

# Resilience

- From Amateur To Pro -

“Combining years of experience, empirically backed recommendations, and personal stories, Resilience provides important and constructive direction.”

– *Dr. Tim Sharp*

7 Life  
Lessons

Dr Pete  
Stebbins  
PhD



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**From Amateur to Pro**



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**7 Life Lessons You Need To Know**

**Dr Pete Stebbins**

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# Foreword

**A**fter years of working in the media spotlight, and surviving my own big waves of life and wipeouts, I have come to appreciate two very important aspects of what it means to be resilient. On one hand, resilience is about overcoming adversity- the ability to rise regardless of what knocks you down. On the other hand resilience is about embracing opportunity and the ability to see opportunity when it's masked as more responsibility and more hours at work. Resilience is the honest ability to become completely focused and work extremely hard on making the most of opportunities when they arise.

My signature mantra is “Live Your True Life” and in my world, adversity is not just living in the spotlight and fierce competition of international radio and television it's also about everyday challenges and struggles in family, relationships, and life. At work, being resilient is about having the coping skills to manage all the knock backs and critics in the world of work while staying true to my values and cause for helping others through my radio and TV shows. At home, being resilient is, among many things, patience, positive energy, and an honest consistent effort to cultivate great relationships with family and friends. I'm also working diligently in a relationship with myself to be as healthy as possible. This means, I employ self-discipline to stay fit and healthy in heart, mind, and body. I'm married, and both my husband and I have intense work schedules. Marriage is like an intricate garden, it must be taken care of, maintenance



is vital, every day pulling the metaphorical weeds, and remembering to water the solid growth.

When it comes to opportunity, resilience is about risk taking and hard work – being able to seize the opportunities, take a chance, and put in the long hours needed to bring an idea into life! Of course, not all opportunities work out and the adversity of setbacks brings us full circle to the importance of resilience in both adversity and opportunity.

Understanding one's purpose in life, living your true life, is the beginning of a life filled with love and joy. Since I was a child, I had a vision, as I grew older I assumed that vision was just a dream. It wasn't until through deep soul searching and my inherent believe in a higher purpose, I was able to identify where my purpose and abilities intersect. Where your purpose and God given abilities come together, is the intersection of a road map. In order to find your roadmap, begin by overcoming and being resilient when it comes to life's knockdowns. Once I interpreted this important piece of life's grand puzzle, I began to put my life in solid order. My values and personal responsibilities changed to accommodate my purpose and my ability to make it a reality. Throughout life, we deal with upsets and pain however the more resilient we are the better we're able to handle what life hands us. Resilience inspires us to react with love instead of fear, to possess honest perspective, and to respect ourselves and act accordingly.

In Resilience Dr Pete, shares 7 Life Lessons - the wisdom born from the scars of his own personal journey and also from his research, training and experiences working with hundreds of

therapy patients over the years. Dr. Pete openly admits that despite his extensive training and professional qualifications in clinical psychology, when it came to facing his own personal struggles he was really only an amateur until more recent years when he had to learn the hard way to practice what he preached.

I love the surfing metaphor Dr. Pete uses, comparing ‘waves on the ocean’ to stressful life events or ‘waves of life’ and the use of the term ‘wipeout’ referring to excessive stress we may experience. The use of the four elements of nature (earth, wind, fire, and water) is also an easy to understand metaphor for the 4 elements of wellbeing (mindset, emotion, lifestyle, and purpose). The seven life lessons are neatly organized around these concepts with Dr. Pete sharing his own journey in mastering each life lesson.

What I love about this book is the way Dr. Pete takes the complex world of clinical psychology and translates this into simple yet powerful strategies and ideas we can apply into our own lives. When we make soulful changes to our thinking and personal behavior to maximize our wellbeing we can manage stressful life events with understanding and clarity. What I found most inspiring about this book is the way Dr. Pete unflinchingly shares his own journey with brutal honesty and raw emotion through some of his own big waves of life.

There is an urgent need for us to be more resilient in our lives today. While we may live with greater prosperity, freedom, and choice we also live with rapidly increasing rates of depression, anxiety, and stress across the western world. Resilience is the key to tackling this epidemic and helping us make the most of our



lives. Simultaneously, it helps us to find and seize the opportunities within the challenges of life and day-to-day living.

We can all benefit from increasing our resilience using Dr. Pete's 7 Life Lessons to manage adversity as well as embrace the opportunities, we may not realize are already present, or opportunities that are on the way. As Dr. Pete says: "Let's ride the waves of life!"

## – **ASHLEY BERGES**

Syndicated talk show host and creator of *Perspectives with Ashley Berges*.

Author of *The 10 Day Challenge to Live Your True Life*.



**D**r Pete Stebbins, PhD, is a leading psychologist, life coach and facilitator with a personal and professional journey full of both achievements and challenges.

Dr Pete uses his 20 years of psychology study and clinical practice (as well as multiple doses of his own Mid Life Crises) to create Wellbeing & Life Strategy 'shortcuts' for you to implement so you can Successfully Ride the Waves of Life.

The professional side: a Masters in Clinical Psychology from The University of Queensland, PhD thesis in chronic stress and CBT, and subsequent work in mental health hospitals, welfare services and corporate and clinical private practice. Dr Pete has authored several books and published a range of articles in peer reviewed international journals, authored a government review paper on carer stress, been a keynote presenter at various conferences and guest psychologist on popular television programs. Dr Pete has extensive experience in the treatment of many common adult psychological problems.

The personal side: Dr Pete is a recovering 'people pleaser'. Combined with the challenge of raising kids in a separated family and running a growing business, this has given him some deep bruises and scars. He's had many opportunities to 'practice what he preaches'. He knows the difference between textbook advice and practical wisdom.

Dr Pete is a wannabe soul surfer who is passionate about life and living. He spends as much time as possible surfing with his daughters and spending time with family and friends in the outdoors.

Dr Pete doesn't have the luxury of spending all his time searching for the ultimate wave. However, he has learned to use surfing not only as a stress relieving activity but also as a powerful metaphor for riding the Waves of Life and managing wipe-outs.

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**7 Life Lessons You Need To Know**

**Dr Pete Stebbins**



# Contents

<b>Part 1: Turning Pro: Finding My Resilience In Adversity</b>	<b>1</b>
Going Over The Falls	3
Knowledge vs Wisdom: Amateur vs. Pro	4
Resilience: A Fork In The Road of Adversity	6
Behaviour Never Lies: The Dedication & Discipline Of A Pro	8
Recovery & My 7 Life Lessons	9
<b>Part 2: Ride The Waves of Life Like A Pro - 7 Things You Need To Know</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>1. Waves of Life: Be Wise &amp; First Measure The Size</b>	<b>20</b>
Mountains vs Molehills	22
The Top 10 Biggest Waves of Life & the 7 Midlife Tsunamis	27
The Tipping Point of Stress	34
<b>2. Wipeouts: Break The Stress Cycle To Prevent Double Trouble</b>	<b>40</b>
Stress Wipeouts & Self Awareness	42
Double Trouble: Getting Stressed About Being Stressed	45
Breaking the Stress Cycle – Some Quick Tips	48
<b>3. Wellbeing: The Balance of All 4 Elements (Not Just 1 or 2)</b>	<b>52</b>
The Four Elements of Inner Wellbeing	56
Living In Balance = A Successful Life	59
Put Your Own Oxygen Mask On First	60



<b>4. Mindsets: Change the Backstory of Your Life</b>	<b>64</b>
Why Affirmations Fail	66
The Story & Backstory: Surface Thoughts & Mindsets	68
Changing Mindsets: A New Backstory For Your Life	76
<b>5. Emotions: The River Must Flow but Not Flood</b>	<b>86</b>
Emotional Awareness (or Not?)	89
Flow vs. Flood: Managing Emotions	94
Unsolvable Problems – Waiting for A Sign	102
<b>6. Lifestyle: Sleep, Eat, Run, Repeat</b>	<b>110</b>
Sleep: Are You Getting Enough?	116
Mood Foods & A Bowl of Concrete	119
Train Insane or Remain The Same	122
<b>7. Purpose: Crossing the Two Bridges of Life</b>	<b>128</b>
A Tale of Two Bridge Crossings	132
Purpose In Life 101: What You Need to Know	135
Purpose In Life 102: What You Need to Do	142
<b>Part 3: Venturus Est Optimus: The Best Is Yet to Come!</b>	<b>149</b>
Destiny's Child & The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy	151
Optimism - A Hazard Warning	154
Life Strategy - Taking Your First Steps	159
<b>Toolkit: My Wellbeing Plan &amp; Stress Risk Survey</b>	<b>167</b>

# Part 1

## **Turning Pro: Finding My Resilience In Adversity**



# Going Over The Falls

*Fall seven times stand up eight*

## **Japanese Proverb**

**A**s a surfer, when the biggest waves hit you and you wipe-out it's called 'going over the falls'. The stress, turmoil and pressure is massive, keeping you held down for what seems like an eternity. Then, just as you find the surface and take a breath, another wave hits and throws your recovery into chaos, leaving you desperately fighting for survival again.

This description of a wipeout in surfing fits nicely with the experience of burnout – a situation where you become so stressed you can no longer cope and are barely surviving amidst the challenging Waves of Life.

I still remember what it was like, despite the years that have passed. I remember the extreme exhaustion and fatigue, the overwhelming sadness, loneliness and grief, the urge to want to sleep and avoid the emotional pain of being awake, the self-doubt and the anxiety about having to start all over again after working so hard for so many years.

But I am not the first nor will I be the last person to face the biggest Waves of Life - the tsunami-sized stressful life events, of which seven of the top 10 can strike in midlife: divorce, death of loved ones, financial ruin, legal problems, family breakdowns, illness and injury, and ageing. Nor am I the first to survive the big wipeouts, 'going over the falls', and the stress, anxiety and depression that can follow.

## **Stress: A Global Epidemic**

In fact, stress affects pretty much everyone on the planet. Did you know that one in two people on the planet (over seven billion people) will end up with such severe stress symptoms that they will burnout and end up with a Depressive Disorder or Anxiety Disorder? Is it you? Or the person closest to you? With so many people affected, stress and burnout is now a global epidemic.

Coinciding with this is the increasingly easy access people have to self-help and stress management information. If the helpful information is there for everyone to use to recover, why is the problem increasing? I believe it is due to the massive gap between what people know or think they know about stress management and what they actually do to lower their stress and improve their resilience and wellbeing in the face of challenging life events.

## **Knowledge vs Wisdom: Amateur vs Pro**

There is an old saying: *'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing'*. This saying highlights the risks of being an amateur at stress management (perhaps by gaining knowledge through watching a few episodes of Dr Phil and reading a few self-help books so you can survive a crisis) compared to being a Pro (which is really about having the wisdom to be able to expertly apply the right coping skills in the midst of a crisis, to become resilient and thrive).

I found out the hard way just how amateur I really was when I had to apply what I ‘knew’ in theory about stress management in order to cope with some of the biggest waves of my life. During my own midlife crisis, I suddenly had to turn my 20 years of “knowledge” based on my research and clinical practice into life-saving personal ‘wisdom’ so I could not only survive, but thrive amidst the biggest Waves of Life.

I was approaching 40 and lost in my own sea of multiple midlife tsunamis. I was recently divorced, managing financial crises and legal issues, working in a full-time job while part-time solo parenting my two beautiful daughters, and facing the challenge of midlife dating. In the midst of this, I faced another unexpected tragedy and the seemingly impossible task of recovering from this loss, while managing the ongoing turmoil in other areas of my life.

I described this time in my life to friends as a ‘nuclear winter’. The sheer scale of events felt so massive and continuous that I wondered if I would survive. At times I literally expected to be struck by lightning, or some other such disaster, at any given moment. Often the way ahead seemed completely impossible.

Some days at best I could only do small amounts of work in between high amounts of rest. The sense of fatigue was overwhelming. The raw emotions of sadness and loss were, at times, only barely contained beneath the veneer of the “I’m doing OK” statements I made regularly to enquiring friends and colleagues – many of whom, like myself, worked as professional psychologists.

Given my state of burnout and stress, the term ‘professional’ hardly seemed to match how I was coping. The more apt self-de-



scription of myself at this time was closer to ‘amateur’ when it came to my own coping skills. My journey from amateur to pro clearly still had a long way to go.

## Resilience: A Fork In The Road of Adversity

I remember talking to one of my close friends during one of the more distressing times of this period of my life and he told me: *“Pete, you are one of the most resilient people I have ever met! It’s unbelievable how you keep going despite challenges and tragedies that would surely overwhelm most people...”* When I heard him say this, I remember thinking how ridiculous it was to consider me ‘resilient’ – after all, I was on the verge of a breakdown and at times felt I did not have the strength to keep going.

I remember saying in reply: *“You must be kidding – I feel so burnt out and overwhelmed most of the time – it’s hard to keep going – I am not one of those high functioning, bulletproof, perfect people – I am the opposite of resilient!”*

*“That’s the point”, he replied. “Resilience is about your ability to recover from adversity – about making a choice at the fork in the road to keep going and keep trying rather than giving up and becoming burnt out. Even though you may feel completely overwhelmed at times, you are actually still getting up and going to work, looking after your kids and moving forward with your life – albeit slowly.”*

He continued: *“You may be feeling really stressed out right now, but you are recovering faster than you think. And as for all those*

*stereotypes of strong resilient people, they are just a myth as people who don't have problems to face cannot, by definition be resilient. 'Resilience' is about your ability to recover from problems.*

*"It is just like the relationship between courage and fear. You have to experience fear in order to make the choice to overcome it and in doing so discover your courage. No fear, no courage. So it is with adversity and resilience. You have to experience adversity in order to choose to overcome it and in doing so discover your resilience. No adversity, no resilience."*

Resiliency

Burnout



Adversity

Well, if that's true, then perhaps I was more resilient than I first thought. I was certainly trying my hardest every day. I took a quick look at the definitions of 'resilience' and 'burnout' which quickly confirmed his point.

Burnout was defined as *"An emotional condition arising from prolonged stress, marked by fatigue, frustration and low motivation that causes dysfunction."*

Resilience was defined as: “*The human ability to recover from adversity without being overwhelmed or becoming dysfunctional.*” Based on these definitions, perhaps I was closer to resilience than burnout – as I was definitely more functional than dysfunctional despite my high levels of distress.

But recovering from such high levels of distress was nonetheless quite a journey. Surviving my multiple midlife tsunamis was an enormous challenge. A challenge where I truly had to ‘practice what I preached’ and no longer be an ‘amateur’ when it came to my own wellbeing (despite the professional qualifications and advice I gave others).

‘Practicing what I preached’ under such difficult circumstances gave me a whole new level of understanding of the challenges my clients faced on their own road to recovery, and how difficult it can be to overcome setbacks and obstacles when you are feeling overwhelmed. In practicing what I preached I had to have a ‘look in the mirror’ and confront my own laziness and avoidance of some of the harder skills and strategies I had to learn.

## **Behaviour Never Lies: The Dedication & Discipline Of A Pro**

I was taught early in my clinical training that ‘behaviour never lies’ which was a critical lesson in observing behaviour rather than simply listening to what people tell you in order to discover

the truth. On several occasions my own behaviour was counter-productive to my recovery as I relapsed into stress and slipped into bad habits and made poor lifestyle choices.

When my patients would relapse, I would reflect back to them the brutal fact that they did not value their own wellbeing as much as they said they did due to the inconsistency between their intentions and their actions. Their behaviour was more truthful than their words about their level of motivation to recover. I would also remind them that they would never trust an ‘amateur’ doctor to perform a life-saving operation on them if they could choose the most experienced and ‘professional’ doctor. I would then highlight the continuous effort and training of professionals and get them to reflect on whether their own level of dedication to recovery was akin to being a ‘pro’ or an ‘amateur’. I firmly believed (and still do!) that having a ‘pro’ level of ability to self-help is the most important frontline recovery strategy anyone can have.

But looking into the mirror back then and confronting the brutal truth of the distance between my words and actions and the inadequate emphasis I was placing on using stress management skills in my own darkest hours showed just how little I had really prioritised my own mental health and wellbeing, and the extent to which a massive increase in self-discipline and commitment was needed for me to fully recover.

## **Recovery & My 7 Life Lessons**

As I boosted my commitment and self-discipline to fully recover, I began to see some positive results. Through my setbacks, mistakes and fluctuating motivation during this difficult phase

of my life, I learnt seven important Life Lessons, mostly the hard way, which I want to share with you so you too can turn 'Pro' and become more resilient and thrive amidst the challenging waves of your life!

**LIFE LESSON 1 “Waves of Life – A Pro knows that not all waves are equal but they do add up to increase the wipe-out risk”**

Under the weight of extreme and prolonged stress, major health problems aren't uncommon, further complicating recovery. As a psychologist, I knew the theory that risk of illness increases as stressful life events accumulate, but in practice I had to live with increasingly serious chest infections. They struck more frequently, and took longer and required more medicine to heal than the infections I'd had previously. Previous shoulder injuries were also more easily aggravated causing intense shoulder and neck pain. The move from amateur to pro was painfully slow, as I had to learn the hard way to keep track of my own vulnerability and to give myself enough recovery time when the big Waves of Life struck.

**LIFE LESSON 2 “Wipe-outs – A Pro prevents double trouble by recognising early warning signs and stopping the stress cycle!”**

I was more sensitive and more easily upset during the most difficult times – not always aware of the early warning signs of my own fatigue and tension. Sometimes I did not recognise what was happening until I was stressed out – or worse, I found myself getting stressed about being stressed! Experiencing the cycle of Double Trouble (getting stressed about being stressed)

firsthand was a new challenge for me personally, even though I had helped my patients over the years with the same phenomenon. I quickly had to adapt and adjust the theory into my own personal practice in order to recognise my early warning signs and stop my own personal cycle of stress.

**LIFE LESSON 3 “The 4 Elements: A Pro balances all four elements of wellbeing every day to create harmony between their body and mind!”**

My recovery was ever so gradual, and at times I found it hard to bring balance to the “Four Elements of my Wellbeing” (Mindsets, Emotions, Lifestyle and Purpose). Some days I was really good at managing my lifestyle through sleep, diet and exercise, but would let my negative mindset take over and lose sight of my purpose in life. Other days I would be on top of coping with emotions, problem solving and stop myself from worry and blame, only to neglect my diet, skip my exercise and wind up unable to sleep. In the end I got balance under control (and turned pro) by buying a big white board and each day wrote down one activity to address each of the four elements of wellbeing, and made sure they were all completed before I went to bed that night.

When it came to managing each of the four elements individually I had a number of hard life lessons:

**LIFE LESSON 4 “Mindsets: A Pro can change the back-story of their life to live free from worry, demand & blame!”**

Mindsets are the cornerstone that holds everything together. I tried using affirmations and hanging motivational posters



around my house – sometimes I felt inspired but at other times the gap between how I felt and what the aspirational messages were saying made me feel helpless. Clearly I had to dig underneath the negative story I told myself to uncover the backstory and the mindsets feeding my negative thinking.

I initially struggled with Blame but then shifted to the mindset of Responsibility. I could not afford to waste energy on being angry as I needed to focus all my effort on making a series of urgent decisions necessary to avert further problems. The mindset of Worry was not too big a problem as the scale of events left me feeling strangely helpless and accepting of my fate. Demanding mindsets also played a part in my distress when decisions were delayed, agreements were changed or appointments were rescheduled, prolonging seemingly intolerable circumstances. But with some deeper reflection the pointlessness and negative energy of a Demanding mindset was replaced with an Encouraging mindset, which paved the way for more positive interactions and eventual resolutions. I came to understand at a personal level what I had taught my patients for years about the positive power of being able to change the mindsets that build the negative backstory of our lives!

**LIFE LESSON 5 “Emotions:** A Pro can recognise and manage their emotions effectively so the river flows but does not flood!”

Emotions were, at times, hard for me to manage. The sadness and loss I felt could be all consuming and overwhelming. Sometimes, when I least expected it, I felt as if my eyes were leaking tears. Mindfulness meditation and learning to sit with uncom-

fortable negative emotions gave me some peace as the high water mark of these strong emotions ever so slowly receded. I also had to kick-start myself into problem-solving mode when action was needed, and make sure I was selecting the right approach to coping so the river of emotions was able to flow but not flood. Becoming a Pro at managing my own emotions had plenty of setbacks with floods of emotions coming at unwelcome times. But, with persistence, I learnt to keep the river flowing smoothly most of the time.

**LIFE LESSON 6 “Lifestyle: Sleep, Eat, Run – Repeat – A Pro has the self-discipline needed to optimise their physical wellbeing!”**

A healthy lifestyle was crucial. My mantra of “Sleep, Eat, Run – Repeat” proved vital in keeping me on track with a healthy lifestyle. Sleep and diet were crucial. In particular, getting enough sleep and avoiding too much alcohol and coffee were crucial, so I remained rested and calm. Given how vulnerable I was at the time, poor nutritional habits could create major setbacks so I learned a lot about healthy eating to maximise my rest and recovery.

Exercise was also a key factor. I had fitness on my side as I had already set goals to complete a long distance triathlon and return to climbing mountains and surfing, prior to ‘going over the falls’, so I doggedly pursued these goals as part of my recovery. To this day I continue to pursue my mantra – achieving Pro level wellbeing when I keep up my self-discipline and focus on lifestyle and falling back to Amateur when my self-discipline fails.

**LIFE LESSON 7:** “A Pro has a ‘why’ in both the big & small picture of life & fulfils their legacy every day!”

Purpose was another key factor in surviving my midlife Tsunamis. So much of my decision making throughout this time focused on my goal of being a great dad, and living in a way that would have made my grandfather proud. This isn't to suggest I made no mistakes — there were plenty — but I did my best to be responsible and supportive to those closest to me. I also learned the importance of purpose in both the big and small pictures of life, and recognised that one of my mistakes in the past had been to place too much emphasis on the big picture of life, missing the small picture of being present and enjoying the day-to-day moments with family and friends. With the support of, and accountability to my mentors, I became much more focused on actively seeking fulfilment as part of each and every day.

## **Having A Wellbeing Plan**

Through the constant note taking, lists, and whiteboard reminders and endless research, reading and journaling I developed a simple one page wellbeing plan that put all seven of these life lessons simply and easily into focus for me when facing the challenging Waves of Life. This wellbeing plan not only helped me prevent future wipeouts but also meant I was able to thrive amidst the challenges knowing I was maximising my wellbeing and resilience despite the stressful circumstances I continued to face.

## Bonus Life Lesson

### “Venturus Est Optimus – The Best Is Yet To Come”

I also learned a critical bonus life lesson during this time of recovery from my midlife tsunamis. As I was undergoing this massive personal transformation and discovering my own resilience, I received a powerful message sent to me out of the blue by someone I had never met. The world famous tennis player, humanitarian and author, Margaret Court, who unbeknownst to me, through mutual friends had heard about my situation, had chosen to reach out to me in my darkest hours. She sent me her book with the words “The Best Is Yet To Come” penned as part of a personal message to me inside the front cover. *“To Pete, The Best Is Yet To Come!”* I broke down and cried uncontrollably the first time I read this message. I was touched by the kindness of her words yet overwhelmed by the distance between the hope she was trying to give me and hopelessness I was feeling at the time.

