BE A HERO IN YOUR OWN STORY

Showing up fully when the biggest moments arrive

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood

WHAT MAKES A HERO

When we think of heroes, we often picture someone fearless. Someone who never doubts, never hesitates and always seems to know what to do.

But the heroes I have had the privilege of working with, and of interviewing on the *Heroes in Our Midst* podcast, are rarely fearless. They feel the pressure. They doubt themselves. They carry the same worries, responsibilities and very human limits as everyone else.

What sets them apart is not the absence of fear. It is the courage to show up fully anyway.

As sports reporter Claire Hanna put it, "I know what it feels like to play in a big championship game. Everything is on the line, and it comes down to this one moment."

Most of us will never play in a championship game. But all of us will face our own big moments. The presentation that could change the direction of a project. The difficult conversation we have been avoiding. The promotion, the new role or the restructure. The moment we are asked to lead when we do not feel ready. And the moments outside of work that matter even more.

Those moments are where our stories are written.

Being a hero in your own story does not mean being perfect in those moments. It means having the courage to bring all of yourself to them, and the tools to do it consistently.

As explorer Ray Zahab reminds us, "We all have within us this capacity for our own version of extraordinary."

THE HEROES WITHIN YOU

What helps us show up fully when it matters most? Across years of work with athletes, leaders and people navigating big moments, six qualities keep surfacing. Together, they spell HEROES:

Harness your why
Emotionally literate and agile
Resilient mindset
Opportunities for growth are found
Embrace your humanity
Self-aware and compassionate

H: HARNESS YOUR WHY

There is an idea, first written by Friedrich Nietzsche and later made famous by Viktor Frankl, that someone who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.

When the moment gets hard, your why is what holds you there.

Simon Sinek's work on purpose makes a similar point for organizations and leaders: people are not inspired by *what* we do or even *how* we do it, but by *why* we do it. The same is true inside us. Skills and plans get us started. Purpose keeps us going when the plan stops working.

Your why might be the people you are doing it for. It might be a value you refuse to compromise. It might be the person you are trying to become. Sometimes it is simply doing something to make your younger self proud.

When Olympic champion Cindy Klassen was asked what she hoped for her daughter, her answer was simple: "Whatever she chooses to do, I hope she does it with all of her heart."

A clear why also makes hard decisions easier to face. Olympic and world champion curler Jill Officer described a moment when her team had to make a difficult call: "We thought we were disrespecting ourselves more if we did not make the tough decision."

And a strong why gives us permission to think bigger. As professional hockey player Danny Zhilkin put it, "Always dream further than what you think you can achieve."

Why does this moment matter to you? Who or what are you showing up for?

E: EMOTIONALLY LITERATE AND AGILE

Big moments come with big feelings. Excitement, nerves, fear, pride, frustration, sometimes all at once.

We often try to push those feelings aside so we can perform. But emotions are not the enemy of performance. They are information. The question is whether we can read that information and use it well.

Yale researcher Marc Brackett calls this emotional literacy, and his RULER approach offers a simple path:

Recognize emotions in yourself and others.

Understand where they come from and what they are telling you.

Label them with precise words.

Express them in ways that fit the situation.

Regulate them so they help you, rather than run you.

Naming an emotion accurately matters more than it seems. "Stressed" and "excited" can feel almost identical in the body. "Disappointed" and "embarrassed" call for very different responses. The more precisely we can name what we feel, the more choice we have in what to do next.

Emotional literacy helps us understand our feelings. Emotional agility helps us move with them. Psychologist Susan David describes it as being able to hold our thoughts and emotions with curiosity and compassion, without getting stuck in them or pushing them away, and then acting in line with what we value.

Agility also means accepting what we cannot change, so we can put our energy into what we can. As Vlastic Cerny shared, "It is what it is. The sooner you accept that, then when the time comes to actually develop a plan for something very concrete, you're ready to go because you're not bound by the past."

What are you feeling as you head into this moment? What is that feeling trying to tell you?

R: RESILIENT MINDSET

Resilience is not about never being knocked down. It is about how we respond when we are.

Big moments rarely unfold exactly as planned. Circumstances change, setbacks happen and uncertainty creeps in. A resilient mindset helps us stay flexible in how we approach the situation we now find ourselves in, rather than the one we expected.

A few anchors help when things feel uncertain:

Focus on the concrete. Come back to what you know to be true and what is within your control.

Stay in the moment. Uncertainty pulls our attention toward everything that might happen. The next step is usually enough.

Let yourself feel how you're feeling. It's okay not to be okay. Resilience does not require pretending.

Trust the process. Swimmer Kelsey Wog offered this advice: "Be patient and trust the process. Enjoy the journey even if it is good and bad. The struggles make the achievements even better."

Resilience is not a fixed trait that some people have, and others do not. It is built, often quietly, through each difficult moment we move through.

When things don't go as planned, what helps you get back on track?

O: OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH ARE FOUND

Notice the wording: opportunities for growth are *found*. They are rarely handed to us neatly packaged. More often, they are hidden inside the hard moments, the disappointments and the things we would not have chosen.

