

MORE OKAY, MORE OFTEN

Three intentional practices for protecting your capacity and sustaining performance

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood & Dallas Ludwick

“It’s okay to not be okay.”

It is a phrase we hear often. It sounds like progress, and in some ways, it is. For a long time, the messages around mental health were very different: Toughen up. Don’t talk about it. Hide it. Being upset is weakness. Keep going and make sure nobody notices.

We have changed the language. But have we changed the way we live?

We can repeat “it’s okay to not be okay” while continuing to judge ourselves for struggling, reward people for hiding what things are costing them, and wait until someone is overwhelmed before taking their mental health seriously.

Acceptance matters. It gives us permission to acknowledge the harder parts of being human without shame. But permission is only the beginning. If the conversation ends with accepting that we are not okay, have we really made enough progress?

Real progress requires us to do something with that awareness.

If you ask a great deal of yourself, do not wait until you are struggling to pay attention to your mental health. Do not treat recovery, connection, and well-being as things you will get to when the work is finished. The work is never finished.

Mental health is not entirely within our control. Hard things happen. Stress happens. Grief happens. Pressure happens. Our moods fluctuate, and sometimes we will struggle despite doing many things well.

But there are also things we can influence.

High performers manage what they can

influence. They prepare for predictable demands, monitor their capacity, use the people around them, and recover with intention. They do not leave important parts of their performance to chance.

That is one of their hidden advantages: the best performers bring the same intention to their mental health that they bring to their performance.

Our approach is simple: disconnect, connect, and celebrate. These are three things most of us already know are good for us, and three things high performers are often surprisingly bad at doing on purpose.

DISCONNECT

High performers are exceptionally good at continuing.

They push through fatigue, solve the next problem, respond to one more message, and make themselves available when other people need them. That capacity is often part of what makes them successful.

It can also become a trap.

Being capable of continuing does not mean continuing is always the right decision. When you consistently operate without enough recovery, your thinking, patience, perspective, relationships, and performance eventually pay the price.

Recovery is not a reward you earn after the work is complete. It is part of the work.

Sometimes the healthiest and most productive thing you can do is step away, from work, from your phone, from the problem you have been trying to solve for three hours, from being needed, or from the endless stream of information, expectations, decisions, and demands coming at you.

Disconnection is not avoidance. Avoidance is refusing to deal with something. Intentional disconnection is creating enough space to recover

so you can return better able to deal with it.

Start by assessing your capacity honestly. How much do you actually have available right now, not how much you think you should have, how you felt last week, or how much the situation demands?

Are you energized, clear, and able to make good decisions? Are you functioning but more stretched than usual? Or are you depleted and relying on discipline to hide it?

Then respond to that information.

Do not recognize that you are depleted and continue exactly as planned. Adjust something. Reduce unnecessary decisions. Take a break. Move your body. Go outside. Put down your phone. Protect your sleep. Ask someone else to carry part of the load.

Know what restores your capacity. What works for someone else may do nothing for you. Your job is not to find the “right” self-care activity. Your job is to identify the recovery strategies that genuinely work for you and make them part of how you operate.

Do not wait until you have time. Schedule recovery. Protect it. Build small moments of it into demanding days and plan more substantial recovery before and after major pushes.

Just because you can keep going does not mean you always should.

CONNECT

High performers are often rewarded for being self-reliant. They know how to solve problems, carry responsibility, and keep functioning when things are difficult.

But self-reliance has limits.

When pressure increases, many of us pull away at exactly the moment we most need other people. We tell ourselves that we do not want to burden anyone, that they will not understand, that everyone else seems to be doing fine, or that we should be able to handle it ourselves.

So, we retreat, continue performing, and make sure nobody sees the effort it is taking.

That is not always strength. Sometimes it is

isolation disguised as competence.

Connection interrupts that. Intentional connection is not simply being around people, scrolling through hundreds of people online, or sitting beside someone while both of you stare at your phones. It means allowing yourself to be known.

Be clear about what you need. Say, “I’ve had a rough day.” Say, “I need to talk.” Say, “I don’t need you to fix this; I need you to listen.” If you do want help solving the problem, ask for it directly.

Connection is not reserved for difficult moments either. Tell someone when you are proud, excited, or doing well. Share the good news before immediately moving on to your next goal. Do not wait for other people to go first. Initiate the conversation. Call someone. Ask a real question. Tell the truth. Listen without trying to fix everything. Laugh together. Let someone help.

Build connection before you are in crisis. Identify the people you trust and maintain those relationships when life is going well. It is much easier to reach for support under pressure when honest communication is already part of the relationship.

Independence is useful. Believing you must do everything alone is not.

CELEBRATE

Celebration may be the easiest of these practices for high performers to dismiss.

There is always more to do. Another standard to reach. Another problem to fix. Another level of performance available.

High performers are trained to notice the gap between where they are and where they want to be. That ability drives improvement, but if the gap is all you ever see, progress begins to disappear. Something goes well and you immediately move on.

Next.

That might keep you productive, but it does not necessarily keep you well. It can also prevent you

from recognizing what is working and repeating it. Celebration is not about pretending everything is wonderful. It is about deliberately registering progress before rushing past it.

Notice when you handle a conversation better than you would have six months ago. Recognize when you do something that scares you, maintain a boundary, recover from a setback, ask for help, or keep going through something difficult.

Pay attention when your child makes you laugh, a friend shows up for you, or someone at work makes your day easier. Tell people when they have helped. Give them the opportunity to understand that what they did mattered.

Celebration does not require champagne, balloons, or a giant achievement. It can be a ten-second pause that allows the good to count.

Make the celebration useful. Ask yourself: What went well? What did I do that contributed to it? Who helped? What do I want to repeat?

Then take that information forward.

A difficult week can still contain a great conversation. A painful season can include moments of laughter. You can be struggling and still be proud of yourself. You can be grieving and still experience joy.

One state does not cancel out the other. That is what full colour living looks like.

IT HAS TO BE INTENTIONAL

The common thread is intention.

Disconnect intentionally. Connect intentionally. Celebrate intentionally.

None of this is particularly complicated. The difficulty is consistently doing it.

You already know that recovery matters, but you may continue working through every opportunity to recover. You know you need people, but you may isolate yourself when things become difficult. You accomplish something meaningful and immediately start thinking about what comes next.

The problem is rarely lack of knowledge. It is a

failure to turn what you know into a deliberate practice.

Stop relying on good intentions.

Put recovery in your schedule. Know who you will contact when pressure rises. Build honest conversations into your relationships before you desperately need them. End demanding days and weeks by identifying what worked. not only what needs to improve.

Ask yourself:

What reliably restores my capacity, and when will I do it?

Who are the people I trust, and am I allowing them to know how I am actually doing?

What progress am I rushing past without allowing it to count?

Choose one action in each area and follow through.

BUILD IT INTO HOW YOU OPERATE

You are not going to be okay all the time. That was never a realistic goal and accepting the harder parts of being human matters.

But acceptance does not have to mean passivity. Pay attention to your capacity and recover before you are completely depleted. Move toward people instead of automatically retreating. Notice and reinforce what is working, even while other things remain hard.

Disconnect. Connect. Celebrate.

Not perfectly. Not every day. But deliberately and repeatedly.

The goal is not to eliminate every difficult moment. The goal is to take greater responsibility for the things you can influence so you can be more okay, more often; and continue showing up fully for the work and people that matter most.

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.