A photograph of a handwritten note on a book cover. The text is written in cursive and reads: "To Pete", "The Best is Yet To Come", and "Margaret Court".

I really struggled with the idea that the best was yet to come in my life – things seemed so bleak at times it was hard to believe that good things would happen to me in the future. I also struggled with the unhelpful notion that if I believed ‘the best was yet to come’ I was somehow downgrading my previous life experiences and doing a disservice to the wonderful life memories

of the past. Eventually I came to realise that believing in an amazing future was an essential ingredient for happiness and did not diminish all the wonderful things of the past. Moreover, believing ‘the best is yet to come’ created a wonderful self-fulfilling prophecy as I was more open to accept all the good things that came my way – no matter how small, laying the foundations for a new optimistic vision for my life.

And indeed the best was yet to come... Over the next few years many wonderful events began to unfold. From the sunset view of the Temple at Tanah Lot in Bali, Indonesia and the amazing tropical waves I would surf, to the summits of high altitude trekking on peaks near the Equator; to rock climbing on the sea cliffs in Thailand; to taking my kids on their first European journey and sharing with them the sheer beauty of Paris in winter and the hustle and bustle of London and Rome; to family reunions and beach holidays with close friends at wild coastal towns in Australia, surfing the rugged Pacific swells, to getting married again barefoot on the sand amongst my closest family and friends.

## **Beating The Stress Epidemic**

Looking back now on those times of struggle and stress, I believe that learning the difference between theory and practice in managing the four elements of wellbeing, combined with the firm belief that the best is yet to come, were the keys that enabled me to turn Pro in managing my own wellbeing and to move beyond surviving to thriving amidst the challenging Waves of Life. I am so grateful for these Life Lessons, which have enabled me to move forward with life and become even more passionate about my work, family and relationships. It was

through the recovery from this adversity that my resilience was formed and the legacy project of *The Stress Surfer* and this book were born.

It's my hope that you will not experience the trauma of 'going over the falls' and wiping out from some of the biggest tsunami-sized Waves of Life. However should such events occur, be aware of your higher vulnerability and risk, be sensitive to your early warning signs to stop the stress cycle before it turns into Double Trouble. As you discover your own resilience through learning to balance the Four Elements of your Wellbeing, be patient and kind to your body and mind while you gradually recover. And above all, be inspired to grow wiser and more compassionate remembering that the best is yet to come!

Venturus Est Optimus - Dr Pete PhD



# **Part 2**

## **Ride The Waves of Life Like A Pro**

### **7 Things You Need To Know**



# 1. Waves of Life: Be Wise & First Measure The Size

## **Pro Questions:**

*Are You Under Or Overreacting To  
The Pressures In Your Life?*

*Do You Know What Your Current  
Stress Risk Score Is?*

## Turning Pro: The Waves of Life & Me

**S**ince I was a kid, when my mother told me ‘don’t make mountains out of molehills,’ I have been aware that some stressful life events are worse than others. At university, studying psychology and the groundbreaking research from the 1960s by Holmes and Rahe, I found out about the risk scores for different types of stressful life events and the cumulative risk of stress-related illness where multiple events occurred in a 12 month period.

But alas, knowledge does not necessarily equal wisdom, and despite understanding the theory behind stressful life events, I did not comprehend the impact this had on my own situation until I was faced with my own midlife tsunamis.

The weight of extreme emotional trauma from multiple stressful life events can result in major health problems. As a psychologist, I knew the theory that the risk of illness increases as stressful life events accumulate. During the more stressful times of my life I had to live with increasingly serious chest infections

and also battled with chronic fatigue symptoms and severe neck and back pain from old sporting injuries.

This increase in sickness, fatigue and pain was linked to my ‘under-reaction’ to the emotional trauma I was enduring and my failure to slow down and give my body and mind the necessary time and rest to recover. Whilst I had always known about the problem of turning a ‘molehill into a mountain’ and the pointless wasted energy of overreacting, I had never quite understood the extremely unhealthy consequences of ‘trying to pretend a mountain was really only a mole hill’ and ‘under-reacting’ to stressful life events.

When it came to measuring the Waves of Life and reacting in a healthy manner, the move from Amateur to Pro was painfully slow, as I had to learn the hard way to keep track of my own vulnerability and give myself enough recovery time when the big Waves of Life struck.

In this chapter, I want to share with you some important life lessons around (1) Understanding the Waves of Life and how to measure the risk of different types of stressful life events (2) Review the top 10 Waves of Life and explore why seven of the top 10 occur in midlife and (3) How to recognise your tipping point for stress and calculate your stress risk score.

## **Mountains vs Molehills**

*“Pete, don’t make mountains out of molehills”*

**Dr Pete’s Mum**

**W**hen I was a young child and getting upset about things, I remember my parents saying to me “Pete, don’t make mountains out of molehills.” More recently I have heard a similar saying made famous by author, Dr. Richard Carlson “Don’t sweat the small stuff.”

But when I look back, what my parents saw as a molehill, I, through my child’s eyes, saw as a big mountain. What they saw as a small Wave of Life, not even a wave, a mere ripple, I saw as a large Wave of Life, about to dump and pummel me.

So how do we better understand the objective size of the Waves of Life we face so we can get a better perspective of what really warrants our attention versus where we could well reduce our focus? There are two ways to answer this question:

1. Personal Relativity (Your Own Life Experience); and
2. Stressful Life Event Scales.

## **1. Personal Relativity**

The first answer is about personal relativity - that is, comparing what you are currently upset about with your previous worst challenges in life, and using this comparison as a reference point for sizing up the current wave.

For example, if you had recently been in a car accident and are recovering from minor injuries without any previous major traumas, then you may feel quite distressed by this event. Whereas if, prior to the recent car accident, you had previously had serious injuries as a child such as breaking an arm or leg,

you may have a lesser reaction to the minor injuries from the car accident.

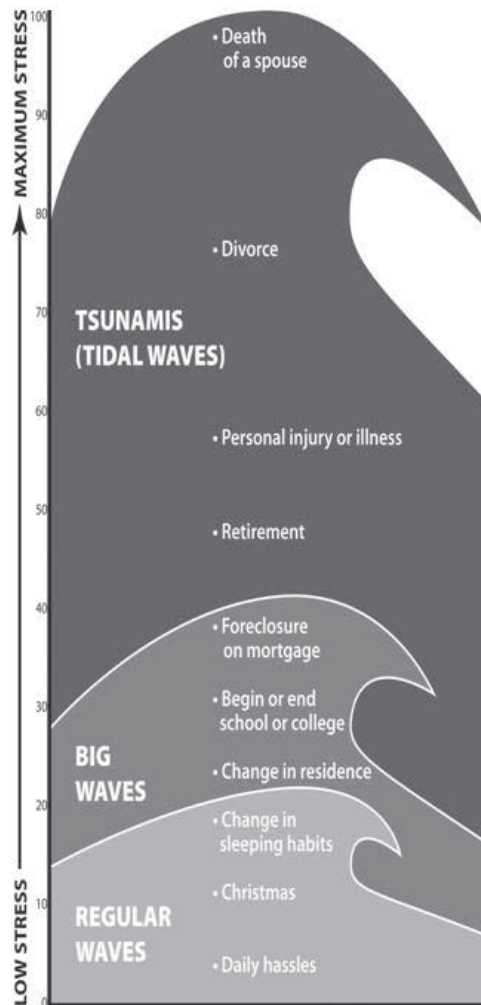
People who have had ‘the bad luck of good luck’ in their lives, often find very small challenges overwhelming due to their previous easy run. Whereas people who have had ‘the good luck of bad luck’ are often able to cope well with more difficult challenges because of their past experience of adversity.

## 2. Stressful Life Event Scales

The second answer is about sizing up your current wave against objective measures of stressful life events based on what many people over the years have found to be the most and least challenging Waves of Life to manage.

It is helpful to group Waves of Life into three categories, as I have outlined more fully in my book, *The Stress Surfer*, and based on the scale of 43 life events developed in 1967 by psychiatrists Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe. They used this scale to assess the link between stressful life events and illness, and their scale continues to be one of the best measures in this area.

*The Stress Surfer* divides the events that stress people out into three categories: 1. Regular Waves of everyday hassles; 2. Big Waves of major change; and 3. Tsunamis (Tidal Waves) of life-changing events. The Wave Chart below shows the scale of different life events.



## Tsunamis

Tsunamis or Tidal Waves are Waves of Life that create *acute crises, tragedies or dramatic changes* to our lives and place us at risk of extreme dysfunction and stress-related illness. These Waves include a range of stressful life events such as: Death of spouse, Divorce, Marital separation, Jail term, Death of close family member, Personal injury or illness, Marriage, Being fired at work, Marital reconciliation, Retirement, Change in health of family member, and Pregnancy.

## **Big Waves**

Big Waves are Waves of Life that create *significant challenges and changes* to our lives but do not necessarily create risks of extreme dysfunction and illness that Tsunamis do. Big Waves include: Gaining new family member, Change in financial state, Death of close friend, Change to a different line of work, Foreclosure of mortgage or loan, Change in responsibilities at work, Son or daughter leaving home, Trouble with in-laws, Outstanding personal achievement, Begin or end school/college, Change in residence, and Change in school/college.

## **Regular Waves**

Regular Waves & Daily Hassles comprise the majority of stressful events that we face on a day-to-day basis and are less extreme. Regular Waves of Life include: Change in recreation, Change in social activities, A moderate loan or mortgage, Change in sleeping habits, Change in number of family get-togethers, Change in eating habits, Vacation, Christmas, and Minor violations of the law. These everyday causes of stress are sometimes referred to as ‘daily hassles’ – minor irritations such as misplacing car keys, traffic jams, minor arguments with family/colleagues, and so on.

## **Healthy Responses to Different Size Waves of Life**

By properly assessing the size of the Waves of Life you are facing, you can respond in a healthy way and avoid the problems of underreacting or overreacting.

Underreactions are where we live in an unhealthy sense of denial and do not prepare for the inevitable change, and in turn are overwhelmed when it comes. If you are experiencing a genuine Big Wave or Tsunami, then you should create space to allow yourself to cope and recover.

On the other hand, overreactions are when we blow out of proportion our response to what is really a small wave or daily hassle, and this can lead to unnecessary health problems and damaged relationships.

So next time you find yourself confronted by some challenging Waves of Life remember to 1. assess the size of the waves, so that 2. you can respond with the right approach, and 3. avoid the dangers of underreacting or overreacting.

## **The Top 10 Biggest Waves of Life & The 7 Midlife Tsunamis**



The Stressful Life Events that rate as Tsunamis are so disruptive and devastating that they deserve special focus. Let's do a quick review of the research around Stressful Life Events.



## **Top 10 in 1967**

The first place to find a good list of the Top 10 Waves of Life is the original Social Readjustment Scale that Holmes & Rahe developed in 1967. They decided to study whether or not stress contributes to illness. They surveyed more than 5,000 medical patients and asked them whether they had experienced any of a series of 43 life events in the previous two years. This is Holmes and Rahe's Top 10 list of stressful life events most likely to place you at risk of illness:

1. Death of Spouse
2. Divorce
3. Marital Separation
4. Jail Term
5. Death of Close Family Member
6. Personal Injury or Illness
7. Marriage
8. Fired at Work
9. Marital Reconciliation
10. Retirement

## **Top 10 in 2001**

Researchers from the University of Birmingham again tested Holmes and Rahe's Social Readjustment Scale for validity in

2001. This more recent study found that the original list of events was still relevant in 2001 for the most part—however, there were some differences.

These researchers found that the death of a spouse was still considered the number one life stressor with divorce, jail, loss of job, and death of a family member (including the specific category of suicide) also considered to be extremely stressful events. In the 2001 study, financial difficulties or the results of job loss were also high on people's list of stressors including unemployment, going into debt, and homelessness.

## **Dr Pete's Top 10 Waves of Life**

So now I have given you an overview on the history of the research both old and new on stressful life events. I am now going to give you my Top 10 list and explain my reasons:

1. Separation & Divorce
2. Death of Spouse
3. Death of Close Family Member
4. Serious Legal Problems
5. Serious Financial Stress
6. Serious Personal Injury or Illness
7. Loss of Job and Unemployment
8. Major Family/Carer Problems

9. Marriage

10. Retirement

## **No. 1 & 2**

Historically, the biggest wave is Death of a Spouse followed by Separation & Divorce. However, when I compare the Impact Zone of these events, Separation & Divorce has a more wide-spread and longer impact than Death of a Spouse.

The Death of your Spouse is indeed a devastating Wave of Life. It's followed by grief and loss, with possible financial and legal estate complications. However, it's a definitive life event which occurs at a single point in time. Once recovery is underway, chances of relapses or further complications are minimal.

In comparison, Separation & Divorce has a broader Impact Zone. It may also contain a number of the other Top 10 Waves of Life including grief and loss, legal and financial problems, and family and carer issues (when children are involved). These issues may take a long time to resolve. They may re-occur at different times across your lifespan. Children grow up and needs change, family and friendships from your former relationship adjust and change, and longer-term settlement interactions occur — all of which can reignite old wounds.

## **No. 3, 4 & 5**

The next Waves of Life on my Top 10 list are: Death of a Close Family Member, Serious Legal Problems and Serious Financial Stress.

‘Death of a Close Family Member’ is relevant to all three of the Top 10 lists reviewed. It includes the unexpected death of a child or sibling, suicides of close family members, and the somewhat predictable yet devastating event of the death of an older parent which many people will face when they are between 45 and 55.

‘Serious Legal Problems’ is a term I have used to replace ‘going to jail’. Since 1967 there has been an increase in the type and complexity of legal issues people face which can have a devastating impact. Not only criminal matters cause major distress. Civil matters relating to family law, personal injury and bankruptcy are widely known to be devastating Waves of Life. In each case there are disruptive and complex legal processes, highly-charged emotional issues, and penalties and consequences which can permanently alter the course of someone’s life.

‘Serious Financial Stress’ is a term I use to replace debt related definitions in the lists reviewed earlier in this chapter. Bankruptcy is another term I have avoided as this is a very specific end-stage financial stressor. The biggest impact from these issues is associated with running out of money, and having to make drastic changes to spending and downsizing assets and expectations — all of which occur prior to bankruptcy proceedings.

### **No. 6, 7 & 8**

The next Waves of Life in my Top 10 are reasonably self-explanatory. Number 6, Serious Personal Injury or Illness, includes major health problems or injuries, which may have long-term impairment or disability implications. Number 7, Loss of Job

or Unemployment, is well-reflected in all three lists of Top 10 events and can have ensuing financial and family complications. Number 8, Family/Carer Problems, reflects the challenges of caring for younger children who may have learning or behaviour problems, caring for teenagers or young adults who have ‘gone off the rails’ or becoming the carer of older parents who may be in stages of decline.

### **No. 9 & 10**

Numbers 9 and 10 are both potentially positive life events, but have made the Top 10 list because they create massive changes to our routines — both in prior planning and in subsequent lifestyle. Such changes can create significant risks of stress-related illness.

Number 9, Marriage, is a massive event for most people. Planning the wedding, bringing together two different families and a series of different friendship networks to all be cooperative and harmonious on the wedding day and then in the years thereafter is by no means easy. Then there is the financial impost of a wedding, reception and honeymoon, which can vary from very small amounts to tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars. Once the wedding is over, establishing new lifestyle patterns and coping with changing expectations of friends and family — which may be incompatible with your needs and available time as a couple — is also a source of potential ongoing challenge.

Number 10, Retirement, is another major Wave of Life. While positive for many, the completion of your career and the change to more free time and fewer obligations and responsibilities can

have an unexpected negative impact on your sense of purpose and direction. We build up an expectation and fantasy of being able to do “whatever I like, whenever I want” and finally being free of our old job. Within months of living the retirement dream, these can be replaced by restlessness, irritability, boredom and frustration.

## **The Top 10: Ages & Stages**

Now that we have a definitive Top 10, let’s take a look at when each of these Top 10 Waves of Life is most likely to hit. The average ages listed in the table below are derived from population statistics, demographic data and research reports.

### **Dr Pete’s Top 10—Ages and Stages**

1. Separation & Divorce: Average age is 43
2. Death of Spouse: Average age is 75
3. Death of Close Family Member (Elderly Parent): Average age is 52
4. Serious Legal Problems: Average age is 43
5. Serious Financial Stress: Average age is 45
6. Serious Injury & Illness: Average age is 45
7. Loss of Job and Unemployment: Average age is 18
8. Major Family/Carer Problems: Average age is 50

9. Marriage: Average age is 27

10. Retirement: Average age is 53

As you can see, seven of the Top 10 Biggest Waves of Life are most likely to occur between the ages of 43 and 53. These are the seven MidLife Tsunamis.

## **Multiple MidLife Tsunamis**

Given that seven of the Top 10 Tsunami-sized Waves of Life are most likely to occur between the ages of 43 to 53, the likelihood of multiple Tsunamis is very real.

As you can see from our table above, between the ages of 43 and 45 we could have multiple Tsunamis related to major injury/illness, separation & divorce, serious legal problems and serious financial stress. Between the ages of 50 and 53 we could have major family/carer problems related to teenagers and/or elderly parents, the death of one of our elderly parents and the beginning stages of retirement.

The risk of multiple MidLife Tsunamis is even higher for people involved in separation and divorce or whose parents may be old and declining in health rapidly.

## **The Tipping Point of Stress**

Everyone has a tipping point – when it all becomes too much. I had one the other day. After waking up too early with a new baby, followed by a multitude of regular waves

and daily hassles, I had to manage a medical emergency with a family member.

I got home late in the evening and tripped over the kids' toys and snapped! Luckily no-one was watching as I kicked the toys to one side and let out a couple of expletives before collapsing in a heap – exhausted and feeling like I couldn't cope.

Later on, after debriefing with my wife – it seemed so silly for me to lose my temper tripping on the kids' toys – clearly an over-reaction! Yet when I added up all the events of the previous 24 hours, tripping on the toys combined with the medical emergency, daily hassles and sleep deprivation, my stress reaction seemed to make more sense.

Looking back now, had I kept track of the rapidly increasing score of stressful life events, I may have been able to recognise my own vulnerability and look after myself better as the challenges of the day grew and in turn ended the night without the unhelpful stress reaction and outburst.

## **Knowing Your Score**

You know, it never ceases to amaze me how so many people cope with so much adversity until some relatively minor hassle creates a tipping point, sending them over the edge into a stress wipeout. Why is it often the smaller issues that create the tipping point? The answer lies in understanding how stressful life events are measured.

Holmes and Rahe's Stressful Life Events Research shows that whilst the Waves of Life come in different sizes, once



the total score of life events exceeds a threshold (regardless of whether it is one or two big life events or a lot of smaller events) we will have some sort of stress reaction and indeed be at risk of illness.

Let's take a look together now... What you can see below are the 43 items in the Holmes and Rahe survey broken down into the 3 Waves of Life categories (Tsunamis, Big Waves & Regular Waves). Tick the number of events you have experienced in the last 12 months and then add up your score (see page 170 for the scale).

### **The Tsunamis of Life:**

	<b>Life Event</b>	<b>Value</b>
1	Death of spouse	100
2	Divorce	73
3	Marital separation	65
4	Jail term	63
5	Death of close family member	63
6	Personal injury or illness	53
7	Marriage	50
8	Fired at work	47
9	Marital reconciliation	45
10	Retirement	45
11	Change in health of family member	44
12	Pregnancy	40

## The Big Waves of Life:

	Life Event	Value
13	Sex difficulties	39
14	Gain of new family member	39
15	Business readjustment	39
16	Change in financial state	38
17	Death of close friend	37
18	Change to a different line of work	36
19	Change in number of arguments with spouse	35
20	A large mortgage or loan	31
21	Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
22	Change in responsibilities at work	29
23	Son or daughter leaving home	29
24	Trouble with in-laws	29
25	Outstanding personal achievement	28
26	Spouse begins or stops work	26
27	Begin or end school/college	26
28	Change in living conditions	25
29	Revision of personal habits	24
30	Trouble with boss	23
31	Change in work hours or conditions	20
32	Change in residence	20
33	Change in school/college	20

## The Regular Waves of Life:

	Life Event	Value
34	Change in recreation	19
35	Change in church activities	19
36	Change in social activities	18
37	A moderate loan or mortgage	17
38	Change in sleeping habits	16
39	Change in number of family get-togethers	15
40	Change in eating habits	15
41	Vacation	13
42	Christmas	12
43	Minor violations of the law	11

Score	Comment
300+ Tsunami	You have a high or very high risk of becoming ill in the near future.
150-299 Big Wave	You have a moderate to high chance of becoming ill in the near future.
<150 Regular Wave	You have only a low to moderate chance of becoming ill in the near future.

## What's Your Score - How Did You Go?

What was your total score? You know most of us, in any given twelve month period have some significant challenges in our lives – but hopefully not too many.

When I did this test during one of the more difficult years in my life I scored 510. An extremely high score and putting me in the 'high risk' category for stress related illnesses. But thankfully I managed to get through the year without any major medical conditions by practicing what I preach.

Once you know your score and your risk category you can be much more aware of how close you are to your 'tipping point' for stress related illness and become much more proactive in Balancing the 4 Elements of Your Wellbeing (Mindsets, Emotions, Lifestyle & Purpose).

When you have a lower score with less risk of illness you can push yourself a bit harder in life but watch out for the risk of overreacting to the small stuff. I like the quote by Richard Carlson: *"Don't sweat the small stuff."*

When you have a higher score and high risk of stress related illness you need to stop and reassess the 'important' and the 'urgent' and say 'no' to things (even things you may desire) so you

can create the space and time you need to recover and refresh to prevent stress wipeouts.

Remember, maintaining your mental health and wellbeing is the first and most urgent priority when you're under pressure and just like the airline flight passenger safety announcement, "*You need to put your own oxygen mask on first – before you help others!*"

## **Resilience Pop Quiz: Waves of Life**

What are Waves of Life – why is it important to understand the different sizes to prevent stress wipeouts? Why is underreacting just as bad, if not worse than overreacting to stressful life events?

What are the top 10 Tsunamis and why do seven occur in Midlife?

What is your stress risk score and how does this increase your risk of hitting the tipping point of stress and developing a stress related illness?

## **Pro Challenge:**

Become a Pro by reviewing the last five years of your life and assessing the size of the waves you have faced and whether you under or overreacted in proportion to the challenges you faced. Complete the Stressful Life Events survey on page 170 and find out your score and make any necessary adjustment to your life over the next few weeks and months to lower the risk of hitting your tipping point and wiping out.

