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COAUTHOR OF PEAK PERFORMANCE



THE  
PRACTICE OF  
GROUNDEDNESS

A TRANSFORMATIVE PATH  
TO SUCCESS THAT FEEDS  
—NOT CRUSHES—  
YOUR SOUL



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# CONTENTS

## Part One

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### THE PRINCIPLES OF GROUNDED SUCCESS

- |          |   |            |
|----------|---|------------|
| <u>1</u> | <u>Grounded to Soar</u>   | <u>3</u>   |
| <u>2</u> | <u>Accept Where You Are to Get<br/>You Where You Want to Go</u>             | <u>25</u>  |
| <u>3</u> | <u>Be Present So You Can Own<br/>Your Attention and Energy</u>              | <u>57</u>  |
| <u>4</u> | <u>Be Patient and You'll Get<br/>There Faster</u>                           | <u>87</u>  |
| <u>5</u> | <u>Embrace Vulnerability to Develop<br/>Genuine Strength and Confidence</u> | <u>115</u> |
| <u>6</u> | <u>Build Deep Community</u>   | <u>139</u> |
| <u>7</u> | <u>Move Your Body to<br/>Ground Your Mind</u>                               | <u>171</u> |

*Part Two*

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LIVING A GROUNDED LIFE

8 From Principles to Action 203

9 Focus on the Process, Let the  
Outcomes Take Care of Themselves 229

Conclusion 239

Acknowledgments 241

Recommended Reading 245

Notes 251

Index 271



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*Part One*

THE PRINCIPLES OF  
GROUNDED SUCCESS





# 1

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## GROUNDED TO SOAR

In the summer of 2019, I began to notice a concerning trend among my coaching clients—high-ranking executives, successful entrepreneurs, physician leaders, and elite athletes. Whereas I used to spend most of my time with them discussing high-performance habits and routines, over the past few years I'd been hearing something else. “I'm dying for a break,” said my client Tim, the chief physician of adult and family medicine at a large health care system. “But even when I try to take a single weekend off, I can't seem to go more than a few hours without opening my work email. Logically I know I don't have to—and I don't really want to—but I feel compelled to check. To be honest, I become restless and insecure if I don't.”

Other clients experience angst when they don't have the proverbial “next thing” lined up. And even when they do, they worry about falling short. They perceive a deep-seated need to always be pushing toward something, lest they feel a widening gap, a sense of emptiness

in their lives. “I thought that when I finally secured funding and launched this business I’d be content,” said Samantha, an entrepreneur at a fast-growing technology company. “But I was wrong. And I’m a bit worried that if this isn’t enough, I’m not sure what will be.”

Some of my clients also report feeling scattered, if not physically then mentally—spending too much time looking back, planning ahead, second-guessing their decisions, or getting caught up in what-if scenarios. “I’ve long felt the pull of distraction and I’ve long had a tendency to overthink things,” explained Ben, the CEO of a large software company. “Yet it feels intensified now. Like hyper-distraction. It’s harder than ever to be present. I can deal with it; but I don’t like it.”

Most of these individuals—including Tim, Samantha, and Ben—have been go-getters for as long as they can remember. They are determined and goal-driven, and they care deeply about their work and personal lives. They are no strangers to adversity. The athletes have faced awful injuries. The executives who identify as minorities have faced bias and discrimination. The entrepreneurs have stared down arduous hours. Everyone has dealt with significant stress, especially the physicians, who are confronted with life-and-death situations on a regular basis. And yet, despite overcoming these obstacles, all of my clients—individuals whom I’ve come to admire greatly—continue to struggle mightily.

It’s not just my coaching clients. These themes have also been prominent in my research and writing, which has focused on performance, well-being, and general life satisfaction. Many of the people I’ve gotten to know through this work—top athletes, intellectuals, and creatives—have shared similar discontent. By conventional standards, they are highly successful. But deep down, they,



too, often sense that something is not quite right, that something is missing. Interestingly, many of these people tell me that when they aren't wound up they can actually feel quite low. It's not that they are clinically depressed; it's just that they are often bothered by a lingering sense of dissatisfaction. As one world-class athlete reflected to me, "If I stop looking ahead, I start feeling the post-competition blues, even if I won the dang competition! It'd be nice to have a little more, and deeper, peace."

