to ‘control the controllables’. John didn’t order the bowlers to go out and bag five wickets in every innings or tell the batsmen he expected centuries. Instead, he told the bowlers to keep the ball just outside the off stump, and the batsmen to start their innings by rotating the strike and building momentum. What he was saying was: focus on the process of doing the fundamentals well on a consistent basis, and the results would take care of themselves.
- *Be open to constructive feedback:* Rather than taking criticism personally, learn to receive the message and use it to help you learn, develop your skills and improve. Rather than use the word ‘failure’, use the word ‘learning’ instead. Being able to take the positives from feedback increases your ability to perform at a higher level the next time. When you receive critical feedback, ask yourself: is the source of this feedback credible? And: is what they are saying correct? Try to shut off your emotional reaction (or at least recognise it and try to detach yourself from it) so that you can dispassionately judge whether the criticism is fair. If you’re struggling with this step, ask someone whose judgement you trust what their honest opinion is.
- *Celebrate the success of other people:* Live in the world of *mitfreude*, not *schadenfreude*. To make the climb to success an enjoyable one, we cannot live jealous and intimidated by others. We must commit to being genuinely happy for the success others have achieved. Remember, you reap what you sow.



## 5. PRACTISE POSITIVE SELF-TALK

High performers learn that nerves are a normal, healthy part of the performance cycle. I help my clients anticipate what to do if they find their nerves shift from helping them prepare to putting them into an over-aroused state.

One helpful strategy is to disconnect from the inner voice and have some fun by saying things like, ‘Hello, little voice! I’ve been waiting for you to come back ... it’s been a while!’ Rather than becoming consumed by the negativity and internal chatter, then using a combination of relaxation skills, imagery and affirmations or cues to stay calm and gain control.

Trigger words or ‘cues’ can be used for motivational and instructional purposes. Serena Williams has been known to have key messages at hand courtside, with statements like ‘Hit in front’ or ‘Stay low’. Nine-time Olympic gold medal-winning athlete Carl Lewis says, ‘My thoughts before a big race are usually pretty simple. I tell myself: Get out of the blocks, run your race, stay relaxed. If you run your race, you’ll win ... channel your energy. Focus.’

## 6. PRE-PERFORMANCE ROUTINES

The first step in any performance routine is to minimise distraction, and one of the biggest villains here is technology. Before any major/important performance:

- Turn off your mobile phone, laptop or tablet, or switch them to silent mode. Aim not to be distracted by any external messages as you prepare.
- Avoid making phone calls prior to key events, especially ones that could cause you stress or create tension.
- Ideally the night or morning before, prepare all your equipment, resources or tools in advance so you are not racing around at the last minute, wasting energy and creating unnecessary stress. If you manage your energy expenditure you will be in a state that allows you to channel positive stress towards the performance ahead.

Now let's consider some specific pre-performance routines you can implement into your day. Sports psychologists divide pre-performance routines into two categories:

- Pre-event routines, or the physical warm-up, involving 'preferred sequences of action in the run up to important events'.<sup>31</sup> Examples would include a dancer doing stretching and mobility exercises before going on stage, or a rugby union player performing kicking drills in the pre-game warm up. These routines tend to focus on physiology and warming up the body.
- Pre-performance routines for the mind that include 'sequences of thoughts that performers adhere to immediately prior to skill execution'.<sup>32</sup> This might include self-talk and affirmations like, 'I have been here before; I know how to manage my nerves and stay calm' or 'Nerves are a sign my body and brain are getting ready. It is now time to breathe, relax and enjoy the moment'.

One of my favourite pre-performance affirmations comes from legendary All Blacks coach Graham Henry, who reminded his players that 'pressure is a privilege. You've earned it. Enjoy'.

It's important to note that self-talk and pre-performance routines are specific to each person. For tailored performance psychology strategies, work with a high-performance psychologist or coach.

## 7. DAILY MICRO-DOSES OF CHANGE

Think of micro-doses of change as mental fresheners that help our neurons to fire along new pathways and our brain to stay open to change.

Our brain is an energy efficient machine. It likes to do things automatically, even when it doesn't serve us, because it is the energy-efficient way; based on our past experiences and our habits, the information is logged and we go about our days – brushing our teeth, eating breakfast, driving to work, going to

meetings – without having to think too hard. In doing this, we reinforce the same neural connections day after day.

Try doing one or two things differently every day, including:

- Walk or drive a different way to work
- Get off the bus or train at a different stop in the morning
- Take a different route on your run or cycle, or try a new class at the gym
- Say yes to something that you would automatically say no to
- Order a different coffee or tea in a different place
- Sit down to dinner with your partner and talk, instead of sitting in front of the telly.

When we're tired or stressed or under pressure, the easiest thing to do is to take the path we know, even if it's a much longer or ultimately more inefficient way around. Taking the road less travelled – metaphorically, literally and neurally – takes effort and energy. This explains a lot about why people are so uncomfortable with change: it is uncomfortable for our brains. Stop playing the Same Game!

## **PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY IN ACTION**

I was taking my make-up off (this will make more sense soon) and received a text message from a CEO I had previously coached. 'Andrew, would like to talk. Do you have capacity to work with one of my team on his presentation skills?'