## 2 . Wipeouts : Break The Stress Cycle To Prevent Double Trouble

### **Pro Question:**

*Can You Recognise Your Early Warning Signs  
And Stop The Double Trouble Cycle  
To Prevent Burnout?*

## Turning Pro: Wipeouts & Me

One of the challenges I have faced during some of my biggest life crises has been managing my own emotions and not letting myself be consumed by seemingly overwhelming experiences of sadness or fears and anxieties about the future.

Like many people under extreme pressure, I was more sensitive and easily upset during difficult times, and not always aware of the early warning signs of my own fatigue and tension. When I realised I was stressed out I would then become even more stressed about being stressed. Sometimes my emotions would get the better of me which only compounded my sense of fatigue and exhaustion and left me feeling frustrated and stressed about these seemingly never ending emotions.

This stress about being stressed is commonly referred to as 'double trouble'. Experiencing the cycle of Double Trouble (getting stressed about being stressed) firsthand was a new challenge for me personally despite helping my patients over the years with the same phenomenon.

I quickly had to adapt and adjust the theory into practice to recognise my early warning signs and stop my own cycle of stress. Understanding my Early Warning signs of Stress was not a completely new idea for me personally as I had learned this lesson many years previously through drawings and feedback my children had given me about the level of tension and stress I displayed even when I was being happy and playful.

But fast forward to the more recent difficult times, the importance and urgency of detecting the early warning signs of stress and stopping the cycle of double trouble had an increasingly urgent and critical importance in my own resilience and recovery.

In this chapter I want to share with you two critical life lessons about (1) Stress Wipeouts and Self Awareness and (2) How to recognise and prevent The Cycle of Stress referred to as 'Double Trouble'.

## **Stress Wipeouts & Self Awareness**

Have you ever been stressed out to the max? What happens when you are fully stressed out? Do you feel extreme levels of tension, anger or sadness? Do you want to run away and escape, or do you confront the situation as soon as possible?

In order to ride the challenging Waves of Life as opposed to Wiping Out, we need to understand our own body's reaction to

stress, and manage our stress response to make it more helpful than harmful. To understand our stress response, let's first explore what Wiping Out means for Surfers.

## **Wipeouts for Surfers**

When surfers wipeout, they lose control of the surfboard, and fall off into the crashing wave. They get held down in the impact zone of the wave and become distressed and disoriented so they don't know which way is up. There are two categories of wipeouts – minor wipeouts and major wipeouts.

Minor wipeouts are where surfers fall off while taking off on a wave, duck diving an oncoming wave, or falling off while turning on the face of the wave – but they are then able to either dive back behind the breaking wave or out in front of the wave and avoid the full force of the 'impact zone'.

Major wipeouts are where surfers go 'over the falls' – a freefall down the face of a steep wave, and then get caught in the 'impact zone', feeling the full crushing force of the breaking wave. Surfers usually fall victim to a major wipeout on bigger waves when attempting a late take-off, or when simply trying to avoid an impending wave as it breaks directly on top of them.

## **Wipeouts for Stress Surfers**

When Stress Surfers wipeout, they become unbalanced and unable to 'stay on their feet' when the Waves of Life hit. They worry too much, sometimes drink too much, make bad lifestyle choices, lose their sense of purpose and meaning – all of which slows down recovery, making it harder to surf the waves



coming in behind. When they face difficult situations, they can end up feeling depressed, anxious or stressed. Stress Surfer Wipeouts are akin to the psychological state of ‘burnout.’ Two types of burnout are: 1. Brownouts and 2. Blackouts.

**1. Brownout** – As a brownout begins, a Stress Surfer’s initial energy to cope with the challenging Waves of Life gives way to chronic fatigue and irritability. Eating and sleeping patterns change and escapist behaviours such as drinking, partying, shopping binges, or avoiding people or places they find demanding are likely. As a brownout gradually gets worse, Stress Surfers become increasingly frustrated and angry and blame everyone else for their difficulties. They can become openly cynical, detached, and critical and are on the verge of a more serious Wipeout – a Blackout.

**2. Blackout** – Full Scale Burnout. Unless the Wipeout process is interrupted, Brownouts eventually become ‘Blackouts.’

This is where Stress Surfers become highly distressed and experience an overwhelming sense of failure and major loss of self-esteem and self-confidence. They can become clinically depressed, anxious or stressed and are at risk of major health problems.

### Knowing Your Signs of Stress

Everyone is different, and our bodies have different ways of showing us we are stressed. Maybe the people closest to you can tell you what yours are. When my little daughter drew this picture of me and called it ‘Happy Daddy’ – with stress lines all over my face, I knew it was time to do something!



The symptoms of Stress include: physical tension, irritability, social withdrawal, poor concentration, tearfulness, anger, increased blood pressure and sleep disturbance. When stress becomes too intense, it can cause anxiety and depression.

What are your signs of stress? How do you know you are at risk of Wiping Out? What are the signs and symptoms that tell you of an impending Minor Wipeout or 'Brownout'? How do you prevent your stress reactions from taking you 'over the falls' of Major Wipeout or 'Blackout'? What life lessons can you learn from past wipeouts so you won't repeat the same mistakes?

## **Double Trouble: Getting Stressed About Being Stressed**

Being stressed is bad enough, right? But have you ever met someone who has been stressed for so long that they start to get anxious or depressed about their ongoing stress condition?

This may sound a bit strange but what if I told you there was no such thing as 'pure' stress, depression or anxiety? Did you know these clinical conditions share some common symptoms? What if I told you that most people who end up suffering with depression or anxiety first suffer the negative effects of stress and then get stressed about being stressed? Once they are stressed about being stressed, things quickly deteriorate further leading to anxiety, depression or both!

### **The Links Between Stress, Depression and Anxiety**

There are a number of overlaps between the symptoms of stress (common to us all) and more serious conditions such as depression and anxiety.

**Stress symptoms** include poor concentration, attention and memory; physical tension; irritability; low mood; muscle aches and pains; changes in diet and appetite; sleep problems; dizziness; shortness of breath and rapid heartbeat; social withdrawal; and nervous habits such as nailbiting or pacing.

**A Depressive Episode** has symptoms such as low mood; loss of interest in normal activities; weight loss or gain; sleep disturbance; agitation and restlessness; fatigue and low energy; and problems with attention and concentration.

**Generalised Anxiety Disorder** has symptoms such as agitation and restlessness; fatigue and low energy; problems with attention and concentration; irritability; muscle tension; sleep disturbance; and excessive worry.

As you can see from the symptoms listed above all three conditions have the following symptoms in common: low energy and fatigue; irritability; poor attention and concentration; and sleep disturbance.

Hmmm... I wonder if they are somehow connected?

## **The Vicious Cycle of Stress**

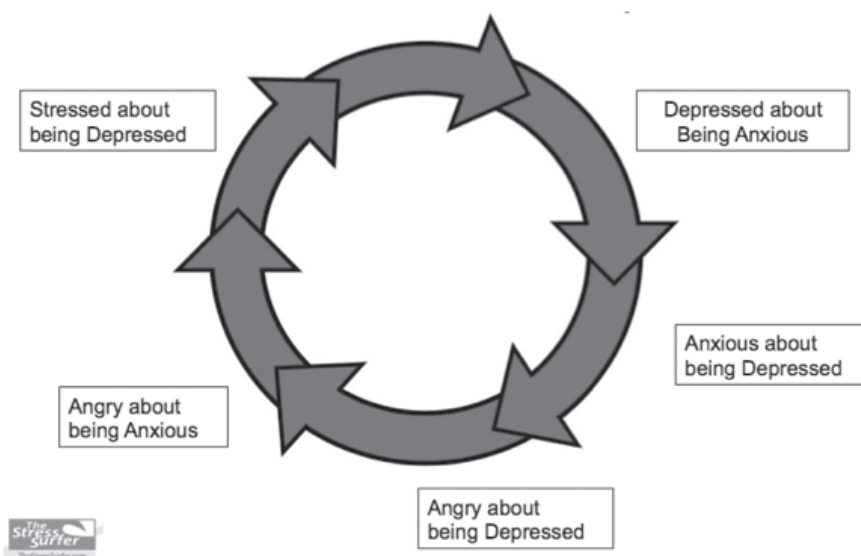
Of course they're connected!!! Most serious Depression and Anxiety problems begin as relatively normal Stress problems. When something happens, we get a fight/flight response and

stress symptoms emerge. Then a fork in the road – we either calm down, putting the Four Elements of Wellbeing into action (Mindsets, Emotions, Lifestyle and Purpose) OR find ourselves adopting an increasingly negative perspective and our stress symptoms become worse...

After the worsening of our stress symptoms, we then become doubly stressed as we begin to react to our negative stressful state – in other words, we get stressed about being stressed.

The longer this stress cycle goes on, the more it ‘takes on a life of its own’ and our stress begins to worsen, becoming extreme tension and worry – causing clinical levels of anxiety OR extreme low mood and exhaustion – in turn causing clinical levels of depression.

But that’s not all. Once we’re depressed or anxious, we are still stuck in the cycle of reacting to our own negative mood.



As the diagram shows, we can become depressed about being anxious or anxious about being depressed and any other number of possible combinations.

This is known as the cycle of negative emotions and once this sets in, recovery is much harder and takes much longer. But it's still possible...

## Breaking the Stress Cycle – Some Quick Tips

If you're caught in this vicious cycle of negative mood what can you do? If you are an avid reader, then the recovery journeys and strategies in this book will be a great resource. For some of the more severe wipeouts, you may also need to seek professional help and get involved in a recovery program.

Learning to understand your own stress reaction patterns and harness the Four Elements of Wellbeing to overcome stress and manage the challenges in your life is an extremely valuable and important investment of your time and resources. As a quick shortcut, to get you started, let me share four quick tips that I use to break the stress cycle:

**1. Self-Awareness** – It is important that you know yourself and the size of the waves you face. In my case, having a good understanding of how I react to stress and knowing my early warning signs has been critical. It is also important to objectively measure the size of the Waves of Life that stress me out and either (a) don't sweat the small stuff when it comes to Regular

Waves of Life OR (b) give myself enough recovery time when facing the Big Waves and Tsunamis of Life.

**2. Mindfulness** – It is important to adopt a mindset of acceptance regarding any negative emotions you might be feeling and are present in your struggles and stress rather than avoiding them or worrying, becoming angry, demanding and blaming. By accepting what is happening, I was immediately able to adopt a realistic view of the situation and start problem solving and coping better.

**3. Pacing** – Another important tip when breaking the cycle of stress is Pacing. Pacing is about planning out each day in a way that did not exhaust my energy levels and protected my emotional and physical health. Trying to do too much can lead to setbacks in recovery.

**4. Realistic Self-Expectations** – When you are stressed, you need to remember you're not operating at 100% and have more realistic self-expectations about what you can and cannot achieve each day and adjust your expectations accordingly. I also needed to nurture myself more and take the time to do more small acts of kindness both towards myself and others in order to increase my daily happiness, whilst overcoming the bigger Waves of Life I was facing.

## **Double Trouble and You**

Have you ever been stressed about being stressed? Have you every suffered the vicious cycle of negative emotions? How do you break the cycle of stress? How can you put my favourite tips of self-awareness, mindfulness, pacing, and realistic self-expectation into practice right now? Carpe Diem.

## **Resilience Pop Quiz: Double Trouble**

Burnout - What is the difference between brownout and blackout?

What are your early warning signs of stress and why is it important to know?

What are the symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress and which symptoms are common to all three?

What is double trouble and how do you stop the stress cycle?

### **Pro Challenge:**

Become a Pro by becoming self-aware of your early warning signs and giving your friends and family permission to give you feedback when they notice these signs too. Learn to use mindfulness, pacing and setting realistic self expectations to prevent the cycle of double trouble.





# 3 . Wellbeing :

## The Balance of All 4 Elements (Not Just 1 or 2)

### **Pro Question:**

*Can You Balance All Four Elements Of  
Your Wellbeing Every Day?*

## Turning Pro: Balancing the 4 Elements & Me

**O**f all the Life Lessons I have learned on my way to becoming more resilient in adversity, ensuring that all four Elements of Wellbeing are balanced each and every day remains one of the most difficult to achieve. The four Elements: Mindsets, Emotions, Lifestyle and Purpose. The challenge is to ensure that at the end of each day I could look back and see clear evidence of healthy activity in all four. That is, each day I was able to look back and see that: (1) I maintained healthy mindsets and did not get caught up in worrying, demanding and blaming others for my own emotions; (2) was self-aware of my emotions and processed them as they emerged rather than suppressing them, creating baggage; (3) lived a healthy lifestyle by getting enough sleep, exercising daily and having a healthy diet; and (4) was able to connect with my purpose in both the big and small picture of life!

On a 'good' day I was able to weave these four Elements into my busy schedule and regularly reflect on how I was thinking and feeling, monitor my level of fatigue and eating habits and consciously engage in some small acts of kindness as I interacted with people around me as well as briefly reviewing my big picture goals before I went to bed in the evening.

On an 'average' day I may have kept my thinking patterns and emotions in check but would neglect my diet and miss my exercise session. I would also be so preoccupied with my busy schedule I would not consciously go out of my way to complete small acts of kindness and would hit the pillow exhausted without reflecting on the progress I was making towards my big picture goals. Other 'average' days saw me on top of my exercise and thinking but not aware of the emotional lows after the endorphin highs of the exercise with the flagging energy levels making me tired and distracted leaving me less effective in my work as a psychologist.

On a 'bad' day I would fail in at least three elements, waking up exhausted and worried about what lay ahead only to get angry and demanding with the kids as they were late for school and I was late for work. By the time I got to the office I was so preoccupied by my own fatigue and tension from the morning I was carrying baggage all day in the form of not fully listening to those around me and feeling resentful about my circumstances and engaging in wishful thinking about winning the lottery and escaping to a tropical island. Given my lowered mood and tiredness, I would get some junk food and sweets to pick me up and then suffer the sugar

low in the afternoon as I collected the kids and did battle with the traffic. The evening saw me having a strong drink and vegging out and staying up way too late and eventually falling asleep in front of the TV – and setting me up for failure the next day!

When there were too many ‘bad’ days in a row – life was grim – I would gain weight, get sick, become withdrawn and aloof around the family and become dishevelled and fatigued – not a good look! When there were a lot of ‘average’ days in a row, things seemed OK but never awesome or exciting. When there were many ‘good’ days in a row, life was focused and fun, and I felt healthy and energised and enjoyed a strong a sense of adventure and excitement about the future!

Turning Pro and developing a routine and habits to make sure every day was a ‘good’ day and the four Elements were balanced – despite all the challenges, busy schedules and daily hassles – was well worth the effort. Despite the occasional relapses and average and bad days I now spend the majority of my life enjoying the benefits of a balanced approach to my wellbeing!

In this Chapter I want to share with you some important life lessons around (1) Understanding the Four Elements of Well-being and Linking These to the Four Elements in Nature; (2) The Importance of Balancing All Four Elements & The Pitfalls of a Busy Schedule; and (3) the need to Put Your Own Oxygen Mask on First.

# The Four Elements of Inner Wellbeing

## Ancient Cultures Recognised Four Elements In Nature: Wind, Water, Earth & Fire

I have met some really caring people over the years – people who were calm, kind and generous, people who were knowledgeable, encouraging and supportive, people who were excited, enthusiastic and motivated. I have also met some really fit and physically healthy people – people who were active, self-disciplined and fashionable.

In each case I have admired their positive characteristics and felt compelled to strive for greater self-improvement. But also, as time progressed, I became aware of their imperfections and limitations. The really caring people were not always the most physically fit and healthy, the really physically fit and healthy people were not always the most calm and caring.

Worse still for the unfit and unhealthy, these downfalls in physical fitness and health could have devastating consequences on their wellbeing and quality of life. Similarly for the uptight and uncaring, the downfalls in a lack of calmness or caring for others could have disastrous results on relationships and in turn their own happiness and life satisfaction.

The more I started to look closer at the people I admired the more I realised that very few people achieve a good balance of both their physical health and psychological wellbeing at

the same time. This realisation set me on a path to develop a simple framework using The Stress Surfer concept to describe the four essential Elements of Wellbeing as well as design simple tools and strategies to achieve Balance and thus live a successful life in terms of both physical and psychological wellbeing.

To Ride the Waves of Life successfully we need to be able to live in Balance with The 4 Elements of Wellbeing. Just as in Nature there is Wind, Water, Earth and Fire so for Stress Surfers there are Mindsets, Emotions, Lifestyle and Purpose. The idea that there are 4 Elements in Nature is not new and dates back thousands of years. The Ancient civilisations recognised four Elements in nature: Wind, Water, Earth & Fire and searched for these elements in their inner worlds.

## **Element 1 – Mindsets**

MINDSETS and thoughts were likened to the free moving and unseen WIND.

The way we think about what happens to us, and our beliefs and mindsets about events, circumstances and life pressures are important in managing our stress. We can sometimes see circumstances as being either all bad or all good. This “black or white” or “all or nothing” view of a situation may cause unnecessary distress. It can limit our ability to look at things accurately and solve problems. The Stress Surfer can learn to think about the Waves of Life in ways that turn negative pressures into positive pressures and promote personal growth and success.

## **Element 2 – Emotions**

EMOTIONS and feelings were the cause of tears, which flow like WATER.

This is about what we actually ‘do’ every day in response to the emotions we experience as we ride the Waves of Life. The Stress Surfer learns to manage their emotions through problem solving, coping strategies and relaxation. We learn to reduce any unnecessary tension and stress, and increase levels of physical calmness and mind relaxation. We become aware of the “here and now”, neither dwelling on the past nor worrying about the future. We develop the ability to draw on positive and relaxing images and memories, which in turn enables us not only to accurately assess and solve problems we experience, but also to stay mentally calm and relaxed.

## **Element 3 – Lifestyle**

LIFESTYLE and the daily needs of the body was likened to the stability of the EARTH.

Sometimes we can allow stress to affect our sleeping patterns, eating habits and diet causing other aspects of our lifestyle such as social activities, hobbies and interests to suffer. We may also forget to prioritise the importance of staying physically fit and active. The Stress Surfer learns to maintain a balanced and healthy lifestyle across the areas of sleep, diet, exercise and social habits and interests, even as the Waves of Life continue rolling in.

## **Element 4 – Purpose**

PURPOSE and passion was the courage of convictions that burns within us, and was likened to FIRE.

Having a clear sense of purpose or mission in life, and developing meaningful life goals are the key ingredients of a successful life. The Stress Surfer learns to live according to their values, both in the big picture and in everyday living, and pay attention to the legacy they are leaving behind them.

# **Living In Balance = A Successful Life**

When you are able to live in Balance with The 4 Elements of Wellbeing you are able to optimise both your physical and psychological wellbeing and in turn live a successful life. By having healthy Mindsets you can live free from Blame, Demand and Worry. By recognising your Emotions and using the right coping skills you can limit the damage of negative emotions and maximise the impact of positive emotions.

By living a healthy Lifestyle your sleep, diet, exercise and social activities will keep you physically healthy and regularly engaged with family and friends. Finally, by having a strong sense of Purpose in both the big picture and in day-to-day life you will feel more fulfilled and be making a positive difference every day.

With the Four Elements in Balance in your life you will have the best of both worlds – be both caring, supportive and motivated, as well as physically fit and healthy! Are You Living in Balance?



# Put Your Own Oxygen Mask on First

*'It is important to put your own oxygen mask on first before you help others...'* (routine airline safety announcement)

## Learning The Hard Way

I had to do an urgent work trip interstate a while ago – a trip that marked a turning point in my own work/life balance.

I was 'up and about' by 4.00am to fly to another city for a day of work and home again – the same evening. The previous week I had spent several days overseas running training programs. With my watery and bloodshot eyes, my dry skin, and my throat sore from air conditioned offices and airports, I was overtired and unable to rest – wired on coffee and junk food to keep up the energy.

I found my seat on the plane, sat down adjusted my seat belt, and could not help noticing my increasing waist size! The loud speaker came on and the flight attendants began the flight safety demonstration. As they were speaking I realised something I should have learnt a long time ago – something I have heard every time I have flown on a plane: "*You need to put your own oxygen mask on first before you help others*".

Of course! You need to make sure you are reasonably OK before you can help others, otherwise your help will not be effective, and your own situation is likely to go backwards as well. But

what was I doing? I was so caught up with the demands of my work and meeting all deadlines I was ignoring my own wellbeing; my tiredness, fatigue and weight gain were taking over. My purpose in working so hard was to have a great family life but the long hours made family time more difficult. I was also angry with my colleagues who I blamed for my fatigue after I had to take on additional work they refused to do in order to keep clients happy and work flowing through the wider business. Needless to say I was in a bad space with all four Elements of my Wellbeing (Mindsets, Emotions, Lifestyle & Purpose).

By the time I flew home that evening my sore throat was turning into a cold and I was miserable. I needed a rest but had another couple of busy days ahead. I hung on until the weekend and then was so tired I needed a break right at the time my kids wanted me most. I felt highly frustrated about this turn of events – I felt unable to enjoy my family due to my work-related fatigue.

That was the tipping point for me – it was time for some hard decisions to lower my workload, adjust my finances to cope with a drop in income, and make my health and fitness and family my number one priority. The following months were a time of difficult transition as I set in place firmer boundaries with people around me, and renegotiated expectations of what I would and would not do. ‘Breaking some eggs in order to bake the cake’ – as the expression goes. There were a few flash points as responsibilities at home and work were realigned but I felt more calm and consistent and that my life was becoming more balanced.

A few months later some clients who had previously seen me in a state of overwork remarked on how rested and refreshed I looked; yet these were the same people I felt had created the urgency and insistence that had driven my sense of stress and pressure and who had initially been most resistant to my changed work pattern!

It seems to me that the saying ‘don’t ask for permission; beg for forgiveness!’ is a great principle for improving work/life balance and one I will remember should I find myself out of balance with the 4 Elements of Wellbeing.

In the next 4 Chapters we will take a closer look at each of these 4 Elements (Mindsets, Emotions, Lifestyle & Purpose) what you need to ‘know’ and ‘do’ to Turn Pro in managing your own wellbeing.

## **Resilience Pop Quiz: Balancing The 4 Elements**

What are the 4 Elements of Wellbeing and how are they linked to the 4 elements of nature?

Why do we need to balance all 4 Elements every day – what happens when we only balance 1 or 2 Elements?

What does the saying ‘put your own oxygen mask on first’ mean when applied to your wellbeing?

## **Pro Challenge:**

Become a Pro by evaluating your daily routines to assess if you are balancing all four Elements daily and keep track of your progress with a journal noting the changes you make to your daily routine to live in complete balance every day!