Make no mistake, all of these individuals experience moments of happiness and joy, but the moments are just that: moments—more fleeting than they would like. Too often, they feel like they are being pushed and pulled around by the whims of life, constantly bouncing from one thing to the next, sacrificing autonomy and losing control. They tell themselves (and me) how much they want to turn it off—all of the news and busyness and email and social media notifications and thinking about what's next. And yet when they do, they feel unsettled and restless, fluctuating between aimlessness and angst. They know that always being on isn't the answer, but they never feel quite right when they are off. Many men describe it as a cumbersome need to be bulletproof, invincible. Many women report feeling like they must be everything always, continually falling short of impossible expectations. I've come to call this *heroic individualism*: an ongoing game of one-upmanship, against both yourself and others, paired with the limiting belief that measurable achievement is the only arbiter of success. Even if you do a good job hiding it on the outside, with heroic individualism you chronically feel like you never quite reach the finish line that is lasting fulfillment.

Heroic individualism is not isolated to my coaching, research, or

writing. Its woes are a common topic of conversation in my social circle, and those of my younger cousins and older colleagues, too. Regardless of age, race, gender, geography, or line of work, feeling like you are never enough seems to be a significant part of life. This is not exactly new. From the beginning of recorded history, humans have longed to feel like they are solid and whole, even though life is always changing. But the feeling has intensified. Heroic individualism is in the water, perpetuated by a modern culture that relentlessly says you need to be better, feel better, think more positively, have more, and “optimize” your life—only to offer shallow and superficial solutions that, at best, leave you wanting.

If some of this sounds familiar, you are not alone. The details may be different from the examples I’ve given. Perhaps you dislike your job or have faced acute hardship. Maybe you are fresh out of college or twenty years into your career. Perhaps you are approaching retirement, or even already there. But heroic individualism and its most prevalent symptoms—restlessness, feeling rushed, low-level angst, scatteredness, exhaustion, burnout, periods of emptiness, a compulsion to keep chasing the next thing, and recurrent longing—all of which are supported by mounting data that we’ll soon examine, describe what so many people report feeling these days. There are parts of it that describe me, too.

### WHEN THE BOTTOM FALLS OUT

My first book, *Peak Performance*, explored the principles required to make sustainable progress in any endeavor. My second book, *The*

*Passion Paradox*, recognized that some people are wired to keep pushing at all costs, and showed readers how to develop passion and drive and point it in productive directions. I thought the recipe for success and happiness was to cultivate a fruitful passion and then use the principles of *Peak Performance* to channel it, to climb toward mastery. That is certainly how I and so many of my coaching clients had been living our lives—and usually to great triumph. Push, push, push. Go, go, go. Never satisfied. Never enough. Relentless drive and intensity aimed toward whatever is next.

Then, after *Peak Performance* became a bestseller and a complete draft of *The Passion Paradox* was written, I was blindsided by obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), a misunderstood and often debilitating disease. Far from a tendency to be overorganized or to double-check things, clinical OCD is characterized by intrusive thoughts and feelings that dominate your life. You spend every waking hour trying to decipher what they mean and how to make them cease, only to have them come back stronger and more violently. They cause electrifying shots of anxiety from head to toe. You compulsively try to distract yourself from them, but they are always there in the background, exploiting any open space in your day. You go to bed with them crawling through your mind and body and you wake up the same way. They are there when you are eating. They are there when you are working. They are there when you are trying to be present for your family. They are even there when you are sleeping, tormenting your dreams. The intrusive thoughts and feelings are so persistent that you start to question whether you might believe them.

