

MENTAL HEALTH IS MORE PREDICTABLE THAN YOU THINK

Use your patterns to prepare, respond, and perform

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood & Dallas Ludwick

High performers like predictability. We study the environment, prepare for pressure, anticipate obstacles, and reduce unnecessary surprises. We review the calendar, plan for busy periods, and think through what could affect performance.

Yet when it comes to our mental health, many of us do the opposite. We avoid looking too closely because we worry that paying attention will make things worse. We tell ourselves not to dwell on it, overthink it, or give it too much power. If we admit we are struggling, maybe it will become more real. If we stop and notice how tired we are, maybe we will lose momentum. So, we ignore the signals and hope they disappear.

Paying attention does not create the problem. It gives you information about what is already happening. Mental health will never be completely predictable or controllable, but it is rarely as random as it feels. The demands around you, your reactions, and the things that affect your capacity all have patterns.

The more of those patterns you recognize, the less likely you are to be blindsided by yourself. That is the advantage: find what is predictable, prepare for it, and become more consistent when the unpredictable happens.

MAP WHAT IS COMING

Life will always contain uncertainty. You cannot anticipate every loss, conflict, disappointment, health concern, or difficult conversation. But not everything is unexpected. You often know when the demanding project is coming, when your family schedule will become crowded, which months stretch you, which commitments collide, and when you are entering a period of high demand with very little room for recovery.

Stop acting surprised by pressure you watched

approaching. Open your calendar and look beyond the next few days. Identify the major pushes, the collisions between work and home, and the periods when your usual routines will be harder to maintain.

Then prepare. Decide what can be reduced, who may need to help, which routines must be protected, and what recovery needs to happen afterward. You may not be able to remove the demand, but you can stop pretending it will have no impact.

KNOW YOUR PATTERNS

The world around you has patterns. So do you. Most people respond to pressure in fairly predictable ways, even when they do not recognize those responses as predictable.

Some people speed up. They work harder, talk faster, take on more, and try to control everything around them. Others slow down. They procrastinate, withdraw, avoid decisions, or struggle to begin. Some become quiet; others become louder. Some immediately reach for people; others isolate themselves and insist they are fine. Some become critical, while others agree to everything because conflict feels like too much.

Your body also provides information. Your breathing changes, muscles tighten, vision narrows, or thoughts become fast or foggy. You may sleep less, lose interest, become short with people, or lean more heavily on habits that help you escape.

Do not wait until those patterns create a problem. Learn your early signals. Identify what changes first in your body, mood, thinking, and behaviour when pressure rises. The sooner you recognize your pattern, the more options you have.

WHAT YOU IGNORE STILL DRIVES YOU

There is a difference between paying attention and endlessly analyzing every feeling. Rumination can keep you stuck. Awareness gives you useful information.

Ignoring your internal experience does not make you unaffected by it. You can be stressed without acknowledging stress, hurt without calling yourself hurt, or overwhelmed while continuing to tell everyone that everything is fine. The feeling remains, and it often begins to shape your behaviour outside your awareness.

You become impatient, rush a decision, withdraw, or try to control everything because uncertainty feels threatening. An ordinary question can begin to feel like an attack.

When you are disconnected from what is happening inside you, your reactions can feel random. They usually are not. Something was happening before the reaction. You simply did not notice it soon enough.

USE AWARENESS AS DATA

Self-awareness does not mean controlling every emotion. Emotions provide information about what matters and how you are experiencing a situation. Your job is not to eliminate the reaction. It is to notice it early enough to choose what happens next.

Use a simple sequence: notice, name, observe, and choose. Notice that something has shifted, then name it honestly: anxious, angry, embarrassed, overwhelmed, disappointed, threatened, or exhausted.

Then observe how it is showing up. What is happening in your body? What thoughts keep repeating? What do you feel compelled to do? What is your usual response when you feel this way? Finally, choose. Ask whether your automatic response will help and what the moment needs from you.

Awareness creates a pause between what happens and how you respond. Use that pause.

TRAIN YOUR RESPONSE TO THE UNPREDICTABLE

You cannot predict every situation, but you can become more predictable in how you respond. When caught off guard, you may immediately want to fix the problem, defend yourself, leave, or say something that shuts the conversation down.

That first reaction may happen quickly, but it does not need to become your action. Know your tendencies. If you become defensive when criticized, controlling when uncertain, quiet when emotions rise, or overly solution-focused when discomfort appears, recognize the pattern as it begins.

Interrupt it. Pause. Slow your breathing. Listen. Ask a question. Understand what is happening before deciding what to do. Knowing your pattern does not excuse an unhelpful response; it helps you choose a useful one.

The situation may remain unpredictable. Your response can still become more consistent.

REMOVE THE JUDGEMENT

Many high performers notice that they are struggling and immediately judge themselves for it: I should be handling this better. Other people have it worse. I have no reason to feel this way. I thought I was past this.

That is not useful awareness. It is awareness followed by criticism. Replace judgment with curiosity. This is where I am right now. What contributed to it? What were the first signs? What has helped before? What support or action would be useful now?

Treat your mental health like physical information. If your knee hurt every time you increased your training load, you would adjust, recover, or seek support before pain became an injury. You would not argue that noticing the pain caused it.

Early information gives you more options. Use it.

ACT BEFORE YOU HAVE TO

Many people respond to their mental health only when they can no longer ignore it. They wait until they are exhausted before resting, until they explode before admitting they are angry, or until they feel completely disconnected before reaching out. They wait until their performance, relationships, or physical health are affected before taking the signals seriously.



Do not make crisis the threshold for action. Identify what makes you vulnerable, such as too little sleep, consecutive demands, conflict, uncertainty, isolation, or loss of routine. Then identify what reliably keeps you well and protect it.

Knowing these things is not the advantage. Using what you know is.

BUILD YOUR PERSONAL FORECAST

Look ahead. What challenges can you already see coming? What are your earliest signs that you are moving away from feeling well? What happens to your body, thinking, and behaviour under stress? What is your predictable reaction? What helps you recover, and who knows what you are like when you are struggling?

Decide what you will do before the next demanding period begins. Choose the routines you will protect, the warning signs you will act on, the people you will use, and the response you want to practice.

The more honestly you answer these questions, the less mysterious your reactions become. You recognize yourself sooner, and the sooner you recognize yourself, the more choice you have.

USE THE ADVANTAGE

Paying attention to your mental health does not mean allowing it to control your life. It means learning enough about yourself to participate more intentionally in what happens next.

Some parts of life will always be unpredictable. You will be caught off guard, and some days your usual strategies will not be enough. But you are not starting from nothing. You have patterns, warning signs, and experience.

Use that information. Prepare for the demands you can see coming. Recognize yourself earlier when something begins to shift. Pause before turning an automatic reaction into an action. Respond to what is happening instead of pretending it is not there.

The goal is not to predict exactly how you will feel. The goal is to know yourself well enough that, however you feel, you have a more predictable way forward.

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood is a licensed psychologist and performance consultant with over 30 years of experience helping people thrive under pressure — from Olympic athletes to emergency responders. She is the founder of Toogood Consulting and specializes in building human-first, high-performance cultures.

Dallas Ludwick is a high-performance coach and culture builder with 25 years of experience helping individuals and teams face fear, grow boldly, and perform with purpose. Known for her direct and supportive approach, she brings a deep passion for creating space where real conversations — and real growth — can happen.