# 4 . Mindsets :

## Change The Backstory of Your Life

**“The Devil is in the details, but so is Salvation.”  
Hyman G. Rickover**

**“To change your mindset it’s not ‘what’ you are  
thinking that is important it’s ‘why.’” Dr Pete**

### **Pro Question:**

*Can you live free from the need to worry, demand and blame?*

## Turning Pro: Mindsets & Me

**I** have always believed that how you feel is directly related to how you think and the scientific evidence to confirm the link is overwhelming. However, despite knowing this, I have really struggled with the process of changing my own negative thinking patterns at times when I felt intense sadness or frustration. Despite looking into the mirror and telling myself all sorts of reassuring and positive statements and affirmations, my sense of hopelessness and despair did not seem to improve and sometimes I felt worse.

I had learnt in my clinical psychology training how to identify the negative thinking patterns that caused me so much distress and it was pretty easy for me to recognise these negative thoughts. However recognising my negative thinking was simple compared with the much harder task of uncovering the unhealthy mindsets that caused these thoughts. I also had to learn the difference between the surface thoughts that form the story of our lives and the more powerful deeper thoughts and mindsets that formed the backstory of my life.

Once I could uncover the mindsets and backstory that drove the surface thinking and story of my life, I then had to learn how to effectively challenge and change these deeper mindsets so they became healthy. I initially learnt how to do this when I felt calm and refreshed. However uncovering, challenging and changing unhealthy mindsets was much harder to do when I needed it most – often in the middle of episodes of sadness or anger when I had very little motivation to try and change my thinking.

In this chapter I will share the life lessons of (1) Why affirmations fail; (2) The difference between healthy and unhealthy mindsets; and (3) How to uncover and change your mindsets to write a better backstory for your future...

## Why Affirmations Fail

*“It’s not working!”* cried my depressed and anorexic patient Katie. *“Every day for the last few weeks I have been doing exactly what you told me to do – looking into the mirror each morning and telling myself ‘I’m not fat and ugly – I am beautiful and healthy’. Yet I feel even more depressed, fat and ugly than ever before!”*

Affirmations are a poison chalice. Whilst it is a simple fact that your thinking patterns will lead you to happiness or despair, changing your thinking patterns is not so simple. When I did my postgraduate training to be a clinical psychologist I was taught to encourage people to use ‘affirmations’ and think ‘positive thoughts’ about themselves – and say these thoughts out loud to change their negative thinking patterns into positive ones. The idea was that if they repeated these positive thoughts often enough, the positive thoughts will eventually replace the negative ones. Whilst this idea may sound logical, the

notion that you can ‘fake it till you make it’ does not change your underlying thinking patterns, and used as a stand-alone self-help strategy is downright dangerous, often making things worse.

Just look at what happened to a patient of mine ‘Katie’ (not her real name) who was suffering from anorexia and depression (made worse by conflict with her family and boyfriend). Despite her engaging in therapy and doing her daily affirmations, staring in the mirror and saying to herself – *I am beautiful* – she kept feeling worse about herself and ultimately ended up back in hospital. What went wrong? Why didn’t these daily affirmations change her negative thinking into positive thinking?

## **Thinking Patterns: You and The Mirror**

Try a quick experiment with me now. Go to the bathroom and look into the mirror and say to yourself out loud “*I am beautiful and healthy*”. Then stop and take note of the thoughts in your mind as soon as you have finished speaking... what happened? Chances are many of us would have had after thoughts such as “*This is silly*”, “*No, you’re not that beautiful*”, “*You wish...*”, “*Who are you trying to fool?*”. A few of us may have thought, “*Yes – you really are very beautiful and healthy*” and the rest of us may have not thought anything at all.

Those of us who had some negative thoughts in our minds immediately after we stared in the mirror and told ourselves we were beautiful need to recognise why our affirmation failed to prevent our negative thinking from getting worse. Even more important, we need to learn the secrets of how to truly change our negative thinking into positive healthy thinking to live a happy life.



# The Story & Backstory: Surface Thoughts & Mindsets

*“The real story is in the backstory.”*

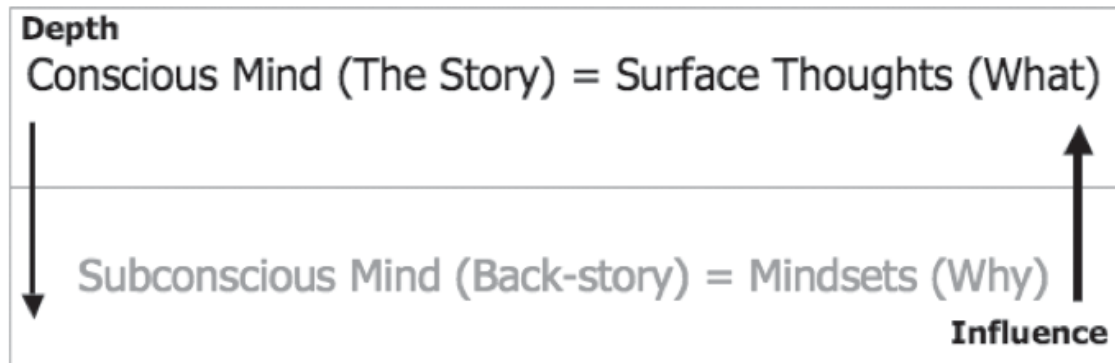
**Dr Pete**

**T**o understand what went wrong for Katie and for many of us, we need to understand two important concepts in books and movies namely the ‘story’ and the ‘backstory’.

The ‘story’ of a book or movie is what you are experiencing in the present moment – what can be seen and heard – just like seeing yourself in the mirror and hearing your voice say aloud “I am beautiful”. In psychology, the ‘story’ is known as our ‘surface thoughts’. Our surface thoughts (be they said out loud or in our minds) simply describe what we are thinking and can be either positive or negative, like the thoughts we had after we told ourselves we were beautiful. For many people, these subsequent thoughts were negative.

When it comes to psychology and mindsets, the ‘backstory’ of a book or movie is more important than the ‘story’. The ‘backstory’ is the narrative providing a history or background of why the characters are behaving the way they do in the main ‘story’. This ‘backstory’ is akin to our underlying mindsets, which develop over a lengthy time and influence our surface thoughts to be either positive or negative in response to the situations we face. For those of us who had negative after thoughts about how

beautiful we are – our underlying mindsets are the ‘backstory’ that needs to be both understood and changed if we are to truly believe we are beautiful...



In research psychology we have known for a long time that it is the mindsets and deeper layers of thinking (the ‘backstory’) that are more influential in causing depression, anxiety and stress than surface thinking (the ‘story’). Yet, when it comes to therapy to change negative thinking, we often make the mistake of only treating ‘surface thinking’, which does not change the underlying mindsets nor help people recover from depression.

## Why Katie’s Affirmations Failed

Let’s apply this theory to Katie, my patient with anorexia and depression. As you can see from the case study, when she was asked to change her surface thoughts from negative (“*I am fat and ugly*”) to positive (“*I am healthy and beautiful*”) she cooperated and began changing her surface thoughts by saying aloud the positive thoughts every day. Unfortunately, despite using these affirmations to help her change the ‘story’ of her surface thoughts from negative to positive, we did not help her

uncover and change her deeper negative mindset and ‘backstory’. As such, her ‘backstory’ continued to negatively influence her thinking and ultimately made things worse for her, leaving her feeling more frustrated and sceptical about her therapy and prospects of recovery.

## **If Our Affirmations Fail – What Next?**

So how do we (1) help Katie and ourselves uncover and identify the unhealthy mindsets we have within us that lead us into negative thinking patterns and sabotage our attempts at positive affirmations to lift our moods and (2) learn the skills, techniques and strategies we can apply through a self-help approach to rewrite the backstory of our lives and change unhealthy mindsets towards more positive ones for lasting wellbeing and happiness?

In the next section we will explore the unhealthy mindsets that lead us into negative thinking patterns, and in particular define the difference between these unhealthy and healthier mindsets.

## **Unhealthy Mindsets**

Did you know there are only five types of Unhealthy Mindsets and only three of them are linked to Psychological Disorders? When I was younger I was an avid reader of self-help books and found the work of Dr Albert Ellis really helpful in understanding and improving myself. Dr Ellis (27 September 1913 – 24 July 2007) was an American psychologist who in 1955 developed Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT). He was a very direct and somewhat con-

troversial therapist and zealous promoter of what he called Rational Thinking.

Dr Ellis developed a list of Irrational Beliefs aka Unhealthy Mindsets, which he theorised were the root cause of most psychological disturbance. As researchers tried to prove his theory, they began to develop questionnaires to measure these Irrational Beliefs. When they analysed how similar or different each of these beliefs were, they found several overlapped and their results suggested there were only five clearly distinguishable types of Unhealthy Mindsets:

1. **Worrying** – Irrational and excessive worrying over possible misfortune and possible future accidents.
2. **Need (Demand) For Approval** – Excessive need for approval from others reflecting a fear of not being accepted and/or rejected.
3. **Emotional Irresponsibility (Blame)** – Ascribing emotions to external causes instead of oneself.
4. **Rigidity** – Irrational rigid thoughts and norms people hold for themselves and others leading to guilt, attribution of guilt and punishment for mistakes.
5. **Problem Avoidance** – Irrational avoidance and dependent cognitions concerning decision making and taking risks.

## **Psychological Disorders**

Fast forward 15 years and I am completing my PhD research. In my research, I examined the link between types of Unhealthy

Mindsets and psychological distress in people who were carers for a family member with an injury or illness. I did what is called a ‘longitudinal study’ where I measured people’s mindsets and also their level of distress at two time points six months apart (to accommodate for the varying effects of life events on psychological status).

The results of the study at the earlier time highlighted a range of different stressors and coping problems people had which were difficult to disentangle given their complex adjustment issues. However, at the second point in time – where participants had a subsequent six-month period of settling and adjustment – the results were much clearer regarding the specific impact of different mindsets on various types of psychological problems.

*Correlations Between the Predictor and Outcome Variables*

Dependent Variables	T2 Global Severity Index	Somatisation	Obsessive/ Compulsive	Interpersonal Sensitivity	Depression	Anxiety	Hostility	Phobic Anxiety	Paranoid Ideation	Psychoticism
<i>Irrational Belief Inventory Subscales</i>										
Worrying	0.42**	0.15	0.43**	0.38**	0.42**	0.32**	0.42**	0.32**	0.30**	0.34**
Rigidity	0.04	-0.03	0.22	-0.11	-0.16	0.05	0.19	0.11	0.17	0.11
Problem Avoidance	0.16	0.01	0.06	0.23	0.17	0.09	0.01	0.22	0.05	0.22
Need for Approval	0.21	-0.04	0.32**	0.23	0.17	0.08	0.27*	0.17	0.31**	0.22
Emotional Irresponsibility	0.20	0.07	0.14	0.23	0.41**	0.09	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.13

Note: \*\*significant at  $p < 0.01$  level (2 tailed)  
 \* significant at  $p < 0.05$  level (2 tailed)

My research showed that the Mindset of Worrying is linked to almost all forms of psychological distress. The Mindset of Demand (Need for Approval) is linked to Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Hostility and Suspiciousness (Paranoid Ideation), and the Mindset of Blame (Emotional Irresponsibility) is significantly correlated with Depression.

The key point here is that whilst all five Unhealthy Mindsets are likely to be unhelpful in living a successful life, only

three (Worrying, Demand and Blame) in my follow-up research were linked to actual psychological disorders.

## **From Unhealthy to Healthy Mindsets**

Having discovered the three most important Unhealthy Mindsets related to serious stress related disorders (Worry, Demand & Blame) it was also important to identify and clearly describe the corresponding healthy mindsets for each of these (Accept, Encourage & Responsible) and be able to clearly communicate what this shift in thinking patterns would look like.

**From Demanding to Encouraging** – There is much freedom from anger and depression when you change your mindset from Demanding that others ‘should’ do what you want them to by controlling their actions and instead move to a mindset of Encouraging. Example thought patterns that relate to a mindset of Demand include:

*“They should do what I want them to do or else...”*

*“I must achieve what I set out to with no flexibility.”*

*“I do not accept failures or excuses and people must do what they commit to, regardless.”*

The opposite mindset, Encouraging, respects people’s right to make their own choices and encourages and influences them where possible. Example thought patterns that relate to Encouraging include:

*“How can I shape and influence them to do what I need them to?”*

*“I hope they will do what I want but I need to have a backup plan.”*

*“How can I encourage them and show them the benefits of what I want them to do?”*

**From Worry to Acceptance** – The mindset of Worry involves fearing the future and change, over-controlling relationships, and blocking growth and development for self and others. Example thought patterns that relate to Worry include:

*“They might be hurt or unsafe but I do not know because I am not there.”*

*“What if this or that bad thing happens soon?”*

*“I can’t let them take that risk as I do not want them to get hurt.”*

When you move from a state of Worry to one of Acceptance, you make the most of each day and each relationship in the “here and now” without trying to predict the future. Example thought patterns related to Acceptance include:

*“That has not happened yet. I need to make the most of today.”*

*“One day at a time – I will not worry about the future.”*

*“I hope they are safe but no point worrying about what I can’t control.”*

**From Blame to Responsibility** – Blame is where you rigidly believe other people and/or events are to blame for your own reactions, outbursts and negative moods. Examples of thought patterns related to Blame include:

*“How dare they talk to me like that!”*

*“It’s all their fault my life is ruined.”*



*“If they didn’t treat me like that, then I would have been able to succeed.”*

When you make the journey to the Responsible mindset, you take responsibility for your own reactions, outbursts and moods. You have an awareness of your own body and mind and decide your own actions, letting go of harmful emotions. Example thought patterns related to Responsibility include:

*“I will not waste my energy or time on them any longer.”*

*“I will make the most of what I have.”*

*“My anger is my problem and the sooner I move on from this the better.”*

## **Mindsets and You**

When it comes to Mindsets, where are you at with Worry, Demand and Blame? Take some time out now to answer the questions below and identify where you could improve your thinking patterns and adopt healthier mindsets when facing the challenging Waves of Life!

Worry - Do you Worry more than live in a state of Acceptance? How do you know you are Worrying – can you remember a recent example of this? Could you replace this worry with a mindset of Acceptance and what would this look like for you?

Demand - Do you Demand more than you Encourage? How do you know you are Demanding – can you remember a recent example of this? Could you replace this worry with a mindset of Encouragement and what would this look like for you?



Blame - Do you Blame more than take Responsibility? How do you know you are Blaming – can you remember a recent example of this? Could you replace this worry with a mindset of Responsibility and what would this look like for you?

## **Changing Mindsets: A New Backstory For Your Life**

So let us return to the beginning of the chapter: Why do affirmations fail? Why didn't Katie feel beautiful despite the fact she looked into the mirror and told herself "I am beautiful" every day? We have already discovered that the reason affirmations often fail us is that they don't engage our thinking patterns at the deeper levels where our unhealthy mindsets are hidden. Whilst our surface thinking may be changed through our affirmations and mantras, the deeper unhealthy mindsets remain unaffected and so our negative views remain intact despite the positive things we say to ourselves in the mirror. We refer to these important layers of thinking as the 'Story', which represents our surface thinking and the 'Backstory' which represented our deeper level mindsets.

In order to become more resilient and happy in life we need to be able to (1) quickly and easily uncover the mindsets that have created a negative backstory to our lives, and (2) genuinely challenge and change these negative Mindsets to rewrite this into a more positive and helpful backstory for the future of our lives.

So, in this next section we will learn the skills, techniques and strategies we can apply through a self-help approach to rewrite the backstory of our lives and change unhealthy mindsets towards more positive ones for lasting wellbeing and happiness.

## Quick Refresh: Thinking Patterns and the ABCs

So everyone knows the ABCs of thinking, namely we can predict the emotional consequences we feel (C) based on our thoughts and beliefs (B) about the events or actions (A) we experience. This simplistic view of the different emotional consequences (C) of various thinking patterns and beliefs (B) to the same action or event (A) is illustrated below:

<b>A</b> <b>Action or Event</b>	<b>B</b> <b>Beliefs &amp; Thoughts</b>	<b>C</b> <b>Consequence</b>
Someone I care about yells at me...	“I am a failure – I give up!” “I hate this - they are horrible!” “I don’t care - not my problem...”	Depressed Angry Calm

We also know that B contains both surface thoughts – aka the story ( “*I’m a failure – I give up!*” or “*I hate this – they are horrible*” or “*I don’t care - not my problem*”) as well as deeper Mindsets – aka the backstory (the reason why I have my surface thoughts).

## 1. Uncovering The BackStory: Mindsets & The Downward Arrow:

To uncover the backstory and mindsets driving our surface thinking and story we tell ourselves about our lives, we need to use a strategy called the Downward Arrow. The Downward Arrow is a self-questioning technique where we ask ourselves a “why” question to reveal the mindsets that cause our surface thinking and subsequent emotional distress. Let’s go back to the example of “*Someone I care about yells at me...*” and becoming angry and upset with surface thoughts of “*I hate this – they are horrible*”:



## 2. Rewriting the BackStory for a Better Future: Changing Your Mindset

To do this we add two more letters to our ABC model of thinking. You guessed it, D and E. In the ABCDE model the ABC is the same – with the Downward Arrow applied to the B to uncover the backstory (unhealthy mindset) behind the story (surface thoughts). The D stands for Disputing or Challenging our unhealthy mindsets and the E stands for new and Empowering Healthy Mindsets.

Let's look at the example from Katie's life where "*Someone I care about yells at me...*" using the ABCDE strategy to uncover and change the negative mindsets causing the unhealthy emotional consequences.

To rewrite the backstory of Katie's (and our) lives for a positive future, we must Dispute or Challenge these blame-based mindsets that drive our unhealthy surface thinking and anger. We need to ask ourselves some important questions about how logical, realistic, practical (helpful) and empirical (evidence-based) the beliefs are. If these beliefs fail any one of these important challenge questions then we will need to rewrite this belief to match what is more practical, realistic, helpful and so on.

Let's do this together now using the example above as a guide. As we ask ourselves these challenge questions, we quickly realise how unhelpful and unrealistic our Mindsets are and have to write down beliefs that are more helpful and realistic. *NOTE: we are not writing down positive affirmations or unrealistic predictions of the future – just blunt, honest and believable statements about the*

*situation.* As you can see, the result of this dispute/challenge process is a healthier Mindset in the E Column, which provides an Empowering new believable backstory for the next stage of our lives.

## **HAZARD WARNING:**

### **Letting Go of The Old Backstory is Hard!**

Changing Mindsets is hard – giving up and letting go of the old backstory of your life to embrace a new backstory for your future is not as easy as it may seem. Let me explain.

Compare the following old backstory (B) and new backstory (E):

### **Unhealthy Mindset (Blame)**

*“It’s all their fault I am upset. I hate them – they have ruined my day (or ruined my life!)”*

**Vs**

### **Healthy Mindset (Responsible)**

*“Whilst I may be angry and do not like being yelled at, I can choose my own response and stay calm instead of wasting my energy on anger.”*

Which would you rather be? The answer seems quite obvious and most of us would choose to have a more Responsible mindset

<b>CHANGING MINDSETS - ABCDE</b>				
<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
<b>Action or Event</b>	<b>Unhealthy Beliefs</b>	<b>Consequences</b>	<b>Dispute Un-healthy Beliefs</b>	<b>Empowerment</b>
Someone I care about yells at me...	<p><i>"I hate being yelled at!"</i></p> <p><i>"They shouldn't yell at me - I am sick of being treated badly"</i></p> <p><u>"It's all their fault I am upset"</u> (BLAME)</p>	<p>Upset</p> <p>Angry</p>	<p><b>Logic Q:</b> <i>Is it logical that my anger is ALL their fault?</i></p> <p><i>A: NO – I am responsible for my anger</i></p> <p><b>Evidence Q:</b> <i>Is there evidence to prove my belief?</i></p> <p><i>A: NO – They do not have 100% control over how I feel – I do!</i></p> <p><b>Practical Q:</b> <i>Does this belief help me cope?</i></p> <p><i>A: NO – It only makes me more angry - I don't like being angry</i></p> <p><b>Realistic Q:</b> <i>Is this belief realistic?</i></p> <p><i>A: NO – I can control my own response</i></p>	<p><i>"Whilst I may be angry and do not like being yelled at, <u>I can choose my own response</u> and stay calm instead of wasting my energy on anger"</i></p> <p>(RESPONSIBLE)</p>

and have greater control over our own happiness and quality of life. However, whilst this is all very well in theory, in practice many people, including Katie, struggle to shift from unhealthy to healthy mindsets despite having all of the insights and strategies we have covered. Why?

## **Why is 'Blame' so Easy and 'Responsible' so Hard?**

Let's be honest, for some people there is some short-term pleasure in blaming others for their emotional distress and burnout. We create this evil logic that if we didn't cause the problems that led to our own anger and depression then why should we have to fix it??? It seems unfair and unjust to expect ourselves to have to work hard at our own recovery when we believe our stress was caused by someone else.

Just like when you walk past the broken food jar someone else spilled on the supermarket floor without feeling the need to clean it up, you become a bystander avoiding the obvious need to take action to restore your own wellbeing and instead wait for someone else to fix your life for you! But drinking from the cup of blame is a poison chalice and creates a very dark back-story of your future life. By refusing to help yourself recover you will either be waiting a very long time (for some sort of justice, retribution or compensation) in a state of depression – wasting the wonderful life you could have had OR be rescued by some knight in shining armour without learning to help yourself. This only reinforces your cycle of dependency and blame when the next life crisis occurs. Clearly the catastrophic long-term consequences of the Blame mindset outweighs any



short-term relief and self-justification (aka self-righteousness) you may feel.

On the other hand you could change the backstory of your life to being Responsible for your emotional state regardless of the unfair circumstances and unkind people who may have contributed. In the short-term this may feel overwhelming, unjust and unfair as you try to rebuild your life by collecting the fragments that were left after the destructive actions of others. You need to pace yourself and allow yourself plenty of room to grieve and process the negative emotions of sadness, anger and fear. As you persevere with rebuilding your life, each day gets a little easier to manage but setbacks may still occur. When you face setbacks, imagine a boat stuck high and dry on a sandbar unable to set sail. Gradually (it may seem like an eternity), as the tide turns and the water level rises the boat floats and can set sail again. In a similar way through patience and perseverance, your hope and optimism for the future returns and you can overcome any setbacks and confidently move forward with life again.

Moreover, as you set sail again on the adventure of life, your Responsible mindset creates a positive backstory to your future life. With the scars born of wisdom from the self-recovery process you have undertaken, you now have powerful reminders of your courage and self-confidence to successfully face the next challenges of life. Thus the short-term burden and angst of being responsible for your recovery even when the damage was done by others is clearly only a minor inconvenience when compared to the lasting courage and self-confidence gained through the struggle of self-recovery!