In my case, the intrusive thoughts and feelings (obsessions)



## THE PRACTICE OF GROUNDEDNESS

centered on despair, emptiness, self-harm, and existential distress. Though living with uncontrolled OCD was certainly depressing, deep down I knew I didn't want to hurt myself—but my mind would not leave me alone. It was a chaotic and bottomless spiral of terror. This was my day-to-day reality for the better part of a year, before I began to notice the positive effects of therapy and other practices that have changed my work and life for the better.

My OCD wasn't necessarily caused by my ingrained personality traits—a desire to solve every problem, an incessant drive and restlessness, an always-looking-ahead attitude, and an inability to be content. But the diagnosis certainly made me pause and reflect on these qualities. Somehow they seemed linked. As if all of that pushing forward put me in a place where the bottom could more easily fall out. As if OCD was the extreme version of my usual mode of being, only pointed in a dark direction.

## THE DANGERS OF RELENTLESS OPTIMIZATION

After I wrote about my experience with OCD in an essay for *Outside* magazine, I received hundreds of notes from readers who also suffered from OCD, anxiety, other mood disorders, or a generalized sense of unease. Many of them expressed that they, too, had an insatiable drive that, prior to the onset of their disorders, was celebrated. That drive and forward energy had helped them accomplish great things. It was a source of excitement. But now, like me, they found themselves wondering if their inability to be content and their outsize focus on growth and progress—on more, more, more, on always pushing forward—somehow contributed to

a mind in pathological overdrive; a mind that couldn't downshift; a mind that couldn't find its ground.

These notes made me realize that we do everything we can to optimize our entire existence so we can finally feel like we are enough. But perhaps this isn't so optimal. In ancient Eastern psychology there is a concept known as the hungry ghost. The hungry ghost has a bottomless stomach. He keeps on eating, stuffing himself sick, but he never feels full. It's a severe disorder, and one many people still experience.

The groundbreaking sociologist Émile Durkheim noted that "Overweening ambition always exceeds the results obtained, great as they may be, since there is no wanting to pause here. Nothing gives satisfaction and all this agitation is uninterruptedly maintained without appeasement. . . . How could [mental health] not be weakened under such conditions?" Though the following afflictions do not exist in a vacuum, many appear to be related to heroic individualism, if not a direct by-product of it. Rates of clinical anxiety and depression are higher than ever, with estimates showing more than one in five people are suffering at any given time. Addictions to harmful substances are at peak levels in modern history, as evidenced by increasing rates of alcoholism and the opioid epidemic. There has been a tragic rise in what researchers call *deaths of despair*, or fatalities caused by drugs, alcohol, or suicide. In 2017, the most recent year for which we have data as of this writing, more than 150,000 Americans experienced deaths of despair. That is the highest this number has ever been, and nearly twice as high as it was in 1999.

According to the latest research in cognitive science, psychology, organizational behavior, medicine, and sociology, large swaths of people are struggling with feelings of dissatisfaction, too.



Research from Gallup, a large polling organization, shows that overall well-being and life satisfaction in the United States are down nearly 10 percent since 2008. The data “suggests a trend that not all is well with people in the United States,” summarizes *The American Journal of Managed Care*. The reasons for this are manifold. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer people were engaging in traditional community gathering places than at any point in recent history. Political tribalism is rising. At the same time, experts believe that loneliness and social isolation have reached epidemic proportions. In 2019, the World Health Organization classified burnout as a medical condition, defining it as “chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” Insomnia is more common than ever, as is chronic pain. When you put all of this together, it seems safe to say that people’s underlying feelings of not being or having enough are increasingly surfacing. The irony is that so many of the people experiencing these afflictions are productive and successful, at least by conventional standards. But surely this isn’t the kind of success they are after.