I was in the ABC studios in Melbourne and had just wrapped up my regular segment on *News Breakfast*, and this had prompted my former coaching client to reach out. I called him on my walk back to the hotel and learned his CFO was receiving terrible feedback from analysts and investors about his presentation style during company briefings. I agreed to meet with the CFO the following week to see whether he was open to my support. I asked the CEO to brief him on our conversation and be explicit about why I would be meeting with him.

Our first discussion didn't begin well. I received a frosty reception, arms folded, mono-syllabic answers and a general attitude that said: *Why do I need to work on my presentation skills? I'm a smart guy, and it's all about the finance.* I tried a conciliatory, coaching-based approach for 15 minutes and was getting nowhere, so I reverted to a more in-your-face methodology.

'Okay,' I said, 'I can see you really don't want to do this, and if I was in your shoes I'd probably feel the same way. But let's strip out the emotion and look purely at the facts.'

'Fact: your boss, the CEO, spoke to me because you've had very bad feedback from numerous sources about your presentation style, and this is causing noise the company doesn't need. And I know you have been told about this.'

'Fact: as a CFO, market updates are a very important part of your job; and from where I sit, if you don't improve, that's going to put considerable strain on your job.'

'Now, I can support you with the skills you need, and I can train you to manage your presentation style, but if you're not open to it, I don't want to take you on as a client.'

When I put on my 'executive coach' hat, I sometimes throw what I've been trained in coaching psychology out the window and take a much more direct approach. The risk is that it can go wrong. The CFO sat silently for what felt like five long minutes, then he looked at me and said, 'All right. I appreciate you being so transparent. I hadn't pieced it together like that. When do we start?'

'Now,' I said. 'Tell me about your routine before you present a market update.'

'What do you mean? I just wake up, have a shower and get ready, grab a coffee and drive into the city. I might grab another coffee and a piece of toast if I have time, and then I take another look at the PowerPoint slides and make sure I have a firm grasp of the numbers. Then I stand up and go through the slide deck.'

I had a few more questions for him.

'Are you a morning person?'

'Nope, hate them.'

'What time do you go to bed?'

‘Around 11.30 pm. More likely midnight.’

‘What do you listen to when you’re in the car?’

‘Normally classical music – I don’t like all of the commercial talkback rubbish.’

‘Do you do anything of a morning, apart from coffee, to wake yourself up?’

To this I just got a blank stare.

I wanted to jump right in to fix-mode, but our time was up. ‘I’m going to put together what I call a pre-performance routine to get your body and brain in the best possible state before your next update. I’ll take you through that the next time we meet.’

‘But what about the speaking skills?’ he asked.

‘Oh, we’ll spend some time on that. But I think your main problem is that your body clock is out of sync and you aren’t preparing yourself in the right way for what is arguably the most important Performance Moment of your job. This will be the focus of our next session.’

The following week I was greeted by a much more enthusiastic and agreeable client. ‘Andrew,’ he began, ‘I’ve been thinking about what you said, and I agree. I really don’t like presenting of a morning – I’m in a bad mood the moment I wake up on the day of an early presentation.’

‘Good to see you’ve been thinking about this. Let’s start by looking at the routine I’ve drafted for you. It’s based on you presenting at 8.30 am.’

## Night before

- Limit alcohol to only one drink (or none at all).
- Get to bed by 10.30 pm (prepare to go to bed from 10.00 pm; no technology after then).

## Morning

- Wake up at 6.30 am.
- Glass of water and lemon, a brisk 10–15-minute walk (listening to upbeat music, NOT classical), ideally outside.
- Shower, change, protein smoothie (takes five minutes to make).

- 7.30 am: In the car driving to city. Again, upbeat music. No classical (that's for the drive home).
- 8 am: Arrive at venue and grab a coffee and review slides; think about key messages. Five minutes doing deep-breathing exercises and reviewing cue words (we'll do a separate session on that next week).
- 8.30 am: Presentation time!

'Do you have any questions,' I asked.

'Not really,' he said. 'I'd prefer to not have to get up earlier than normal, but your process makes sense. I've never thought about it like this. Actually, I do have a question. What should I listen to on the radio?'

'Triple M Rock,' I replied straightaway.

'I don't like Triple M,' he replied.

'I don't care. Your audience doesn't like your update when you listen to classical music.'

We shared a laugh before ending the session.

A few months later I received a follow-up message from the CEO. 'Andrew, today was market update. I don't know what you've done, but the CFO was a different person. He had real presence and spoke to the audience, not the slides.'

What I did was coach my client to follow a structured pre-performance routine to orchestrate his body and brain to work together for when it really matters.



## THINK TAKEOUT POINTS

Using these techniques will help you to engage fully with your Performance Moments, meet challenges with agility and grace, and flourish in your professional and personal life.

1. People with a *growth mindset* believe that most things can be improved with education and/or effort.
2. A growth mindset helps us to develop grit, which is the combination of passion and perseverance in the pursuit of meaningful goals.
3. Positive thinking is a skill that helps us focus on opportunities, and on our strengths and good qualities. When we believe things will work well, we take action to ensure that it does.
4. Like positive thinking, gratitude is a choice we can make, even in our darkest moments, to acknowledge that good also exists. It is a powerful practice that boosts the feel-good neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin and the hormone oxytocin.
5. Striving for lasting fulfillment over happiness will provide a greater sense of purpose and contribute to our overall health and wellbeing.
6. The biggest differentiator between a great performer and an okay performer is the ability to manage stress and handle change.

Harnessing the techniques and skills outlined in this chapter will set you up to perform and feel your best.