## **Changing Your Mindset: Don't Be A Passenger – Be The Driver!**

Changing Mindsets is hard because effort is required often when you feel most upset and distressed and simply want to avoid taking responsibility for lowering your distress – but you are the driver of your own life and if you let go of the steering wheel and become a passenger, a crash is inevitable.

However if you understand and can easily apply the ABCDE strategy to your life then driving through the hard times is possible and you need not give up and become a passenger!

## **Resilience Pop Quiz: Mindsets**

Why do affirmations fail? When it comes to understanding our thinking patterns, what is the difference between the 'story' and the 'backstory'?

What are the five unhealthy mindsets? Which ones cause stress and burnout? What do the others cause?

What is the ABCDE strategy for and how does the 'downward arrow' help to uncover unhealthy mindsets? Why is it hard to change the backstory of your life and let go of unhealthy mindsets?

## **Pro Challenge:**

Become a Pro by successfully completing 1 x ABCDE exercise every day for 10 days using a current or previous example of a real action or event that caused you to become upset and stressed. Collate these 10 exercises into a folio so you can regularly remind yourself of the new backstories that are shaping your future life!

# 5 . Emotions :

## The River Must Flow But Not Flood

**“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”**

**The Serenity Prayer**

**“The river of emotions must flow but not flood”**

**Dr Pete**

### **Pro Question:**

*Can you recognise and manage your emotions effectively so the river flows but does not flood?*

## Turning Pro: Emotions & Me

**E**motions are a tricky topic for a lot of men. Even male psychologists have our own challenges when it comes to managing our emotions. I know from both my personal experience and my clinical training, that there are two important steps to managing emotions (1) being able to quickly identify your emotions correctly (and not confuse them with your thoughts) before they escalate into major distress and longer term baggage; and (2) being able to choose the right strategy to manage emotions so that the river of emotion flows without flooding!

My journey turning Pro with emotions has been marked by two major failures in this regard. Firstly, in the area of not being able to ‘identify emotions’ quickly, I had some serious professional failures as a workshop facilitator and keynote speaker when I did not recognise my fear and anxiety until too late. I was comparatively quite young and baby faced compared to other speakers, and I assumed everyone would think I was incompetent. While speaking, I spent too much energy trying to

be confident instead of portraying myself as a ‘helpful expert’. As my anxiety silently began to rise, I tried over-compensating even more to sound confident and authoritative and inadvertently portrayed myself as an ‘arrogant show-off’. My lack of self-awareness about my fear and anxiety meant I overcompensated too much. Had I have been more self-aware of my anxiety I could have used some simple coping skills to become calmer and more friendly rather than louder and more brash.

My second major failure was in the area of ‘effectively managing emotions’ and had much more of a personal impact. I, like almost everyone on earth, function best when I feel I have some control over events and circumstances around me. When I feel like my life is ‘out of control’ I get quite upset and naturally try to regain control – in doing so I try to problem solve everything. But problem solving, as you will see in this chapter, only works for situations where we can change the outward circumstances and does not work when you can’t change a situation but simply have to endure it. I found it really hard to sit with negative emotions in situations I could not change such as waiting on exam results, managing pain from injuries and resting when I wanted to be active, waiting on the news about the ill health of loved ones, being stuck in traffic jams and managing transitions and difficult/uncertain times in relationships. My tendency to try and turn these unsolvable problems into solvable ones not only further strained relationships around me but also created more complications and difficulties in the long run with sometimes devastating consequences.

In this chapter I will share with you the life lessons of (1) Understanding emotions and becoming self-aware to prevent baggage; (2) The decision tree to select the best approach to managing emotions

depending on the circumstances causing them; and (3) The do's and don'ts of problem solving and coping skills for unsolvable problems.

## Emotional Awareness (or Not?)

Many people think they are emotionally aware but when they are struggling with challenging Waves of Life this is often not the case and this lack of awareness about emotions can create major problems. After all these years working as a psychologist I am still amazed at how difficult it is for bright and capable people under pressure to be able to identify and separate their thoughts and emotions. Have a look at these two cases below:

### Case 1: Bob

Bob was referred for anger management. He had lost his temper at work too many times – smashing a phone on to a desk, slamming doors and more recently pushing a colleague into a wall. Bob was sitting in his first session of counselling and I want to share with you a bit of our conversation:

*Dr Pete: “So Bob, I need to understand more about the recent confrontation with your co-worker – tell me a bit more about how you were feeling at the time?”*

*Bob: “I was sick and tired of excuses – they had promised me they would complete the job two days earlier and then ignored my follow up emails – when I found them walking down the corridor at the office I was ready to punch them out cold!”*

Dr Pete: *“Thanks Bob what you have told me is how you were ‘thinking’ which is really helpful but what I was asking you was how were you ‘feeling’ – can you tell me more about your emotions at the time?”*

Bob: *“I don’t understand? What do you mean – my emotions – I already told you how I felt – I wanted to punch his lights out!”*

## **Case 2: Sharon**

Sharon was in therapy for chronic depression and pain management following a motor vehicle accident that had caused severe physical injuries. Sharon was previously very active but had limited mobility due to multiple fractures and also suffered a lot of pain during this early stage of recovery. An excerpt of one of our early counselling conversations was:

Dr Pete: *“Sharon, I am concerned about how upset you have been lately – and whilst this is completely understandable given your injuries – I want to start to learn more about what you are thinking when you get so upset. Take me back to last night when you couldn’t sleep and started to cry – what were you thinking at the time?”*

Sharon: *“I just felt completely overwhelmed, sad and anxious... and then as I lay in bed staring at the ceiling I got more angry and frustrated which only made my pain worse...”*

Dr Pete: *“Those sound like really strong emotions. That helped me understand why you couldn’t sleep but what I wanted to know was what you were thinking at the time...”*

Sharon: *“What do you mean? Don’t you get it? I told you what I was thinking – I was in pain, I was upset, I was angry...”*

Bob was so preoccupied with his thoughts he was unable to identify his emotions despite additional questioning. Sharon was so preoccupied with her emotions she mistakenly thought they were her thinking patterns.

For Bob and Sharon, recovery and resilience will be achieved through balancing all four Elements (Mindsets, Emotions, Lifestyle and Purpose). Both Bob and Sharon will face some difficulties with the Element of Emotions (and others) given this lack of awareness. Let’s take a look at Emotions now and find out (1) why it is important to be self-aware when it comes to our emotions and (2) how to manage our emotions so the river flows but does not flood...

## **Drivers or Passengers**

Like Water that flows, so are the tears of our Emotions. In order to ride the Waves of Life successfully we need to be aware of the power of Emotions but not let them overpower the other Elements of Wellbeing. Emotions are important passengers, but not the driver and we need to express them in healthy ways to avoid accumulating baggage.

## **What are Emotions?**

An emotion is what psychologists call an ‘affective state’ – a mood or feeling. It is not a thought or Mindset. There are only four basic core emotions:



**1. Joy:** The peak positive emotional state with a continuum of positive emotional experiences. You might hear it described as Happiness, Satisfaction, Fulfilment, Contentment and Peace.

**2. Anger:** Also described as Frustration, Dissatisfaction, Disappointment, Hatred and Rage.

**3. Fear:** Also described as Terror, Panic and Anxiousness.

**4. Sadness:** Also described as Shame, Hurt and Guilt.

## **Primary and Secondary Emotions**

**Primary Emotions (It's ALL GOOD!):** Primary emotions are in-the-moment emotional responses to a pleasant or unpleasant stimuli. They happen as a direct result of an external cue that affects us emotionally. That is, they occur in close proximity to the event that brought them on. Primary emotions are important because they provide us with information about our current situation and get us ready or motivated to act in some way.

**Secondary Emotions (It's ALL BAD!):** Secondary emotions are very familiar. We might mistake them for primary emotions if we're not self-aware. For example, anxiety is often due to fear. We may not be aware that we're afraid, or even what we are fearing (it could be many things), so it becomes expressed as general anxiety. What helps you identify a secondary emotion is if you can't alleviate it without digging deeper.

A secondary emotion occurs when we don't recognise, value, listen to, or respond to our primary emotions. If we do not

express the primary emotion, it doesn't go away. Secondary emotions stick around for a long time and prevent us from interacting and growing in healthy ways. Examples of unhealthy outcomes from Secondary Emotions include: Worry, Anxiety, Low Self-Esteem, Depression, Jealousy, Hatred, Hostility and Paranoia.

## **Be Aware of Your Emotions**

What different types of Emotions have you experienced recently? Have they become Drivers in your Life or are they Passengers?

How did you express these Primary Emotions in healthy ways to prevent unhealthy Secondary Emotions and baggage accumulating in your Inner World? What can you do to move to a higher level of Emotional Awareness when facing the challenging Waves of Life? Let's have a look at the cases of Bob and Sharon a bit more.

### **Case 1: Bob**

Bob, as you can easily guess, had a complete lack of insight into his emotions of anger. This not only meant he couldn't quickly prevent it getting worse once it started but that he was unable to enact effective emotional management skills such as problem solving his approach to co-worker communication and relaxation skills to lower his physical tension. This lack of awareness led to serious baggage in the form of hostility, paranoia and hatred.

## Case 2: Sharon

Sharon, whilst clearly expressing a lot of emotions, confused them with her thinking patterns and as such was not fully aware of the differences between her thoughts and emotions. This lack of insight meant she could not leverage thinking strategies.

# Flow vs. Flood: Managing Emotions

Managing our emotions effectively is essential for our wellbeing. Not only do we have to have self-awareness to be able to identify our emotions as we experience them so they are not surprised or ‘bottled up’ to create baggage later, we also have to do something to process these emotions and lower their intensity to a more healthy level.

What we do to manage our emotions isn’t as straightforward as it seems. Most people go onto ‘autopilot’ when they have strong emotions that can have disastrous consequences if what they do in autopilot does not match the situation creating their distress.

Examples of this are: (1) they try to problem solve unsolvable problems only creating more complications and distress OR (2) they avoid the necessary problem solving required and live in a state of wishful thinking or distraction while things get worse. Given these approaches can either be helpful or unhelpful, depending on the problem, we must first ask ourselves an important question about the problems that cause our distressing emotions.

## **Managing Emotions: The Two Key Strategies and When to Use Each One**

In working out how to cope with the Waves of Life, we are faced with a task that has been well described in the “prayer of serenity”:

*“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

This prayer is a cornerstone of the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous, one of the most longstanding and successful groups aimed at helping people cope with alcoholism. It is also a central philosophy underpinning the success of many other self-help groups across the world.

At a practical level, how we choose to manage the emotions from a Wave of Life will depend on the two types of problems we encounter.

### **1. Problems we can actively do something about. These are problems that require practical solutions, for example:**

- completing household tasks;
- resolving conflicts with family members or service providers; and
- changing your mood state by sleeping or eating differently.

For these problems, the best strategy is Problem Solving.

### **2. Problems which, after very careful consideration, we cannot actively do something about, for example:**

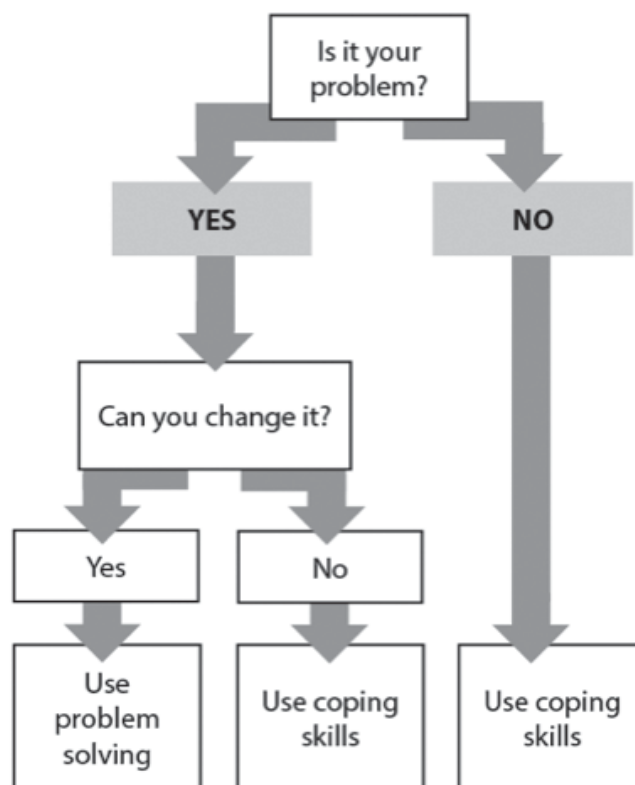
- feeling upset about someone else’s behaviour;

- your feelings about your own or someone else's illness;
- feeling frustrated about financial or physical circumstances;
- waiting for information; and
- feeling upset or frustrated about the number of waves we are facing.

For these problems, the best strategy is to use Coping Skills.

## Identifying the Type of Problem

When a Wave of Life hits, you need to work out whether or not it is your problem, and if so, whether or not you can do anything about it. The following diagram illustrates a process you can follow.



As you can see, if at the outset the issue is not your problem then you don't have to worry about it and can focus on other issues or relax. If the issue is your problem, you need to assess what you can do about it. If you can do something then you need to use problem-solving strategies. If you cannot do anything about it, then you need to use coping skills.

## **Problem Solving**

Problem solving is about identifying the most effective way to address a problem. Problem solving strategies allow the Stress Surfer to ride a wave in such a way that it can reduce, minimise, control, or even prevent stress and anxiety in daily living.

When a problem is yours, and you can do something about it, the following problem-solving steps can help.

### **1. Define the Problem**

Before a problem can be solved, the cause must be clearly identified. This is not always as easy as it sounds, and may need some practice.

For example, you may be concerned because you are not getting enough sleep. However, before racing to the doctor for medication, it would be worth giving some thought to why you are not sleeping.

If you are staying awake because you cannot pay your bills, then the actual problem is about getting some money or getting more time to pay the bills. Defining the problem will help us decide if we need a doctor or an accountant.

Alternatively if you are staying awake because you are worried about your children and do not get to spend enough time with them because of your work commitments, then the actual problem is about balancing work/life pressures.

In defining the problem, keep the following points in mind:

- only consider one problem at a time;
- be specific and concrete; and
- if the problem is complex, break it down into small steps.

## **2. Brainstorm for Solutions**

Generate ideas and solutions to the problem at hand. In brainstorming for solutions, it is important to write down all ideas, no matter how ridiculous they may seem, and list the solutions without evaluating them at this stage.

## **3. Assess Each Possible Solution**

Having brainstormed every possible solution to fix the problem, the next step is to list the advantages and disadvantages of each of your possible solutions.

Make sure you work through all solutions identified, because some that are not useful now may be useful in the future.

## **4. Select the Best Solution**

Choose the solution (or combination of solutions) which is most appropriate and practical.

## **5. Plan How to Implement the Best Solution**

List the resources you will need and any steps involved in putting into motion the strategy you have selected. Also list any obstacles which may impact on the process.

## **6. Implement the Plan and Review Progress**

The final step is to actually implement the strategies you have selected and then monitor your progress.

- Focus on successes first and reward yourself for the effort you've made!
- Acknowledge disappointments – but don't allow irrational thinking to distort or magnify them.
- Re-examine each step and identify alternative strategies and, if necessary, keep trying.

Problem solving is often the only way to find solutions to difficult life problems. It is a helpful strategy for many of the Waves of Life of different sizes, including social and family issues, finances, business, travel, health and fitness.

# **Sample Problem Solving**

This sample is condensed. A full sheet of paper should be used for each step.



## **STEP 1: Identify the Problem**

*Think carefully, ask yourself questions, then write down exactly what the problem is:*

I'm too busy at work and not able to spend enough time with my family.

## **STEP 2: List All Possible Solutions**

*Write down all ideas, even bad ones. List solutions without evaluation at this stage.*

1. Quit work and partner goes back to work full-time.
2. Increase quality of time with family without necessarily making more time available.
3. Quit work, sell house, downsize and move to the country.
4. Reduce hours to part-time and reduce expenses.

## **STEP 3: Assess Each Possible Solution**

*Quickly go down the list of possible solutions and assess the main advantages and disadvantages of each.*

I can't quit as I need the money and my partner can't earn as much. I can increase the quality of time but still need more time than I have now. I can't quit, downsize and move away as my partner and children have friends, family and school locally. I can reduce my hours to a nine-day fortnight and reduce some expenses, for example go on a camping trip instead of the overseas vacation planned for later in the year.

## **STEP 4: Choose the Best Solution**

*Choose the solution that is most practical and appropriate to solve the problem.*

I will improve the quality of time I have by planning ahead and engaging in more activities with the family when I do get to spend time with them, as well as reduce my hours and lower expenses.

## **STEP 5: Plan How to Carry Out the Best Solution**

*List the resources and steps involved in implementing the best solution and note any potential pitfalls.*

Next weekend we can start improving the quality of family time by planning activities we can do together. I'll talk to my boss and start a new nine-day fortnight roster at the end of the month, and also start planning some camping trips to add some excitement to the change in plans for the family holiday.

## **STEP 6: Implement the Plan and Review The Progress**

*Focus on achievements. Identify what has been achieved and what still needs to be achieved. If necessary go through steps 1 to 6 again to identify and resolve any difficulties.*

The family activities are going really well and each person gets to choose an activity within a budget once a month. The nine-day fortnight is going well and on my rostered day off I help with

the kids at school and spend some time exercising. The family camping trip was not well received so we are planning some other options on a limited budget.

## Practical Exercise

**F**ind some blank paper and practice working through the six steps of Problem Solving, using problems you may have recently encountered. If you get stuck, refer to the sample problem solving chart above.



## Unsolvable Problems – Waiting for A Sign

Have you ever been stuck in a moment, waiting for a sign to show you the way forwards? I have.

On numerous occasions throughout my life I have found myself facing overwhelming negative emotions because of challenging Waves of Life that I could not control.

## Unsolvable Problems – Across The Lifespan

In fact, at various times throughout my life, I have faced different problems I could not solve. In childhood, it was having friendships end without warning or reason, waiting for broken bones to mend, and facing boredom when stuck at home with limited activities available. As a teenager, waiting to see if I would be invited to a party or if a girl would agree to go on a date with me.

As a young adult, trying to get a job - sending out countless applications and then waiting for a phone call. Applying for university and then having to... you guessed it... WAIT for an offer to arrive. Also the minor hassles of dealing with being placed on hold for too long, meals taking too long to be served in restaurants, waiting for mail to arrive with important results and decisions...

In midlife, waiting for the birth of children, the news of health conditions of loved ones, waiting as I recovered from my own injuries and illnesses, waiting out setbacks and delays in business, legal and financial matters... the list goes on...

In older adulthood, watching my parents' frustrations at the ageing process, too much time in the waiting rooms of various doctors and having to slow the pace of life to accommodate their ageing bodies despite their agile and eager minds.

## **Waiting - Unsolvable Problems and Coping Strategies**

### **The Bad News: What Not to Do**

When you're facing an unsolvable problem and waiting for a sign, one of the worst things to do is to try and use problem solving techniques or force an outcome too soon. By trying to problem solve something that can't actually be solved per se, you put pressure on yourself and others to make decisions before the full facts are known.

By forcing issues into premature resolution we may harm ourselves by later regretting the actions we chose or harm others by enacting consequences which were later found to be inappropriate to the circumstances. I know I am guilty of jumping at shadows and making decisions too soon instead of giving people more space and time to resolve issues – something I regret.

## **The Good News: What to Do**

Here is some good news! When it comes to ‘waiting’ and managing the emotions associated with unsolvable problems such as a family member being hospitalised or waiting on a redundancy or restructure at work we need to use ‘Coping Skills’ as our primary strategy. Coping Skills aim to change or control the level of anxiety or stress we experience as a result of a problem. Healthy kinds of coping skills include:

### **Positive Reappraisal**

Think about the problem and try to see it in a different light – look for the silver lining in the cloud. There are two ways of doing this:

1. Thinking about what possible good may come from the situation; and
2. Thinking about how it isn’t as bad as it could have been.

Positive reappraisal is an important skill and helps you balance your thinking and be able to see both the good and bad aspects of waves – or as the saying goes, see your glass as both half empty and half full!

## **Selective Attention**

Purposely concentrate on a specific issue which may be related or unrelated to the problem. Some people will divert their attention from difficult problems by focusing on exercise, watching a movie, completing a project or taking part in a hobby. Others may focus on something closely related to the problem, such as organising resources, consoling others, or looking at problem-solving issues.

## **Scheduling Pleasant Events**

This is where we choose to do fun things at a regular planned time – even if we don't feel like it. When managing negative emotions over long periods of time, we often lose the motivation to keep up with friends and engage in activities we previously enjoyed. By continuing to make the effort to schedule and complete a pleasant event, we prevent our emotions from getting worse and increase our recovery speed.

## **Seeking Social Support**

Find people you can talk to and express your feelings to about the Wave of Life you are facing. Make sure you set up a time to talk and don't just “dump” unexpectedly on people. Sources of social support include support groups, caring friends and family.

## **Relaxation & Breathing**

Relaxation is the process of voluntarily letting go of physical tension. When we are stressed we often experience increases in physical tension and our breathing patterns change from slow,

deep breaths to short, shallow breaths. Increases in physical tension and changes in breathing patterns can cause headaches and dizziness. There are three basic types of relaxation strategies.

The first is a slow breathing exercise or ‘breathing re-training’, where you focus on slow and deliberate breathing patterns to calm down and relax.

The second type of relaxation strategy is progressive muscle relaxation, which not only addresses breathing but enables you to relax your whole body by systematically contracting and relaxing all your muscle groups.

The third type is for the mind and is known as mindfulness meditation. It involves focusing your mind and concentrating, and enables you to take control of worries and let go of stress in your mind.

Relaxation is a skill, and like all skills takes time and practice to get it right. Make sure you practice these techniques while your sea is calm so that you can relax effectively when the Waves of Life hit.

### **Mindfulness Meditation**

Not only do we need to enable our body to become physically relaxed when facing unsolvable problems, we also need to let our minds relax by using mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness is firstly becoming aware of and accepting of our negative thoughts and emotions as part of our broader surroundings in any given moment. Secondly, learning to accept and be present in the moment of our physical environment (inclusive of both our surroundings and our



internal feelings) without the need to change or react to them. As an introduction I will share with you a great mindfulness meditation exercise I use with my clients facing unsolvable problems...

*Being Present – Counting Down Meditation Exercise (My Favourite)*

Sit in a chair and rate your level of tension and worry (1 calm – 10 very stressed). Begin by taking three slow deep breaths. Keeping your eyes open, look around where you are sitting. Feel your body in the chair – your bottom on the seat, your feet on the floor, the air you breathe in and out. Listen to the sounds in the room, your own breath, noises in the room, outside or nearby, traffic, people, wind and weather and other sounds.

Now begin to increase your awareness further by naming out loud five objects you can see, five sounds you can hear and five sensations you can feel. Then repeat the exercise, counting down to four things you can see, feel and hear, then three, then two then one. Feel free to repeat things if you see them more than once. Maintain a physically calm and relaxed state using slow deep breathing throughout. At the end, reassess your level of tension and notice any improvements.