### *Signs You May Be Suffering from Heroic Individualism*

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These feelings can manifest in different ways, but the concerns I have heard most frequently include the following:

- Low-level anxiety and a sensation of always being rushed or in a hurry—if not physically, then mentally

## GROUNDED TO SOAR

- A sense that your life is swirling with frenetic energy, as if you're being pushed and pulled from one thing to the next
- A recurring intuition that something isn't quite right, but you're unsure what that something is, let alone what to do about it
- Not always wanting to be on, but struggling to turn off and not feeling good when you do
- Feeling way too busy, but also restless when you have open time and space
- Being easily distractible and unable to focus, struggling to sit in silence without reaching for your phone
- Wanting to do better, be better, and feel better, but having no idea where to start
- Becoming utterly overwhelmed by the information, products, and competing claims on what leads to well-being, self-improvement, and performance
- Feeling lonely or empty inside
- Struggling to be content
- Being successful by conventional standards, yet feeling like you're never enough

## THE PRACTICE OF GROUNDEDNESS

This cluster of characteristics represents a common mode of being in today's world. It may even be the prevailing one. But as you'll see in the coming pages, it doesn't have to be.

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### ENTER GROUNDEDNESS, A BETTER WAY

All of this was on my mind during a hike with my close friend Mario. Both of us were going through our own respective rough patch, feeling more unsettled than we'd like. It was a crisp and windy day with a light gray sky. The upper branches of the massive California redwood trees were blowing violently, but hundreds of feet below, the trees weren't moving at all. Their trunks were rock solid, held to the ground by a network of strong and interconnected roots. And that's when the lightbulb went off. I remember looking at Mario and saying, *That's it. This is what we're missing. This is what we need to be developing. We need to stop spending so much time worrying about our metaphorical overstory, our high-hanging branches, and instead focus on nourishing our deep and internal roots. The stuff that keeps us grounded throughout all kinds of weather. The foundation. The principles and practices that we often overlook, that get crowded out in a too-busy life focused on the relentless and all-too-often single-minded pursuit of outward achievement.*

At that moment I realized what I was longing for, what Mario was longing for, what my coaching clients and the elite performers I write about are longing for, and what I'm pretty sure everyone is longing for: to feel grounded—and to experience a deeper and more fulfilling kind of success as a result.



## GROUNDED TO SOAR

*Groundedness* is unwavering internal strength and self-confidence that sustains you through ups and downs. It is a deep reservoir of integrity and fortitude, of wholeness, out of which lasting performance, well-being, and fulfillment emerge. Yet here's the common trap: when you become too focused on productivity, optimization, growth, and the latest bright and shiny objects, you neglect your ground. Eventually, you end up suffering. Conversely, and this is something that this book will unpack in great detail, when you prioritize groundedness, you do not neglect passion, performance, or productivity. Nor does groundedness eliminate all forms of ambition. Rather, it situates and stabilizes these qualities, so that your striving and ambition become less frenetic and more focused, sustainable, and fulfilling; less about achieving something out in front of you and more about living in alignment with your innermost values, pursuing your interests, and expressing your authentic self in the here and now, and in a manner you can be proud of. When you are grounded there is no need to look up or down. You are where you are, and you hold true strength and power from that position. The success you experience becomes more enduring and robust. It is only once you are grounded that you can truly soar, at least in a sustainable manner.

What, then, would it look like if instead of always pushing for conventional success, you focused on cultivating groundedness? What if the answer is less about excitement for the future and more about leaning into the present? What if you stopped trying so damn hard to be great all the time, stopped focusing on external results, and instead focused on laying down a solid foundation—a kind of groundedness that is not an outcome or a onetime event, but a way of being? A groundedness out of which peak performance

*and* well-being and fulfillment can emerge and prevail for a lifetime? How would one develop this kind of powerful groundedness that is not so susceptible to the changing weather patterns of our lives? Might there be a way to be more at ease and content, more solid and whole, and still perform to the utmost of your potential?

To answer these questions, I looked to scientific research, ancient wisdom, and modern practice.