## **Unsolvable Problems & You**

What challenging Waves of Life are you facing at the moment? Do you need to practice the art of ‘waiting’ – giving the circumstances time to settle and adjust before the way ahead becomes clear? Do you try to problem solve unsolvable problems and force the resolution of issues only to damage yourself and the relationships you have with others? Take some time to stocktake all the Waves of Life you are facing and make sure you do



not try to solve the unsolvable but instead use the coping skills outlined above to get the best result for everyone!

## **Resilience Pop Quiz: Emotions**

Why is emotional self awareness important? What are the differences between primary and secondary emotions?

What are the common mistakes people make when managing their own emotions? How do you select the right strategies to manage your emotions effectively?

What are the types of things you can do to manage emotions caused by unsolvable problems – how would you apply these to your own situation? When problem solving a situation you need to change, what are the most common mistakes people make?

## **Pro Challenge:**

Become a Pro by journaling your daily experience of emotions for ten consecutive days and writing down ten problem solving exercises showing each and every step and journaling your experiences of the daily use of coping strategies and mindfulness!



# 6. Lifestyle: Sleep, Eat, Run, Repeat

**“When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”  
Joseph Kennedy**

**“Eat, sleep, run, repeat”  
Unknown**

**“Food is the most abused anxiety drug. Exercise is the  
most under-utilised antidepressant.”  
OrganicGuide.com**

## **Pro Question:**

*Do You Have The Self-Discipline Needed To Optimise  
Your Physical Wellbeing?*

## Turning Pro: Lifestyle & Me

**W**hen it comes to lifestyle – more specifically having a healthy body – my journey to Turning Pro has been a roller-coaster! Growing up socially awkward – my outlet was in sports and nature and my interest in bushwalking, fun runs, and cycling led to my becoming a competitive long distance runner, elite rock climber, and triathlete. When it came to exercise – I have always done a lot of it – doing a lot of exercise is not exactly what we need to be a Pro. Rather doing the right amount of exercise regularly is the key. Unfortunately my exercising was more of a binge approach where I would do very little for a while and then go crazy overdoing things to the point of injury. This ‘all or nothing approach’ did not help me create a sustainably healthy body and it took a while for me to ‘pace’ my exercise – that is keep exercising hard when I felt like it but maintaining a regular schedule or moderate exercise when my motivation was lower.

Turning Pro on sleep was another big challenge – anyone who has had young children will tell you how hard it is to get enough

sleep. When the kids were young, I struggled with getting enough sleep but I also struggled when I broke my sleep/wake routine by having late nights going to parties, eating sugary foods or consuming caffeine late in the day or taking afternoon siestas which disrupted my ability to go back to sleep at night. There were also times when I was 'overtired' and would stay up late watching TV too tired to go get my pyjamas on, brush my teeth and get to bed. But staying up late invariably made the next day even worse... As I grow older, the importance of getting enough sleep is increasingly critical to my wellbeing which means I set firm boundaries around other diet and lifestyle choices that may compromise my sleep.

But the hardest lifestyle factor for me was having a healthy diet! With 70% of people in Australia overweight or obese I know I am not the only one who has trouble maintaining a healthy diet. While I have managed to stay within the healthy weight range all my life – my greatest problem was not the AMOUNT of food I ate but rather the TYPES of foods I ate and the TIMING of my meals. I didn't enjoy my fruit and vegetables growing up so had less of these than I needed to as an adult favouring carbohydrates, meat and sweets which left me feeling bloated and tired a lot of the time. My timing of meals was also bad – missing meals such as breakfast or lunch due to a busy schedule then snacking on junk food when my blood sugar dropped to low, setting me up for the roller-coaster of high and low blood sugar and the mood swings that can accompany this. It took quite a lot of education, planning and self-discipline to get my diet and eating schedule into an optimal routine whilst managing all my other commitments in life.

In this chapter I will share with you the life lessons of (1) Understanding self-discipline and how it relates to achieving the goal of having a healthy body; (2) A quick tour through the essential info you need about healthy sleeping patterns; (3) An overview of mood foods and tips for a healthy diet; and (4) The powerful benefits of exercise on recovery and resilience.

## **Self-discipline: Delaying Gratification for a Healthy Body**

*“With self-discipline most anything is possible.”*

**Theodore Roosevelt**

***Self-discipline:*** As someone who has struggled with self-discipline for most of my life, I can say that it has been at the core of the successes I have had in life. Conversely the lack of self-discipline the main reason for my many failures. My experience is not unique. Self-discipline or its lack lies at the heart of many successes and failures in life.

In order to succeed in having a healthy body – specifically having a healthy sleeping pattern, healthy diet and healthy exercise routine, we need to look at the topic of self-discipline and how to apply this. This is because self-discipline is the key to living a healthy lifestyle and more and more people are overweight, have heart conditions, sleep disorders and diabetes due to (among other things) poor lifestyle and difficulties with self-discipline.

Most of us at varying times have made commitments and set goals to sleep better, eat better and get fitter by doing more

exercise. We then turn these goals into actions and start doing the activities needed to have a healthy body. However, for many of us there will be obstacles and difficulties that will stop us from achieving our goals and we will need to persevere through setbacks, hassles and hardship if we are to succeed.

***Perseverance:*** Perseverance is largely about suffering; particularly suffering the experience of negative feelings of stress, tiredness, frustration, pain, hunger, anger, and sadness as we continue taking steps towards our goals. To put up with these negative feelings, we need to do something psychologists call ‘delayed gratification’, that is, face this suffering and persevere through it, rather than run away and avoid it by doing something else which would be more enjoyable.

***Delayed gratification:*** Self-discipline is about perseverance and the ability to ‘delay gratification’ and this ability is evident in most successful people today.

But how do I use the delay of gratification to succeed in improving my health and life?

***Just Do It:*** Delaying gratification is about actively engaging in difficult challenges, or tolerating unpleasant feelings rather than avoiding them. We might get up and exercise when we’d rather stay in bed. We might go to work or deal with a difficult situation when our preference would be to avoid it.

For me, this is about getting difficult tasks done quickly and early, such as going for a run as soon as I wake up rather than hit the snooze button and lying in bed. By getting on with unpleasant things quickly, the anticipatory pain and resentment doesn’t linger

and cause me any further frustration or resentment than I feel in the moment. I know a lot of people prefer to avoid tasks resulting in the short-term gratification of procrastination and distraction, but then as the impending tasks grow more urgent, the long-term anxiety and frustration become more unpleasant as time wastes away.

***Purposely postponing the positive:*** Delaying gratification is also about purposely postponing positive events and rewards until we achieve set goals and objectives. We might delay a food reward, a coffee with a friend, or a trip to the movies, until small measurable goals have been achieved.

An example might be where I will not let myself have my favourite food (for me, usually chocolate or ice cream) unless I have achieved my exercise goals for the day. So I might postpone my after dinner dessert till later in the night or not have it at all if I have missed my exercise goals during the day. Another simple example of this is eating the least favourite parts of my meal first and saving the best for last.

Delaying gratification is the key behaviour pattern that forms the basis of Self-discipline in successful people. Whilst this is not rocket science, it is a simple, if sometimes difficult, process that enables you to progress every day with your meaningful life goals despite the obstacles you may face.

Self-discipline and delayed gratification also helps you ensure that once you have achieved steps and pushed through things you would rather avoid, you then experience both short and long-term rewards – enabling you to optimise your physical wellbeing and have a body just as healthy as your mind!



In this next section, I want to discuss further the importance of sleep, diet and exercise and tips and tricks to maximise your lifestyle and physical wellbeing.

## **Sleep: Are You Getting Enough?**

Are you getting enough? Recently a friend of mine told me how tired she felt when worrying about things too much. When she's worried and fatigued she doesn't sleep that well despite feeling tired which leads into a spiral of exhaustion.

Early in my career, one of my biggest mistakes both personally and professionally was to neglect the basics of sleep. Sleep would be hard to maintain when my children were infants. Instead of planning to rest and slow down to compensate for my fatigue, I would just try and keep working through, only to get sick and fall further behind.

Fatigue is a natural physical response to the psychological effects of stress and worry. When fatigued, rest and sleep are the only options for recovery. However, many of us lead very busy lives and may not be getting enough sleep, creating a risk of turning small Waves of Life into big ones or losing control and Wiping Out in a state of stress.

Not only do our busy schedules stop us from getting enough sleep, but worrying and unhealthy mindsets can keep us awake at night as can a lack of healthy exercise and eating habits. Let's take a look at how to combat the effects of fatigue and stress by having a healthy sleep pattern.

## **Getting Enough: Sleep**

Sleep is one of the most vital behaviours necessary for human survival. A lot of research has been conducted which shows that when humans are denied sleep for long periods of time, they suffer major psychological and physical problems. Over an extended period, sleep deprivation can cause irreversible damage.

When faced with the challenging Waves of Life, our bodies tend to react by creating chemical and behavioural changes which make it hard for us to sleep. I'm sure most of us can remember a time when not enough sleep made us irritable and difficult, and made it hard to concentrate on work or with our families.

Many people who make major changes to regulate and control their sleeping patterns experience rapid improvement in their ability to cope with stress and ride the Waves of Life. Research has also shown that an improved sleep pattern can help people recover from depression and other mental health problems as well as improve their rate of recovery from physical illness and infections.

Conversely, sleep deprivation studies show that when people are not able to get enough sleep, they create a "sleep debt" which eventually will have to be repaid. Short-term "sleep debt" causes irritability, memory loss and drowsiness – with some research considering short-term sleep deprivation as dangerous as alcohol intoxication when driving.

Long-term "sleep debt" can result in trouble concentrating, blurry vision, impaired judgment, and even more severe mental

effects such as hallucinations, mania, and nausea. Sleep deprivation can also cause physical problems such as weight gain associated with altered metabolism, slower recovery from injury and lowered immunity and increased risk of infections and illness.

## **4 Quick Tips for a Good Night's Sleep**

1. Go to bed when you are sleepy and get up at the same time every morning. Don't sleep-in longer, trying to make up for "lost sleep", because this will alter your sleep/wake cycle. Avoid naps during the day.
2. Don't lie in bed worrying. Write things down and make time during the day for problem solving. If you can't sleep after about ten minutes, get up and engage in a healthy relaxing activity such as listening to your favourite music, or practicing breathing and relaxation techniques. Only return to bed when you feel sleepy again.
3. Avoid alcohol, cigarettes and caffeine products such as tea, coffee and cola drinks after about 4pm. Try not to have more than two to three caffeine drinks during the day.
4. Regular exercise during the day can improve sleeping patterns.

Are you getting enough sleep – really? What can you do to develop a healthier sleeping pattern and increase your resilience when the challenging Waves of Life hit? Take some time out today to reassess your sleeping habits and make some changes to lower your fatigue and increase your wellbeing!

## Mood Foods & A Bowl of Concrete

The other day I added a big bowl of concrete to my diet – yep, not actual concrete but the ‘harden up’ attitude needed to get me to give up comfort food and get back into serious exercise again.

You see I had been in a bit of a slump – overtired from ‘sleeping like a baby’ for a few weeks (my nine month old’s sleep/wake cycle was affecting us all!) and had got into some really bad habits around managing my fatigue by comfort eating...

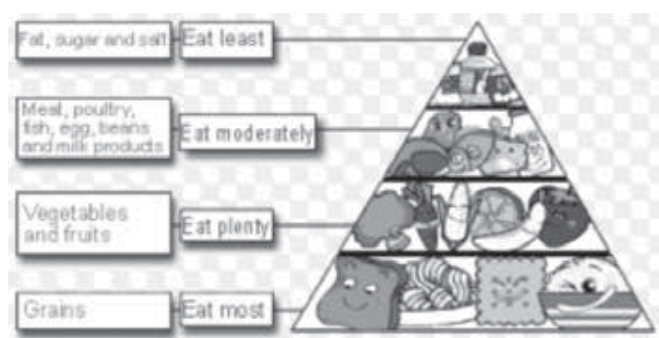
Anyway, during one of my late night wake ups, I was surfing the net and found this really cool meme in the image from organic-guide.com which said, “*Food is the most abused anxiety drug. Exercise is the most underutilised antidepressant.*” It sparked me into action. The next day as soon as the morning routine was under control, off I went on my old 10km circuit to ‘eat my bowl of concrete’ and harden up! Talk about some hard, yet cheap therapy! After listening to myself whinge almost the whole way I got home and within minutes the endorphins kicked in and I was able to ‘turn that frown upside down’, feeling uplifted and positive again!

Later in the day I was working on a book manuscript and was fact checking on diet and exercise and began looking at the latest research on the healthy food pyramid – a basic concept on eating healthily that I regularly use as part of my wellbeing talks. I was surprised to see how it has changed – yet the changes made complete sense in light of my own experiences.

## The Old Healthy Food Pyramid

When I grew up we ate tons of grains, moderate fruit, vegetables and meat and lower amounts of fats and sugars. Exercise was seen as an entirely separate issue. I remember eating large amounts of white breads, pasta, biscuits and breakfast cereals to fuel my hungry body.

In the old days the healthy food pyramid looked like this:



I thought making this my number one food group was the right way to go – consistent with conventional wisdom at the time. What I didn't know was how much of a negative impact eating these types of processed foods, grains and gluten were having on my body, leaving me feeling tired and bloated.

I was very focused on exercise in my younger years and would have chocolate and sweets for a 'pick me up' in response to lethargy caused by my diet prior to a run or working out followed by more chocolates and sweets for energy during long distance training or as a reward afterwards. This pattern of eating and exercising was not frowned upon back then yet in hindsight was a long way from optimal. It also set me up for some long-term bad habits around the use of processed foods, sweets and chocolates as unhelpful ways to manage my mood and fatigue.

## The New Healthy Food Pyramid

Now, with the increasing awareness of mood foods – both good and bad and the impact of gluten, sugars and artificial agents on physical and psychological health, there is increasing acceptance of the effect food has on our mood as well as the integral role of exercise. The healthy food pyramid below from Harvard School of Public Health links the role of exercise with diet as well as providing more detailed do's and don'ts in the food groups.



As you can see from the Harvard Healthy Food Pyramid, the foundation of healthy eating begins with portion control relative to the amount of exercise you do. The next level is about high intake of vegetables and grains – but recognising the importance of whole foods and the harmful effects of many processed foods and synthetic oils.

The next layer is about protein with a high emphasis on nuts, seeds, fish, chicken and eggs. Red meat has been moved to the



“eat least” category, much to my dismay as a steak lover – but for a good reason! Dairy and calcium is a layer above and at the top of the pyramid – foods to “Eat least” are the red meats, butters, processed foods, sugary drinks, sweets and salt.

## **Mood Foods, A Bowl of Concrete & You**

So having updated my knowledge of mood foods and the importance of exercise, I can see how my past experiences and conventional wisdom when I was growing up no longer apply and, with hindsight, indeed may have been somewhat harmful to my mood and energy levels. I can also see how important it is to continue to learn and change my eating habits as well as recognise the high value and therapeutic importance of regular intense exercise!

Do your eating patterns and exercise habits help or hinder your ability to feel energetic and happy in life? By being more aware of mood foods and avoiding the traps of comfort eating and in turn, making sure you include a “bowl of concrete” – a solid exercise session each day... you can optimise your wellbeing so you can successfully ride the challenging Waves of Life.

## **Train Insane or Remain The Same**

I want to share a secret with you about my own recovery journey. During the darkest hours of my midlife crisis, I struggled with fatigue, low mood and constant worry. Changing my thinking patterns helped, eating healthily helped, talking to my counsellor and supportive friends and family helped but it wasn't until

I started intense exercise that I truly began to feel permanently upbeat and energised!

Once I discovered the amazing benefits of intense exercise, the other coping skills were also much easier to use. Life didn't get any easier – if anything the problems of my midlife tsunamis got worse but my setbacks in life did not become setbacks in wellbeing.

In fact, the more challenging my circumstances became, the more crucial intense exercise was for my wellbeing. By training intensively, often to the point of exhaustion, I slept much better, ate healthily and avoided worry and over thinking by being constantly busy. During some of the most difficult times I set some massive stretch goals like completing a half ironman triathlon in the desert with only eight weeks preparation!

Such massive goals required total commitment and focus, leaving absolutely no room for idle time, worrying, laziness or bad habits and providing the healthiest of distractions in otherwise unchangeable circumstances. There were other benefits too. My fitness, physique and weight were not ideal as would be expected with someone going through so much turmoil, so the huge amount of exercise and personal training quickly got my body back into shape, improving my confidence and self-esteem.

Those darker times have long since passed but I have been regularly reminded of the link between intense exercise and an upbeat mood when my 'first world' problems get me down.



## The Benefits of Exercise on Mood & Recovery

So why is exercise so important in recovery and maintaining an upbeat mood?

There is an enormous amount of research on the benefits of physical activity in recovery from depression. Simply type “physical activity and depression” into Google and you will see what I mean. There are some really well established facts about exercise and mood such as:

1. Exercise is an effective low-cost proven part of the effective treatment of depression.
2. People who are physically active have a much lower incidence of depression.
3. Treatment studies on depression show both physical and psychological benefits of regular exercise.
4. The onset of benefits of an ‘anti-depressant’ effect of exercise have been observed as early as two weeks into the recovery cycle.
5. People who exercise have lower risks of other related mental health problems such as anxiety, stress, sleep disorders and pain syndromes.

The underlying explanation is pretty straightforward. When people get depressed, sad or anxious they suffer a range of symptoms to do with lowered energy levels and sleep disturbance, leaving them feeling even more exhausted and tired and

creating a vicious cycle – this explains the occurrence of the physical symptoms. The psychological symptoms are brought on by negative thinking and worry about our lack of coping as we become increasingly preoccupied by our tiredness, sadness and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness and more socially withdrawn and isolated.

An intense exercise regime reverses the effects of the distressing physical and psychological symptoms. Intense exercise improves physical wellbeing through the release of endorphins, cardiovascular and muscular effects that both improve fitness and disrupt the cycle of fatigue-inactivity-loss of fitness, as well as improving sleep quality. Intense exercise also improves psychological wellbeing through distraction from negative thoughts and worry, positive social feedback and interactions, improved self-esteem and body image.

**AN IMPORTANT HEALTH WARNING:** It should also be noted that for people who have injuries or health conditions limiting their ability to exercise, even three 10 minute walks or gentle exercise sessions daily can make a big difference. One of my favourite strategies is to get a pedometer and make sure I do 10,000 steps each day, which is quite achievable for most people through a couple of planned walks and normal daily activities.

### **Your Choice: Train Insane or Remain The Same!**

So now you know more about the amazing benefits of intense exercise, you have a choice to consider.

When it comes to your own exercise and mood management you get to choose between (1) exercising regularly and feeling ener-

getic and upbeat OR (2) skipping your exercise sessions because you don't feel motivated only to feel even worse.... Hmmm, seems like a 'no brainer' to me! I'm getting my running shoes on now.

## Resilience Pop Quiz: Lifestyle

When it comes to optimising a healthy body what are the three most important things to consider?

What does self-discipline and delay of gratification mean? How does this help you have a healthy body?

What do you need to do to ensure you have optimised your physical wellbeing when it comes to (1) your sleeping patterns; (2) your diet; and (3) your exercise routines?

## Pro Challenge:

Become a Pro by developing a weekly planner with key information about sleeping patterns, dietary choices and meal times – to get the right food eaten at the right times - and exercise routines to get at least your daily 10,000 steps. Then place your planner in a clearly visible place and ask your family or house mates to remind you about and tick off each day's achievements and reward yourself after each successful week!



# 7 . Purpose :

## Crossing The Two Bridges Of Life

**“The purpose of life is to contribute in some way to making things better.”**

**Robert F. Kennedy**

**“They who have a ‘why’ will endure any ‘how’”.**

**Nietzsche**

**“Happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue.”**

**Viktor E. Frankl**

### **Pro Question:**

*Is your ‘why’ (purpose in life) clear in both the big and small picture and does it enable you to live fulfilled each and every day?*

## Turning Pro: Purpose & Me

**G**rowing up in a religious family, the subject of purpose was always underlying in our conversations. The idea that your life was special and you had some unique contribution to make, sometimes referred to as a ‘calling’ or ‘mission,’ made a lot of sense to me. At the time I assumed this was some sort of religious task or goal. As I grew older and became consumed with the many challenges of life, the opportunity for some form of divine ‘Mother Theresa’ style contribution seemed to fade amidst the mounting challenges of working full-time, running a small business, paying the mortgage and helping the family.

After the birth of our first child, I remember visiting my grandfather to introduce him to his latest great grand-daughter. During this visit, I spoke to him about all the pressures I felt with work, money, raising a very young child and building a future for the family. I remember sharing my concerns about how overwhelmed I felt and how little time I was spending on my faith and spiritual mission in life. My grandfather (who has

since passed away but remains one of those powerful cheering voices in my subconscious) patiently listened to my woes and agreed the situation sounded difficult. He then reaffirmed to me how important our 'mission' in life was.

As I had come from a family of ministers of religion, I assumed he was taking a religious view of 'mission' and thus I felt my guilt rise at the neglect of my faith. But I was wrong. He spoke of our life mission not necessarily being a religious goal, but rather a goal of everyday living - that your work, family and friends were your mission, as was to be the best you can be, to rise up to the challenges and overcome your own weaknesses and to practice what you preach in everyday living.

As he spoke, I began to see my work and family pressures from a different perspective. I began to believe that my work and focus on providing for my family were an important 'mission' and could be part of my life calling and path and were not unworthy compared to those focused on religious goals. This new sense of connection between my work and family responsibilities and my mission, or 'Big Picture' of life gave me a renewed focus and vision for the future which I immediately began to pour all my energy into.

But, as I look back now, the refocusing of my Big Picture mission was only part of my grandfather's message to me about purpose in life. His words also spoke of the importance of mission and purpose in the small picture of everyday life - something I did not understand fully and struggled with over subsequent years. Looking back, I think this struggle placed some strain on my relationship and family.

Having a clear and motivating Big Picture mission in life is vitally important but not enough to be truly happy. Sadly, as I became consumed by the Big Picture goals I was striving for, I was not always present and mindful of the magic moments of everyday life which I believe put a strain on my close relationships. Instead of enjoying the moments together, I was forever setting bigger and bigger goals and dreams to aspire too. I believe this preoccupation with the Big Picture at the expense of the small picture was a critical factor in the breakdown of my relationship and it is certainly something I would do differently next time.

Turning Pro in the small picture of purpose in life was a rocky road for me. While I could be deeply focused on minute details and deeply present in fun and games with the kids or plunge into deep discussions about all sorts of topics, I struggled with the light social chatter and banter and felt unsatisfied with simple passive interactions that were so important for family and friends, much to my own detriment. The constant need to dive deeply into whatever I was doing was no doubt a difficult experience for others who preferred a much lighter conversation.

It was quite a journey for me to learn how to feel satisfied and content with the small picture of life and balance my expectations of conversations and interactions with others. But with persistence and feedback, I eventually learned the hard way how to live happily with both big and small picture purpose in life.

In this chapter I will share with you the life lessons of (1) understanding the importance of both 'Big Picture' and 'Small Picture'



purposes in life and the consequences of neglecting one or both these factors; (2) a quick tour through the essential info you need to know to understand purpose in life; and (3) the ‘how to’ of purpose in life – things you need to do to find fulfilment in both the big and small picture of life.

## **A Tale of Two Bridge Crossings**

Did you know that to live a happy and fulfilled life there are two bridges you must cross?

One bridge sits over the mighty rivers and deltas that mark the major milestones of your life. The other bridge sits over the many small streams, creeks and marshes that you must cross every day.

Both these bridges are beautiful old stone arch bridges that are built up over time, stone by stone. The arch of the bridge is held together by the pressure of the two sides coming together and the weight of the road surface and traffic that passes above the arch. In psychology, the pressure that holds the stone arch bridge together is interpreted as the clarity of our values and goals put into action with the challenges of life we face. But more about that later...

### **The Perils of Only One Bridge Crossing...**

**D**id you know that some people think there is only one bridge to cross in life – the bridge over the small streams of life? People who only focus on crossing the bridge over the small

streams become preoccupied with being ‘good’ and ‘nice’ and maintaining harmonious relationships above all else, with a confidence and belief that this is all that really matters in life. They do not reflect on the bigger picture of life nor upon their life goals and legacy but instead believe these will take care of themselves through some form of ‘karma’ or ‘divine providence’.



Their experience of happiness may seem superficially constant but beneath the surface can be punctuated by moments of doubt, confusion and crisis as their “goodness” drifts somewhat aimlessly over time. They may be unduly influenced by peers in their big life decisions or simply mimic the choices of those around them to preserve the status quo – often to their own detriment.

For other people, the only bridge to cross is that over the big rivers and deltas which we do not confront very often. Some people live completely obsessed with the big picture and agonise and brood on the meaning of their lives and worry about the future. They are unable to live in the ‘present moment’ and do not value the ‘small talk’ and ‘day-to-day’ interactions with others – which provide the foundations and stability for great relationships.



In some cases, people unable to live in the present can become obsessed with the future. They

may be overwhelmed with existential questions. They either retreat further from friends and family into solitude and the reclusive shadows of their future vision or abandon the quest entirely and instead fill the void with material possessions, addictions and (these days) social media distractions.

## **The Lost Opportunity For Happiness & Fulfilment**

To focus only on crossing one bridge, be it the bridge over the stream or that over the big rivers will not lead to enduring happiness and fulfilment.

To focus on crossing the streams will mean you do not prepare adequately for the crossing of the big rivers. You need preparation, planning and clear vision to see the correct path to take. The lack of focus on the big rivers means that you do not know which path to take in the 'small picture' and which obstacles you must avoid or overcome along the way. Moreover, the lack of 'big picture' focus means you cannot see the opportunities that are wolves dressed in sheep's clothing and lead to dead ends and disillusionment.

To focus on crossing the big rivers will lead you to live in a state of brooding and worry, so much so that you are unable to cross the bridge of the daily streams to be fully present and live in the moment. When you are distracted and unable to live in the moment, you may place unforeseen strain on your loved ones who may feel distant and uncomfortable around you.

## **The Need To Cross Both Bridges in Life**

So how do we cross both bridges that need to be crossed in order to live a happy and fulfilled life? How do we make sure

we have goals, a vision and values to guide the big decisions in life AS WELL AS the focus and mindfulness to be completely present and purposeful in our daily interactions with others?

The answer lies in increasing our understanding of purpose in life – both in (1) what we know, and MORE IMPORTANTLY, in (2) what we do....

## **Purpose In Life 101: What You Need to Know**

To successfully Ride The Waves of Life, you need to ignite the fire of your inner Purpose so it becomes the compass that gives direction to your life. Like the Fire burns hot, so does your passion and Purpose for life. Having a clear sense of purpose and personal mission allows you to know the true direction for your life, enabling you to make every day a masterpiece and leave a positive legacy.

When it comes to our fourth Element of Wellbeing, Purpose, having a clear sense of mission and purpose regarding our legacy in life combined with meaningful life goals and the ability to engage in small acts of kindness each day are the key ingredients to living a successful life.

Sometimes we may encounter challenges, obstacles and difficulties, which are in their own right forms of positive pressure or mini-adventures. We may need to work hard to meet such challenges and overcome such obstacles and difficulties and/or reframe and refocus our life goals towards more achievable ob-

jectives, in order to prevent any unnecessary stress and maximise the sense of meaning and happiness in our lives.

The search for Happiness by itself is elusive. The more we strive for it, the more it seems to escape us. This is because happiness is not an end in itself but rather a by-product of doing something meaningful and worthwhile.

Let's take some time to understand the concept of Purpose in Life more fully.

## **Purpose In Life: What You Need to Know**

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish doctor imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. After watching his friends and family die, he came to realise that happiness and despair have very little to do with either wealth and power, or poverty and failure.

Many of us live with a sense of failing in our daily circumstances. We feel that we have not achieved all that we are capable of achieving. However, while our lives may not be all that we could hope for, we can still choose to find meaning and fulfilment in



our current situation. As the following diagram shows, happiness and sadness exist on a different plane to wealth and power, poverty and failure.

In analysing meaning, purpose and personal success, we've often heard about very suc-

cessful, powerful, rich and famous people getting to the top of their field or the pinnacle of their career only to feel a sense of despair and sadness. Similarly, we meet or hear about others who appear to be less wealthy, powerful or famous, but who are totally fulfilled and happy with life. If we were to ask these different people why they feel either despair or happiness in their lives, the answer would relate to how meaningful they consider their lives to be.

Famous or powerful people often say that initially life was very meaningful as they climbed the corporate or social ladder and began to amass wealth and success. Unfortunately, as success came, and came more easily, a sense of hollowness crept in. There was not as much pressure or challenge anymore, and cracks began to appear in the structure of their lives. They began to feel despair and hopelessness, and that life had become meaningless. Many of these people also became concerned about the harm they did to others on their climb to the top.

In contrast, many hardworking executives, supervisors, staff or community-minded services, often say that seeing other people grow and develop, or even just helping them have a better day, has been more personally satisfying than many other things they have done.

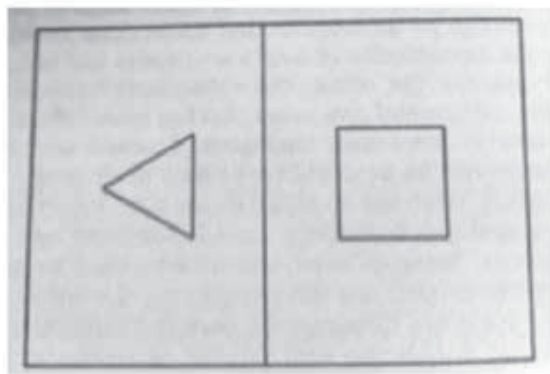
According to several research studies, it is this sense of meaning and purpose – rather than wealth, fame, power or even poverty and failure – that relates to happiness and a feeling of personal success in life. Research has shown that having purpose and meaning in life increases overall wellbeing and life satisfaction, improves mental and physical health, enhances resilience and self-esteem,



and decreases the chances of depression. Paradoxically, people who pursue “happiness” for its own sake are less likely to attain it, and are also at higher risk of depression than those who pursue meaning and purpose in life.

## Purpose and Meaning for the Sceptics

When it comes to understanding the importance of purpose,



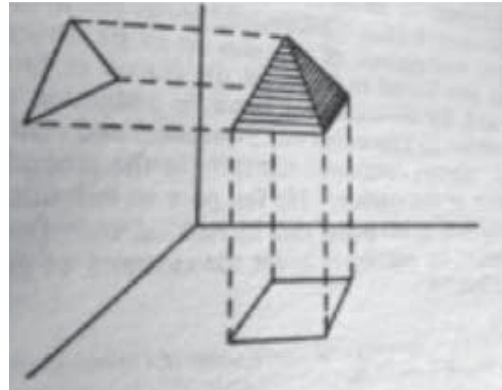
many people rightly connect this with their deeper values and spiritual beliefs. However, when approaching the topic of deeper values and spiritual beliefs, the sceptics can quickly turn into critics and become hostile towards the notion that

there is more to life than what we can see, hear and touch. When faced with such scepticism we need to remember that life exists in multiple dimensions and there is much more to our lives than that which we can necessarily comprehend at any given time. I really like Viktor Frankl’s use of the pyramid shadow to prove this point. Depending on what angle you look at the pyramid’s shadow, you will see either a square or a triangle.

It would be easy to assume that only one of these shadows is correct and the other must therefore be wrong – just like the incorrect assumptions people may make when someone holds a different perspective on life than their own. However, when you are able to look at the entire picture of the pyramid in three dimensions you can see how two different images can both be true at the same time. So it is with many of the more complex

or hidden elements of our lives that relate to our deeper purpose and meaning.

Our goal here is to simply remind ourselves and our sceptic friends that there can be more to life than we may initially realise and to stay open-minded and respectful of different people's beliefs until such time as we have a fuller picture of their lives.



## **Purpose, Meaning and Pressure**

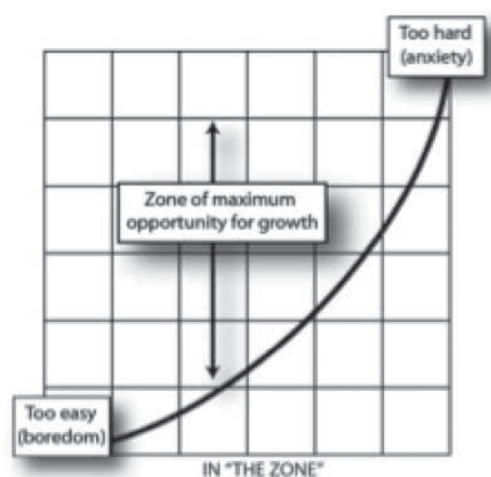
The other really important concept to help us understand meaning and purpose from Viktor Frankl's work is the concept of 'pressure'. One of the most important ingredients when it comes to having a sense of meaning and purpose is the notion of having positive challenges and pressures in life.

We need to have some positive pressure in our lives to maintain balance, just as the stone arch bridge requires a lot of weight and pressure in the middle to make the structure solid and stable. When the weight comes off the stone arch bridge, cracks appear and the arch collapses, just like our lives can fall into disarray when we have no pressure or challenges to face.

## **Balance: Having the Right Amount of Pressure**

The key to leading a meaningful and therefore happier life is about ensuring we have the right balance when it comes to positive challenges and pressures in our lives.





Any task that is not challenging enough has the potential to become boring. In the same way, tasks too difficult lead to anxiety and frustration. The diagram below shows the 'zone' at which maximum happiness and meaning can be derived from any activity.

Every day can be an opportunity for either growth and personal success or boredom, frustration, anxiety and despair. We can improve each day by improving the way we go about our daily activities. We can increase the potential for enjoyable and meaningful experiences in everyday things. This means that in all you do, you need to aim to make tasks neither too hard nor too easy, and always to increase the range of your experience.

The key is to continually change and adapt your own Mindsets and Coping Skills to enable you to experience each day's Regular Waves in a way that promotes your happiness, meaning and personal success. Maximise challenge and opportunity, minimise the redundant and excessive demand.

Actively choose enjoyable activities and control your Mindset to maximise your potential when faced with more difficult or monotonous tasks. For example, a bored and frustrated production worker may not want to do his job any more. As a result he may begin to look for other work and pursue other training (actively choosing other activities). He also may use his current job to set small personal goals to increase his production, or

refine and perfect his own performance and skill by competing against himself every day to aim for better results (looking for meaning and opportunity within tasks). As you can see there is always an opportunity – even in the boring and mundane tasks of life, to increase your sense of meaning and purpose.

## **Purpose 101: In Summary**

Just a quick recap here as we end the first part of our discussion on Purpose in Life:

Purpose is the 4th Element of Wellbeing and is likened to the Element of Fire in Nature as Purpose creates the ‘heat’, drive and passion for life essential for happiness and fulfilment.

Purpose comes from a deeper understanding of our own motivations and deeper life goals and legacy we wish to leave behind us. Purpose and its opposite, despair, sit on different planes to success and failure as can be seen in the higher rates of depression among wealthy and affluent people, in contrast to the optimistic and continued good humour of many people in less affluent societies.

Purpose, whilst being an abstract concept often linked to spiritual and religious beliefs, is still a very real and important issue. Sceptics need to remember life is more than you can simply see or appreciate in one moment as illustrated in the pyramid and the shadow.

Finally, Purpose is linked to having a lot of positive challenges and life pressures which need to be balanced so that they do not become too demanding and stressful nor too easy and boring.

In the next section, we examine “Purpose in Life 102: What You Need to Do” – and will take a deep dive into three practical exercises you can do to enhance your sense of purpose.

## **Purpose in Life 102: What You Need to Do**

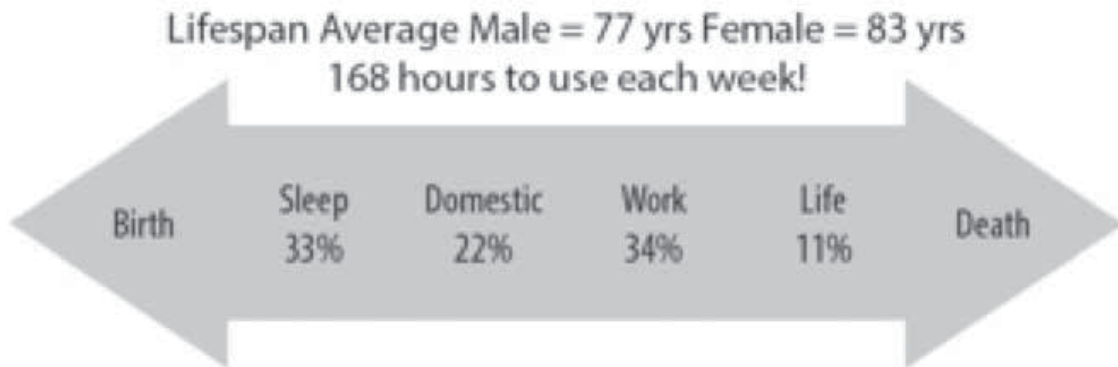
When it comes to taking practical steps to improve our sense of Purpose in Life, there are three key aspects to consider: (1) developing a clear sense of mission and purpose regarding our legacy in life combined with (2) setting meaningful life goals and (3) the ability to engage in small acts of kindness each day.

### **Get Motivated Before Time Runs Out**

As we get ready to start some exercises to enhance our own sense of purpose in life, it is good to stop and consider just how little time we have in our lives to make a difference and therefore how important each and every moment is...

How many of us say, “I don’t have any time!” And yet the truth is that we have no more or less time than anyone else on the planet.

Every one of us has 168 hours every week. Whilst this may seem to be a lot of time, when we take out sleep – which takes up 33% of our lives, Domestic duties – which consumes 22% of our time, the 34% of the week that we spend at Work... we only have 11% of our lives or 18.5 hours per week to focus on the interests and activities of family, friends, hobbies, travel and community – not much time at all!



When we understand this, using our time wisely becomes even more important.

The trouble is deciding what we are going to do with those hours. When you look back on your life, you want to be sure you will be happy with how you spent your time – the legacy that you have left behind you.

## **Your Purpose In Life: 3 Key Strategies**

### **1. Your Legacy and Personal Mission**

Your legacy is about what you will leave behind. When we move on from this earth, or even leave a group of friends, move away or start a new job, we leave a legacy. This is about how people remember us, and the positive or negative impact we had. Imagine you are writing your own epitaph. In one sentence, how would you like to be remembered at the end of your life?

Then imagine you are writing your own eulogy. Under the headings of Life, Love, Family, Work and Play, write how you would like your life to be described. What would you like to have achieved by then?



**Example from Dr Pete** - I have found this exercise to be a great one to help bring clarity to challenging situations and competing priorities (albeit a very confronting one).

I thought I'd share with you my responses below:

*In Life – He helped people grow and ‘go for it’ to be all they could be!*

*In Love – He loved his partner passionately and completely!*

*In Family – He was generous, supportive and available!*

*At Work – He was inspiring and challenged people to be their best!*

*At Play – He loved the outdoors and went on many great adventures!*

NOTE: It is important to note that this is what I aspire to be remembered for but not necessarily what I will achieve with everyone around me. Don't let your current status nor the opinions of others distract you from setting a future vision and legacy to aspire to!

## **2. Purpose and Challenging Life Goals**

Look at the epitaph and eulogy you have written for yourself. For these to become true, what changes might you need to make to the way you are living your life now? How can you add extra Purpose to your life in those areas now, so that this becomes true?

Setting goals and reviewing them regularly is a way to monitor whether we are truly living according to our values and our mission in life.

What challenging life goals have you set for yourself recently? Do you have challenging life goals across different areas of your life, such as work, play, relationships and family & friends? Are your goals clear and specific, enabling some challenge without overwhelming you?

**Practical Exercise.** *Take out some paper and draw a timeline across the middle, marking each year for the next 5–10 years at regular intervals. Now fill in the timeline with the goals you have for each area of your life (Work, Play, Family & Friends, Relationships) and the year/s in which you would like to achieve them. Once you have done this, store it away and every 6–12 months review your progress toward achieving your life goals. Modify the plan as things change and new goals emerge.*

### **3. Purpose and Small Acts of Kindness**

“Flow” studies examining when people are happiest during the course of any 24 hour period show that people experience optimum day-to-day happiness when they’re busy and engaged in meaningful activity. For many people, this involves helping others or making a positive difference at work or in their community. The key to increasing your happiness is to examine what is happening in your life and discover the meaning within it.

What is most important to you? What can you give to help others? Are you doing the things that are important and mean-

ingful for you in your life? If not, how can you begin to do them? Revisit your personal mission and legacy and think about your day-to-day routine... What small acts of kindness can you do each day at work, home or in the community, consistent with your personal mission?

Are you already doing things to improve other people's quality of life? Do you stop and give yourself credit for such noble and honourable work? The good things people do are a permanent testimony to them which can never be erased or undone by time. Do you think that way about the good things you do? In continuing your journey, make sure you take the time to discover the things that are meaningful for you. Also, make sure you continually move in a direction that lets you grow in meaning and in personal success.

## **Purpose 102: Summary**

Just a quick recap here as we end the final part of our discussion on Purpose in Life:

There are 3 key strategies to consider: (1) developing a clear sense of mission and purpose regarding our legacy in life combined with (2) setting meaningful life goals and (3) the ability to engage in small acts of kindness each day.

It is good to stop and consider just how little time we really have in our lives to make a difference and therefore how important each and every moment is in order to maximise our sense of purpose and happiness in life.



Your legacy is about what you will leave behind. This is about how people remember us, and the positive or negative impact we had. Use the Eulogy exercise to set a Legacy you can aspire to!

Setting goals and reviewing them regularly is a way to monitor whether we are truly living according to our values and mission in life.

To find Purpose in Life in your day-to-day routine take some time out to identify what Small Acts of Kindness you can do each day at work, home or in the community that are consistent with your personal mission and legacy.

## **Resilience Pop Quiz: Purpose**

What are the two bridge crossings of life? How do they differ from each other and what happens if you only cross one?

What does purpose in life mean? Why is purpose in life important? What do you need to know about purpose in the big and small picture of life?

What do you need to do to ensure you have a clear sense of purpose in the big picture of life? What do you need to do to ensure you have a clear sense of purpose in the small picture of life?



## **Pro Challenge:**

Become a Pro by preparing a storyboard or picture map of what your big picture and small picture purpose is and sharing it with loved ones as well as placing it somewhere you can look at it every day and hold yourself accountable to living a fulfilled and happy life!

# Part 3

## **Bonus Life Lesson** **Venturus Est Optimus:** **The Best is Yet To Come!**

### **Pro Question:**

*Do you really believe 'the best is yet to come' in your life and do you have a life strategy with clear steps you can take each day to 'live your dreams'?*



# Destiny's Child & The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

*'Failing to plan is planning to fail'*

**- Benjamin Franklin**

*'Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars'*

**- Norman Vincent Peale**

*'Whether you think you can, or you think you can't - you're right'*

**- Henry Ford**

**W**hen someone succeeds in life people around them may say *'it was their destiny'* as if to suggest their success was inevitable and in turn deny the enormous hard work, detailed planning, risk taking, setbacks and failures that all successful people must endure along the way.

Why do people say such things? Is it because they would prefer to believe in 'luck' or 'fate' instead of understanding the enormous hard work and persistence needed for success? Is it easier to minimise the effort required and overemphasise the role of luck - and in doing so avoid a possible confrontation with their own limiting attitudes and behaviours?

You know, one of the most profoundly difficult obstacles many people face in recovery or life strategy is their refusal to set clear goals and plan when it comes to living their dreams. It never ceases to amaze me how many people won't even discuss their hopes and dreams, much less make any concrete plans to achieve them. Yet, they will regularly criticise and blame other people, circumstances and the universe for why they have not got what

they want. And, they will assign the factors ‘luck’, ‘fate’, or ‘destiny’, as opposed to hard work and persistence as an explanation for their success. Hmmm...

## Destiny’s Child

If Destiny represents a vision of the ideal future than Destiny’s Child is the subsequent reality formed as the countless hours of planning, practice, trial and error, failure and setbacks gradually give way to refinement of strategy and an increasing pattern of success. That being the case, the sooner you ‘define’ what success in various areas of your life looks like, the clearer your vision and subsequent goals will be. With such clarity about the direction of your life, you inevitably will think and act in ways that bring you closer to achieving these goals and fulfilling this vision thus creating a positive self-fulfilling prophecy.

## Destiny & The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

A self-fulfilling prophecy is a belief that comes true because we are acting as if it is already true. This concept is also referred to as the Pygmalion Effect – based on the Ancient Greek narrative by Ovid in which, Pygmalion, a Cypriot sculptor, carved a statue of a woman who he then fell in love with – and through the intensity of his devotion and desire she became a real woman whom he subsequently married. The Self-Fulfilling prophecy has also been referred to as ‘The Law of Attraction’ by mystical New Age authors – but there is nothing particularly mystical or magical about it.



When we have a vision or expectation that we will see a particular outcome, we align our subsequent actions and behaviour, which then shapes the way others see us. In turn, others provide the feedback we've subliminally set ourselves up to get, which serves to reinforce the original vision and expectation.

## **Defining or Denying Success In Life**

This simple, yet powerful process has a dramatic influence on the extent to which we live our lives successfully.