### WHAT SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH HAS TO SAY

Studies show that happiness is a function of reality minus expectations. In other words, the key to being happy isn't to always want and strive for more. Instead, happiness is found in the present moment, in creating a meaningful life and being fully engaged in it, right here and right now. There is no doubt that meeting one's basic needs—such as shelter, food, and health care—is critical to any definition of happiness or well-being. Without those elements in place, little else is possible. While some studies show income is correlated with well-being and happiness, other research, such as that conducted by the Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman, shows that above a certain threshold, somewhere between \$65,000 and \$80,000 per year, perhaps with minor adjustments for geography, additional household income is not associated with additional happiness or well-being. Even if it may be a factor, it is not the driving force.

What's more, we're all affected by what behavioral scientists call *hedonic adaptation*, or the “set-point” theory of happiness: when we acquire or achieve something new, our happiness, well-being, and



satisfaction rise, but only for a few months before returning to their prior levels. This is precisely why it is so hard, if not impossible, to outwardly achieve your way out of heroic individualism. If anything, thinking that you can is the crux of heroic individualism's trap.

Speaking about the common struggle to find enduring happiness and well-being, Harvard psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar, who coined the term “arrival fallacy,” says, “We live under the illusion—well, the false hope—that once we make it, then we’ll be happy.” But when we do make it, when we finally “arrive,” he says, we may feel a temporary blip of happiness, but that feeling doesn’t last. And this is to say nothing of all the times we don’t make it, when we suffer the inevitable setbacks that life brings. Ben-Shahar says that if the cycle of seeking happiness outside ourselves and failing to find it repeats enough, eventually we lose hope. But this doesn’t have to be the case. As this book will show, there is a way to change your set point—to permanently increase your happiness, well-being, satisfaction, and performance—that has nothing to do with focusing on external achievement or chasing status. Rather, it has to do with focusing on groundedness.

In clinical psychology, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) are three of the most effective methods to improve anxiety, mood, and self-confidence. Common to all of these therapies is the belief that happiness, stability, and equanimity emerge from being grounded. These therapies are generally used only for recovery from serious mental health issues and addiction, but that’s unfortunate. As you’ll learn in the chapters ahead, their approaches and the practices they teach can be enormously

A woman I've worked with for some time now named Lauren is a C-suite leader at a large and fast-growing technology company. She was one of the first employees. Now her company has over six hundred employees and everyone else on the founding team has moved on, making Lauren the oldest person (not in age—she's only in her thirties—but in tenure) at her company. She is an incredible person and leader. Her biggest challenge is that she cares, and sometimes too much. She feels like the company is her baby, and that it's on her to shepherd it into the future. Yes, in our coaching sessions we work on all the principles of groundedness, but perhaps more than anything we work on self-compassion.

The poet T. S. Eliot famously wrote, "Teach us to care and not to care." It wasn't in Lauren's nature to do the latter. She got to a point in her skyrocketing career where it wasn't her head—she's impeccably sharp and rational—that was getting in the way of her feeling solid, strong, and fulfilled. It was her heart. She had to soften up a bit, which can be particularly hard for women leaders, who are sometimes wrongly profiled as soft to begin with. Using the aforementioned practices, Lauren learned to let herself feel all her emotions—and then do the hard work of creating space to hold them so she wouldn't be overtaken by them. Once she married her disciplined, questioning, and rational mind with a softer and more spacious heart, she became a more grounded and unstoppable leader. More important, she became a healthier and more grounded person.

## MIND AND HEART

One of the most popular Eastern mantras is *Om mani padme hum*. The Sanskrit is roughly translated to English as “the jewel in the lotus.” While it has many meanings, the psychologist and Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield offers the following explanation of its symbolism: “Compassion arises when the jewel of the mind rests in the lotus of the heart.”

In the West, we tend to separate the mind and the heart. The mind thinks rationally. It knows hard and objective truths. It judges good from bad, right from wrong. The heart is emotional and soft. If we pay too close attention to it, it will make us weak or lead us astray. But the truth lies outside this dichotomy altogether. The mind is most powerful when it is situated in the heart, when striving and trying to get something right is held with love and compassion. As Kornfield writes, and as Lauren experienced, the mind in the heart gains “a diamond-like clarity.” Hence the jewel in the lotus.