For example, in a job interview, if I believe I am hardworking, talented and good with people and would visualise myself already working for the company, then I'm likely to be enthusiastic and engaging 'as if' I was already hired, and less apt to take any criticism personally. As a result, people will likely respond to me favourably and I am more likely to be successful in being hired by the company (I use this strategy when coaching executives for job interviews).

On the other hand, I could go to the same interview believing I am a good worker but the world is biased against me. I don't research too much so as not to get my hopes up too high. Instead I visualise myself being told I am unsuccessful and telling myself 'it doesn't matter anyway'. I will probably enter the interview feeling awkward, anxious, and stand-offish. In turn, people are likely to be guarded towards me and view me with less enthusiasm - which only reinforces my belief that the world is biased against me.

In each case Destiny's Child is born - a child of opportunity and prosperity OR a child of anxiety, uncertainty and doubt.

## Destiny's Child & You

When it comes to Defining or Denying Success in Life, which side of the fence do you sit on? Do you have a clear vision for your ideal future? Are you regularly monitoring your thinking patterns and mindsets to make sure you stay positive and hopeful or do you get caught in a cycle of negativity? Are you proactively setting goals for improvement and continually learning new things linked to your vision of the future?

Remember that *failing to plan is planning to fail*. So take some time out to reconnect or further develop the vision for your ideal life and set goals necessary to fulfill this vision. Also don't let yourself be disheartened by setbacks because "*if you shoot for the moon and miss – you will still land among the stars!*"

Now we have discovered the fundamental truth and purpose of the saying "the best is yet to come" and the powerful benefits of an optimistic self-fulfilling prophecy, let us look deeper into optimism and avoid the pitfalls of unhealthy optimism.

## Optimism - A Hazard Warning

*There's no difference between a pessimist who says, "Oh, it's hopeless, so don't bother doing anything," and an optimist who says, "Don't bother doing anything, it's going to turn out fine anyway." Either way, nothing happens.*

**Yvon Chouinard**

Being optimistic is a good thing, right? Not necessarily – it will either be an amazing blessing or be more harmful than helpful depending on what type of optimism we're talking about.

Did you know there are two types of optimism? Healthy Optimism which gives us an unshakeable belief in a positive future (the best is yet to come) and fortitude necessary to endure hardship along the way; and an Unhealthy Optimism where we create amazing dreams and fantasies with deadlines which if unmet lead to hopelessness and despair. Let me explain...

## **Unhealthy Optimism: The Stockdale Paradox**

The Stockdale Paradox is named after Admiral James Stockdale, who was a United States military officer held captive for eight years during the Vietnam War. Stockdale was repeatedly tortured by his captors, and had little hope of survival yet never lost faith during his ordeal: *“I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”*

Then comes the paradox: While Stockdale had remarkable faith and a healthy optimism in the unknowable, he noted that his fellow prisoners who failed to make it out of there alive had a different type of unhealthy optimism placing deadlines and timeframes on their desires. “They were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”



What these unhealthy optimists failed to do was confront the factual reality of their situation - that there was no ability to predict when they may be released. They preferred the ostrich approach, sticking their heads in the sand and hoping for the difficulties to go away. That self-delusion might have made it easier on them in the short-term, but when they were eventually forced to face reality, it had become too much and they couldn't handle it.

## Healthy Optimism

Stockdale approached adversity with a healthy type of optimism: *“You must retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties. And at the same time you must confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”*

The Stockdale Paradox carries an important lesson in defining healthy vs. unhealthy optimism. Never doubt that ‘the best is yet to come’ and that you can achieve your goals, no matter how lofty they may be and no matter how many critics you may have. But at the same time, always confront the factual reality of your current situation and commit to moving forwards in realistic and achievable steps.

## Healthy vs Unhealthy Optimism in Everyday Life

Understanding healthy and unhealthy optimism is not only important in major crises and survival situations but also in everyday life among challenges many people face. Let's look at two simple examples to see both healthy and unhealthy optimism at work.

The first example is someone who is unfit and overweight and dreams of running a marathon. The unhealthy optimist decides to complete this task in 12 weeks' time and registers for the race but does little or no preparation and on the day fails miserably and is severely injured, restricting their mobility and making the weight problems worse.

The healthy optimist who is unfit and overweight and has the same goal does not put a timeframe on this goal but instead confronts the brutal facts of their obesity and poor physical fitness and immediately begins to change their exercise and eating habits. By committing to change behaviour every day, they then set a series of incremental goals from fun runs, to half-marathons and eventually they successfully run their first marathon.

The second example is someone who is single and dreams of being in a loving long-term relationship. The unhealthy optimist sets some rigid criteria for their ideal life partner and a date by which they intend to be married. This then leads to an intense search for 'Mr or Mrs Right' under a tight timeframe and all sorts of people are rejected based on their job, income level, physical appearance and other superficial characteristics and as the deadline for marriage looms, they either make a sudden series of compromises starting a relationship with the next available person – getting married quickly only to divorce after a brief unhappy relationship OR become disillusioned as their deadline passes and resign themselves to a life without a partner.

The healthy single optimist starts with the same goal but instead of setting a deadline and ideal partner list, first con-

fronts the brutal facts of the situation about both the number and type of single people available in their networks as well as their own readiness for a relationship. Through this self-assessment they begin a process of personal development to improve their own attractiveness and readiness as well as begin testing their ideas about the ideal partner by going on a number of dates. As they build their social network and complete their own personal development, they become increasingly confident about the type of partner they are most compatible with and – you guessed it – find themselves in a happy relationship which turns into a lasting marriage.

## **Healthy Optimism and You**

Now that you believe “the best is yet to come” and are taking an optimistic approach to your future – let’s examine how your optimism either helps or harms you in achieving your goals and living your dreams. Do you set unrealistic time-frames and deadlines around your goals without seriously facing your current circumstances? Do you simply ‘hope for a miracle’ or do you set the same (or even bigger) goals yet at the same time confront the brutal facts of your present situation and resolve to take action immediately based on what you can realistically do to move forwards? The answer to this question will determine whether you have healthy or unhealthy optimism in your life!

# Life Strategy - Taking Your First Steps

*“We all dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds, wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous, for they may act on their dreams with open eyes, to make them possible.”*

**TE Lawrence**

Of all the important skills needed to Ride the Waves of Life, Life Strategy would be not only one of the most important but also the most fun!

I have always been a big fan of Life Strategy. It has been a lifelong companion of mine. I have regularly written vision statements for my life imagining various successes – mimicking those I admired since my late teens – long before I properly understood the psychology and the framework of Life Strategy. More recently the Life Strategy framework was vital in guiding my way through the challenging times of midlife and provided the “map” needed to get my life back on track – living my dreams and making a difference!

But before I could take the first steps to create my “map” for the future I had to get ready – do some preparation and get myself into a position where I could take the first step. This preparation was about grasping the implications and power of Life Strategy and consciously choosing to begin to pursue my life dreams.

Once I made this decision, the rest of the process, despite the incredible hard work needed, began to flow.

Life Strategy is about turning dreams into reality and about living fully, passionately and fearlessly. Life Strategy can at times be very confronting – for two very different reasons.

**Reason 1.** First, the process of actually making plans to live out your dreams will force you to become fully responsible for your own life. You will need to accept, and find as you go that in fact you do accept, the size of the effort involved and the numerous false starts and failures you may encounter along the path to success. By the size of the effort I mean the intensity, duration, and range of areas of effort.

Dealing with failures and setbacks, not to mention the extreme effort at times to move from idea to action, and the regular and at times brutal trips outside your own comfort zone, are just too much for many people. They opt for a good life instead of a great life... or worse, become zealots against Life Strategy, entrenched in blaming others for their setbacks and inability to adapt and persevere. Author Jim Collins sums up well this issue when he says that “*Good is the enemy of great.*”

**Reason 2.** The second confronting aspect of Life Strategy occurs, strangely enough, after the first few major goals have been achieved and dreams indeed have become reality. The actual experience of living your dreams must by necessity make the dream die so it can be born in reality. The reality of living your dreams will have unexpected blessings and curses. The blessings are the obvious joys and happy moments of experiencing what you had so long imagined. The curses are the hassles,

unforeseen additional problems and the new challenges that such experiences bring you.

In psychology “the death of a dream” is a very important issue to consider when seemingly wealthy, famous or successful people suffer unexpected depression. The classic case study is about a deaf mother who is given an operation to be able to hear. Within weeks of being able to hear her children’s voices for the first time, she becomes clinically depressed as her imagined sound was so much better than the subsequent reality. The death of a dream is also seen in mountaineering where it is widely known that reaching the summit is a bittersweet experience for many. The greatest chance of an accident is always on the way down rather than on the way up.

People who do not understand the core Life Strategy assumptions of personal responsibility and continuous learning and development invariably give up despite their initial success. They abandon the notion of a great life, retreating for the easier and less confronting option of merely a good life. They thus avoid both the joys and the challenges of future success.

### **After Saying Yes:**

Living a life with clear direction and purpose as well as exciting dreams and goals is achievable for anyone willing to put in the time and effort to develop a Life Strategy. Life Strategy is about living our lives “on purpose” – being clear on what really matters in the end. Life strategy is the process of:

1. Understanding our legacy
2. Mapping out our life dreams

3. Setting goals to live our dreams
4. Action planning—the steps to achieve our goals
5. Building support networks to achieve these goals and literally ‘live the dream’.

## The Endless Summer Life Strategy



When I think about my ideal life strategy I am drawn to the idea of living an Endless Summer. The Endless Summer is a famous 1966 surf movie. Two surfers follow the summer season around the world, in search of great waves and new experiences and cultures. Its title comes from the idea that if you had enough time and money

it would be possible to follow the summer around the world, making it endless.

The Endless Summer is the ultimate dream for many surfers. For non-surfers, the Endless Summer reflects the idea of being able to pursue your dreams and goals without being overcome by barriers and limitations.

Let's look at the Life Strategy of the endless summer surfer who follows the waves around the world for inspiration about what our own Endless Summer might look like:



## **1. Your Legacy in Life - A Clear Understanding of Your Purpose & Mission in Life**

For the Endless Summer Surfer, this may be about nature, travel, and sharing new experiences with friends and family.

What's your mission in life? What Legacy do you want to leave?

## **2. Life Dreams - Have a Vision for Your Ideal Life**

For the Endless Summer Surfer, dreams may be the perfect waves in the perfect locations with the perfect group of family or friends.

What are your dreams in life?

## **3. Goal Setting - Goals are the Concrete and Specific Objectives That Form Part of Our Dreams**

For the Endless Summer Surfer, goals may be to visit specific countries and surf at specific beaches.

What goals have you set for yourself to be able to live your dreams?

## **4. Action Plans - The Important Detailed Steps to Make it Happen**

For the Endless Summer Surfer, there is raising money, learning new languages, organising complex travel plans to follow the



summer season, having phones or internet to stay in touch with loved ones, health checks and physical fitness.

What detailed steps do you need to plan to achieve your life goals?

## **5. Support Networks & Setbacks - Develop Your Support Networks and Prepare for Setbacks**

Support Networks for the Endless Summer Surfer can include Mentors to help stay focused on goals, Friends who can help with specific issues be that surfing skills or native customs, and Professionals who can help to manage finances, travel plans and health.

For the Endless Summer Surfer, setbacks may include delays and cancellations in travel plans, poor weather and waves, ill health, running out of money or other unforeseen circumstances.

What support do you need to have in place to live your dreams and what setbacks do you need to plan for? What backup plans do you have in place?

## **Life Strategy: Taking Your Next Steps**

The Endless Summer Life Strategy is available to us all! What is the next step you need to take? Do you need to stop and re-connect with the Legacy you hope to leave? Are your Dreams and Goals clear? Is it time to roll up your sleeves and examine the effort and detail needed to action a plan and achieve your

goals? Do you need to overcome some setbacks and build a more effective network of support?

A friend of mine recently reminded me that any goal worth achieving in life usually requires tremendous effort, focus, self-discipline and perseverance. So don't give up on your Life Strategy and stay focused on 'Living the Dream'!

## **Resilience Pop Quiz: The Best Is Yet To Come**

1. What does the saying 'The Best Is Yet To Come' mean and how is it commonly misunderstood preventing personal growth?
2. What is a self-fulfilling prophecy? How does this actually help you live your dreams? What is the difference between healthy and unhealthy optimism?
3. Why do people settle for a 'good' life instead of a 'great' life? What steps do you need to take to develop an effective life strategy?

## **Pro Challenge:**

Become a Pro by developing your own comprehensive life strategy with all the details and planning needed to live your dreams and leave a positive legacy! Check out the free one page planner and sample plan at [TheStressSurfer.com](http://TheStressSurfer.com).



# **TOOLKIT: MY WELLBEING PLAN & STRESS RISK SURVEY**

# Dr Pete's Wellbeing Plan

**The Stress Surfer**  
**WELLBEING MASTER PLAN**

Name: PETE Date: 2/1/8  
 Current Worry: FRUSTRATED WITH CO-WORKERS  Trauma  Worry  Worry Wave  
 Stress Symptoms / Worry Risk: TENSE, ANGRY & WITHDRAWN

Stress Test Risk Score  
 My score: 279  
 Low Risk  Moderate Risk  High Risk

**EMOTIONS - ACTION PLAN**

Area	Unhealthy	Healthy	Relevant to Worry?
Coping Strategies	Drinking, addictions, avoidance or procrastination	Healthy distractions, social support, focusing on positives	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Problem Solving	Impulsive action, not evaluating all possible options & solutions	Considering all the options and carefully applying solutions	<input type="checkbox"/>
Relaxation & Mindfulness	Rushing, distractions, not fully relaxing or being present	Scheduling time, preventing distractions, full relaxation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

*Preventing STOP AVOIDING OFFICE MEETINGS & GET A WIPPOUT. COACH & DEVELOP STRATEGIES TO SWITCH OFF A WIPPOUT. RATHER THAN WAITING TO SLOUSE*

**MINDSETS - ACTION PLAN**

Area	Unhealthy	Healthy	Relevant to Worry?
Worry / Acceptance	Worrying about possible outcomes to self/ others	Focusing present - making the most of each day	<input type="checkbox"/>
Demand / Encourage	Focusing people to do what you want	Suggesting people do what you want	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Blame / Responsibility	Blaming others for your own reactions	Taking responsibility for your own reactions	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

*Preventing BE RESPONSIBLE FOR MY OWN ANGER & STOP A WIPPOUT. BLAMING & ENCOURAGE FIRST BUT THEN FOLLOW THROUGH WITH CONSEQUENCES.*

**PURPOSE - ACTION PLAN**

Area	Unhealthy	Healthy	Relevant to Worry?
Living My Values/Legacy	Uncertain values and incompatible circumstances	Clarity of values and aligned work life roles	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Challenging Life Goals	Lack of clarity, unrealistic life goals - too easy/ too hard	Clear life goals and realistic approach to achievement	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Small Acts of Kindness	Unrealistic expectations placing pressure on self/others	Flexible related approach to offer acts of kindness	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

*ACCEPT-EMING TRUE TO VALUES MEANS PREVENTING MAKING CHANGES TO WORK ROLE EVEN A WIPPOUT. WITH LOSS OF \$\$. BE MORE FULLY FILLED AT WORK!*

**LIFESTYLE - ACTION PLAN**

Area	Unhealthy	Healthy	Relevant to Worry?
Sleep	Too little sleep, lack of routine, caffeine, use of alcohol/ poor diet	Healthy habits & routine, enough hours & good diet	<input type="checkbox"/>
Diet	Unhealthy processed - too many fats & sugars - not enough fruit & veg	Healthy processed - more fruit & veg & less fats and sugars	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Exercise	None - all or nothing approach - no routine, risk of injury & illness	Regular activity, gradual build up & goals	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Interests	Narrow interests with limited people contact	Broad interests with variety of people contact	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

*Preventing FIX FOOD DIET, JUNK FOOD SKIPPING MEALS & EXERCISE 30 MIN EVERY DAY RATHER THAN ONE BIG SESSION PER WEEK - INCREASE SOCIAL INTERACTIONS & EXERCISE*

# Blank Wellbeing Plan



**WELLBEING MASTER PLAN**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Wave: \_\_\_\_\_  Calm  Big Wave  Big Wave

Stress Symptoms/Worried Risks: \_\_\_\_\_

Stress Test Risk Score: \_\_\_\_\_  
My score: \_\_\_\_\_

Low Risk
 Moderate Risk
 High Risk

MINDSETS - ACTION PLAN			Relevant to Wave?
Area	Unhealthy	Healthy	
Worry / Acceptance	Worrying about possible resistance to self/ others	Being present - making the most of each day	<input type="checkbox"/>
Demand / Encourage	Forcing people to do what you want	Supporting people do what you want	<input type="checkbox"/>
Blame / Responsibility	Blaming others for your own reactions	Taking responsibility for your own reactions	<input type="checkbox"/>
Preventing a Wipeout:			

EMOTIONS - ACTION PLAN			Relevant to Wave?
Area	Unhealthy	Healthy	
Coping Strategies	Denial, addictions, avoidance or obsession	Healthy distractions, social support, focusing on positives	<input type="checkbox"/>
Problem Solving	Impulsive action, not evaluating all possible options & solutions	Considering all the options and carefully applying solutions	<input type="checkbox"/>
Relaxation & Mindfulness	Rushing, distractions, not fully relaxing or being present	Scheduling time, preventing distraction, full relaxation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Preventing a Wipeout:			

LIFESTYLE - ACTION PLAN			Relevant to Wave?
Area	Unhealthy	Healthy	
Sleep	Too little sleep, lack of routine, cat naps, use of alcohol/ poor diet	Healthy pattern & routine, enough hours & good diet	<input type="checkbox"/>
Diet	Unhealthy pyramid - too many fats & sugars - not enough fruit & veg	Healthy pyramid - more fruit & veg & less fats and sugar	<input type="checkbox"/>
Exercise	None - all or nothing approach - no routine, risk of injury & illness	Regular activity, gradual build up & goals	<input type="checkbox"/>
Preventing a Wipeout:			

PURPOSE - ACTION PLAN			Relevant to Wave?
Area	Unhealthy	Healthy	
Living My Values/Legacy	Unrealistic values and incompatible circumstances	Clarity of values and aligned work/ life roles	<input type="checkbox"/>
Challenging Life Goals	Lack of clarity/ unrealistic life goals - too many/ too hard	Clear life goals and realistic approach to achievement	<input type="checkbox"/>
Small Acts of Kindness	Unrealistic expectations placing pressure on self/ others	Flexible related approach to offer acts of kindness	<input type="checkbox"/>
Preventing a Wipeout:			

# My Stress Risk Scale

## (Holmes & Rahe)

Instructions: Assess the risk of stress in your life. Have any of these events happened in the last 12 months? If they did, write the corresponding number in the Tally column, then total your points.

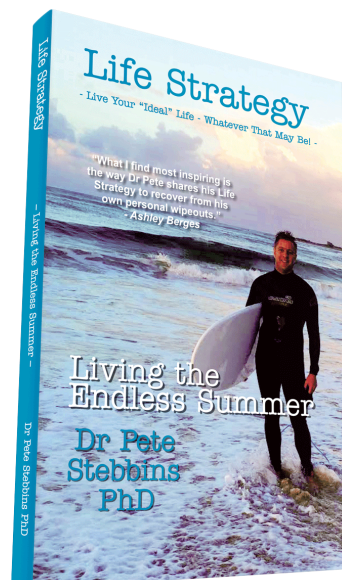
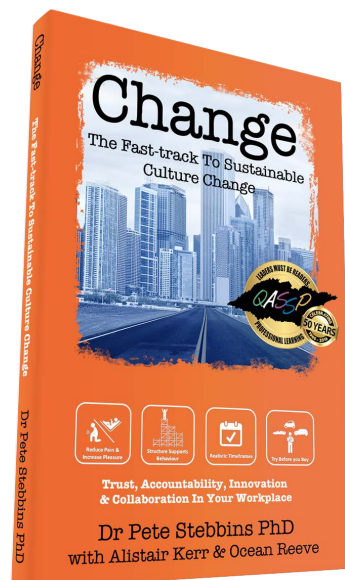
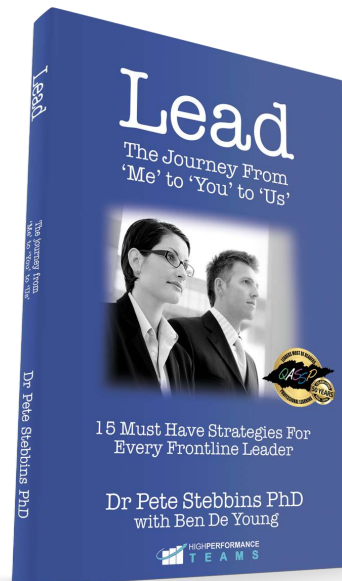
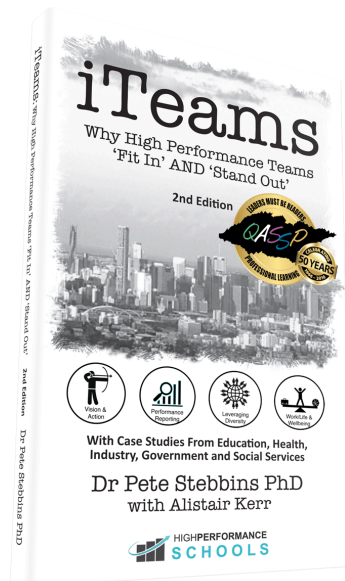
	Life Event		Value	Tally
<b>TSUNAMIS</b>	1	Death of spouse	100	
	2	Divorce	73	
	3	Marital separation	65	
	4	Serious legal problems (i.e., Court/Jail)	63	
	5	Death of close family member	63	
	6	Personal injury or illness	53	
	7	Marriage	50	
	8	Fired at work	47	
	9	Marital reconciliation	45	
	10	Retirement	45	
	11	Change in health of family member	44	
	12	Pregnancy	40	

<b>BIG WAVES</b>	13	Sex difficulties	39	
	14	Gain of new family member	39	
	15	Business readjustment	39	
	16	Change in financial state	38	
	17	Death of close friend	37	
	18	Change to a different line of work	36	
	19	Change in number of arguments with spouse	35	
	20	A large mortgage or loan	31	
<b>BIG WAVES</b>	21	Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30	
	22	Change in responsibilities at work	29	
	23	Son or daughter leaving home	29	
	24	Trouble with in-laws	29	
	25	Outstanding personal achievement	28	
	26	Spouse begins or stops work	26	
	27	Begin or end school/college	26	
	28	Change in living conditions	25	
	29	Revision of personal habits	24	
	30	Trouble with boss	23	
	31	Change in work hours or conditions	20	
	32	Change in residence	20	
	33	Change in school/college	20	





# Books by Dr Pete



[www.drpetestebbins.com](http://www.drpetestebbins.com)