If we—you, me, anyone—are to be successful in transitioning to a grounded life, we’d be wise to situate our minds in our hearts. We need to recognize and see clearly when we veer off the path. And we need to show ourselves the understanding and kindness required to get back on—again and again and again. Until we attempt to apply them, the principles of groundedness are completely intellectual, nice and tidy in our minds. But the real world is messy. Putting into practice the life-changing lessons of this book depends on our heart space every bit as much as on our head space.

Stay on the path. Fall off the path. Get back on the path. It’s as simple and as hard as that.





## Conclusion

**H**eading into the year 2021, as I finish writing this book, COVID-19 continues to ravage much of the world. At the same time, across America and Europe massive demonstrations for social justice have taken hold. While these events seem especially significant—and they are—they are not the first wave of change and disruption in our lifetime, and they certainly won't be the last. What these events are doing, however, is making people step back and ask: *What do I stand for? How do I want to live? What do I want to do with my short time on this earth?* Whether you are reading this book in 2021 or 2051, these are questions we should always be asking. They are perennial.

In the preceding pages, I've argued that the type of conventional success we spend so much time and energy chasing—money, fame, relevance, busyness, followers— isn't all it's cracked up to be. It is not that we shouldn't ever strive. It is that we should spend more



## CONCLUSION

time and energy focusing on the deep, internal foundation—the ground—from which any and all striving emerges. Once we do this, our definition of success changes, and so does the texture of our drive to succeed and the satisfaction of experiencing it. We still have the chance to reach great heights, but we do so from a more solid ground. We feel better. We perform better. And we become better community members, too. Consider this: in his iconic novel *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley presented a dystopian picture of what happens when people are controlled by invisible forces that prey on their psyche. Superficial thrills lead to the dullest of lives, and the loss of independent thinking, purpose, and anything remotely close to depth precipitates the erosion of society. We are not living in *Brave New World* . . . yet. But we are certainly getting too close for comfort. The time to push back is now. Living out the principles of groundedness is every bit as much a civic action as it is an individual one.

My hope is that this book has given you a new way to think about how you want to live your life. And that it's also given you the practices to actualize it. To choose acceptance over delusion and wishful thinking. To choose presence over distraction. To choose patience over speed. To choose vulnerability over invincibility. To choose community over isolation. To choose movement over sitting still. To choose groundedness over heroic individualism.

Living a grounded life may start as a personal project, but groundedness spreads and grows in communities. If you found this book valuable, please share it with your family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. The more of us who take on this project together, the better.

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Above all, thanks to my best friend and life partner, Caitlin (also my primary editor). I am so fortunate to be in this infinite game with you. I love you. And thanks to my son, Theo—there are no words.

# Recommended Reading

During my thinking, writing, and refining process for *The Practice of Groundedness*, I had all of the following books on a shelf directly above my desk. I referred to them repeatedly, and I'm sure I will continue to in the future. All of these books have greatly influenced how I think, write, coach, and live. I am grateful they exist. What follows is a list of recommended reading, sorted by chapter. Like the principles of groundedness, many of these books complement each other. Although sorting in this way is not perfect, it was the best option.

## 1: GROUNDED TO SOAR

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- *In the Buddha's Words* by Bhikkhu Bodhi
- *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- *Selected Writings: Discourses and Selected Writings* by Epictetus

## RECOMMENDED READING

- *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius
- *A Guide to the Good Life* by William Irvine
- *Tao Te Ching* by Lao-tzu (translated by Stephen Mitchell)
- *Letters from a Stoic* by Seneca
- *The Nicomachean Ethics* by Aristotle
- *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben
- *The True Believer* by Eric Hoffer
- *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne* by Sarah Bakewell
- *The Path* by Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh
- *The Sane Society* by Erich Fromm

## 2: ACCEPT WHERE YOU ARE TO GET YOU WHERE YOU WANT TO GO

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- *Radical Acceptance* by Tara Brach
- *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell
- *A Liberated Mind* by Steven Hayes
- *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* by Jack Kornfield
- *On Becoming a Person* by Carl Rogers
- *The Recovering* by Leslie Jamison
- *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart* by Mark Epstein
- *Almost Everything: Notes on Hope* by Anne Lamott

## RECOMMENDED READING

- *The Way of Aikido* by George Leonard
- *Range* by David Epstein

### 5: EMBRACE VULNERABILITY TO DEVELOP GENUINE STRENGTH AND CONFIDENCE

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- *Consolations* by David Whyte
- *The Heart Aroused* by David Whyte
- *Sounds Like Me* by Sara Bareilles
- *No Mud, No Lotus* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- *Rising Strong* by Brené Brown
- *Braving the Wilderness* by Brené Brown
- *The Fearless Organization* by Amy Edmondson
- *Teaming* by Amy Edmondson
- *Rilke on Love* by Rainer Maria Rilke

### 6: BUILD DEEP COMMUNITY

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- *Tribe* by Sebastian Junger
- *Friendship* by Lydia Denworth
- *Middlemarch* by George Eliot
- *Escape from Freedom* by Erich Fromm
- *Suicide* by Émile Durkheim
- *Deacon King Kong* by James McBride



## RECOMMENDED READING

### 7: MOVE YOUR BODY TO GROUND YOUR MIND

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- *Spark* by John Ratey
- *The Joy of Movement* by Kelly McGonigal
- *The Ultimate Athlete* by George Leonard

### 8: FROM PRINCIPLES TO ACTION

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- *Falling Upward* by Richard Rohr
- *The Glass Bead Game* by Hermann Hesse
- *The Art of Living* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- *Wherever You Go, There You Are* by Jon Kabat-Zinn
- *Becoming Wise* by Krista Tippett

### 9: FOCUS ON THE PROCESS, LET THE OUTCOMES TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES

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- *A New Republic of the Heart* by Terry Patten
- *The Life We Are Given* by George Leonard and Michael Murphy
- *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley

## NOTES

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# Index

- academic performance and movement, 185
- acceptance, 20, 25–56
  - author's OCD, 29–31
  - commitment and, 33–37
  - final thoughts on, 55–56
  - happiness and, 29, 31–33
  - movement and, 175–77
  - moving forward requiring, 28–31
  - peak performance and, 40–45
  - recommended reading, [246](#)
  - Sarah True's story, 25–27, 44–45
  - Steven Hayes's story, 33–37
  - triggers, behaviors, and rewards, 220–21
  - use of term, 29
  - wisdom of, 37–40
- acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), [15–16](#), 35–37, 52–53
- acceptance practices, 45–55, 208, 210–11
  - aligning your doing with your being, 217
  - choosing self-compassion over self-judgment, 48–51
  - cultivating lens of a “wise observer,” 45–48
  - mood following action, 51–54
  - for organizations, 226
  - “relax and win,” 54–55
- aerobic exercise, 192–97
- alcohol, [9](#), 163, 176
- Alter, Adam, 61, 247
- American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), 160–61
- American Heart Association, 197
- American Journal of Managed Care*, [10](#)
- American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 193
- Amidst the Chaos* (album), 125, 127
- Ananda, 147–48, 161
- ancient wisdom traditions, 16–18, 20.
  - See also specific traditions*
  - of acceptance, 37–40
- anxiety, [7](#), [9](#), 19, 171, 172, 229
  - acceptance and, 34, 40, 43
  - acceptance practices for, 54–55
  - exercise and movement for, 173, 186, 196–97
  - loneliness and, 141, 145
  - as sign of heroic individualism, [10–11](#)
  - therapies for, [15–16](#), 36–37, 76
  - vulnerability and, 118, 122–23, 125, 127
  - vulnerability practices for, 135–36
- Apple iPhone, 67, 98
- apps, 61, 67
  - Insight Timer, 217, 221
- A Real Good Kid* (album), 69–70



## INDEX

- arête*, 66–67, 72  
 Aristotle, 164–66  
 “arrival fallacy,” [15](#), 17  
 artificial intelligence, 57  
*Art of Living, The* (Nhat Hanh), 62–63, [249](#)  
 Ashley, Maurice, 186  
 Association for Psychological Science (APS), 156  
*Atlantic, The*, 96–97  
 attention  
   meditation for, 45, 80–83  
   presence and, 21, 57–59, 61, 62–65, 66, 72. *See also* presence  
   presence practices for. *See* presence practices  
   vulnerability practices for, 132–33  
 Augustine, Saint, 17, 147  
 authenticity (authentic self), [13](#), 21, 52–53, 136  
  
 baboons and community, 143–44  
 backstage selves, 117  
 Barber, Andrea, 19, 171–73  
 Bareilles, Sara, 19, 124–25, 127, [248](#)  
 Basecamp, 32  
 bathroom breaks, 189  
 Batista, Ed, 63–65  
*Beagle*, HMS, 93, 94  
 “beautiful mess effect,” 129  
*Beautiful Struggle, The* (Coates), 96  
*behavioral activation*, 52–53  
 being-doing cycle, 204–7, 231–32  
   aligning your doing with your being, 216–18  
   practice of formal reflection, 223–24  
 being present. *See* presence  
 belongingness, 21, 142, 182. *See also* deep community  
 Ben-Shahar, Tal, [15](#)  
 Bergling, Tim (Avicii), 69  
*Between the World and Me* (Coates), 96  
 Bhante Gunaratana, 81–82, 247  
 biophilia hypothesis, 196  
 blind spots, 127, 168  
 bliss, 66–68  
*BMJ, The*, 31–32  
 book clubs, 163–64, 218, 222, 226  
 books, recommended, [245–49](#)  
 boredom, 65, 90  
 boundary setting, 65  
  
 Brach, Tara, 39, [246](#)  
 brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), 185  
 brain performance and physical activity, 185–86, 188  
 Braintrust, 167–68  
*Brave New World* (Huxley), [240](#), [249](#)  
*Braving the Wilderness* (Brown), 120, [248](#)  
 breakthroughs and patience, 93–99  
 breathing, three-by-five, 112–13, 217, 221  
 Breines, Juliana, 234  
 Brewer, Judson, 54–55, 79, 247  
 Brigham Young University, 141  
 brisk walking, 192–94  
*British Journal of Health Psychology*, 176  
*British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 108–9, 192–93  
 “bro-science,” 183  
 Brown, Brené, 120, [248](#)  
 Buddha, 17, 38–39, 113–14, 147–48, 161, 166–67  
 Buddhism, 17, 36, 38–39, 66, 72, 73, 113–14, 119, 147–48, 159, 216  
 burnout, [10](#), 16, 19, 43, 106, 143, 229  
   therapies for, 36–37  
 busyness, 58–59, 63, 85, 148  
  
 Cacioppo, John T., 140–41, 145, 146, 153, 154–55, 159  
 California redwood trees, [12](#), 139  
 Campbell, Joseph, 32–33  
 cancer, 69, 120, 188  
 caring and vulnerability, 120–21  
 Carleton University, 61–62  
 Carr, Nicholas, 90, 247  
 Carroll, Aaron, 92  
 Carse, James, 231  
 Cartesian dualism, 174  
 Catmull, Ed, 167–68  
 cell phones. *See* phones  
 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 184  
 Chen, Serena, 234  
 chess masters, 186  
 Cleveland Cavaliers, 121–22  
 Cleveland Clinic, 122  
 Coates, Ta-Nehisi, 96–97  
 cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), [15–16](#), 52  
 cognitive decline