As triathlete Tyler Mislawchuk put it: "The work I have put in is not lost. It is an investment."

Psychologist Angela Duckworth's research on grit shows that long-term achievement depends less on talent than on passion and perseverance over time. Gritty people are not those who never fall short. They are the ones who keep learning, adjusting and showing up.

As Dayna Spiring, President and CEO of Economic Development Winnipeg, put it: "To be an expert, it is just time and hard work. There are no shortcuts."

Looking for growth also means believing it is possible. CFL linebacker Adam Bighill shared, "I believe there's so much potential inside of people, if they want to unlock it."

Sometimes unlocking it starts with a simple shift in the question we ask ourselves. Olympic gold medalist and PWHL goalie Kristen Campbell offers one worth borrowing:

"Why not me?"

What is this moment teaching you? What might you be able to do next time because of it?

E: EMBRACE YOUR HUMANITY

Heroes are human. That is not a weakness in the story. It is the story.

We get tired. We make mistakes. We have bad days, competing priorities and lives outside of work that do not pause when the big moment arrives. Pretending otherwise does not make us stronger. It just makes us more alone.

Embracing your humanity means accepting that you will not always be at your best, and that you are still worthy of showing up. It means letting others see the real you and making room for the real people around you.

It also means remembering what matters most. As Bill Johnson said, "That's what sport is about. You love the game, but more importantly, you love the people you're with." The same is true of our work. The results matter, but the relationships are what we carry with us.

And it means keeping perspective. Leanne Taylor put it beautifully: "I think we have such a short time that we get to be here on this earth and experiencing the things that we can. I think there's so many experiences that I can still have."

Being human is not something to overcome on the way to performing well. It is the foundation that performance is built on.

Where are you expecting yourself to be more than human? What would it look like to give yourself the same grace you give others?

S: SELF-AWARE AND COMPASSIONATE

The last quality brings the others together. To show up fully, we need to know ourselves, and we need to be on our own side.

Self-awareness means understanding how you tend to respond under pressure. What do you need before a big moment? What pulls you off course? What helps you come back? Often, we already know more than we give ourselves credit for. As Alexa Scott put it, "You always know within yourself what you need. Don't fight it."

That knowledge lets us become a leader to ourselves: noticing what is happening, making deliberate choices and trusting our own judgment. Skylar Park described what changed for her: "I learned to trust myself, and I found my best performance by being me."

But awareness without compassion can quickly turn into harsh self-criticism. That is where self-compassion matters.

Psychologist Kristin Neff describes self-compassion as having three parts:

Self-kindness. Treating yourself with the warmth and understanding you would offer a friend, rather than judgment.

Common humanity. Remembering that struggle and imperfection are part of being human, not signs that something is uniquely wrong with you.

Mindfulness. Noticing difficult thoughts and feelings with balance, without ignoring them or getting swept away by them.

Self-compassion is not letting yourself off the hook. Research shows the opposite: people who are kinder to themselves after setbacks are more likely to take responsibility, learn and try again.

Olympic soccer gold medalist Desiree Scott said it simply: "Love what you are doing. The hard work pays off. Be your biggest cheerleader."

Sometimes that can be as literal as giving yourself a high five in the mirror. It may feel a little silly. That is part of the point.

What do you need to hear from yourself before your next big moment?

THE FORMULA

I often share a simple formula that captures how these qualities come together:

Embracing Humanness × Deliberate Toolkit = Best Self

By best self, I do not mean perfect. I mean your most consistent and resilient self: the version of you that can show up well again and again, even when conditions are not ideal.

Embracing humanness is the foundation. It is accepting that you will feel nerves, have off days and

carry things that others cannot see. It is the honesty and self-compassion that allow you to work with yourself rather than against yourself.

A deliberate toolkit is what you do with that awareness. It is the routines, strategies and habits you build on purpose: how you prepare, how you reset after a mistake, how you manage your energy and how you recover. As Winnipeg Jets host and producer Sara Orlesky shared, "I am a big believer in over-preparing for everything."

The two are multiplied, not added, and that matters. If we try to be all toolkit and no humanity, we end up rigid and brittle, pushing through until something breaks. If we embrace our humanity without building any tools, we understand ourselves well but struggle to act on it when the pressure is on.

It is the combination that allows us to show up as our best selves, not just once, but consistently.

IT IS NEVER EASY, AND THAT IS THE POINT

Showing up fully in big moments is never easy. Even with a clear why, good tools and plenty of self-compassion, some moments will not go the way we hoped.

That is why it helps to think of big moments not as one-time tests, but as part of a cycle:

> **Get Ready.** Prepare with intention. Clarify your why, check in with how you are feeling and choose the tools you will use.
>
> **Go.** Step into the moment and bring all of yourself to it.
>
> **Get It Back.** Recover. Reset your body and mind, especially if the moment took more from you than expected.
>
> **Grow.** Reflect on what you learned, so the next moment can be a little better.

Every big moment, whether it goes well or not, becomes information for the next one. Over time, those small lessons add up. We do not become heroes in our own story all at once. We become them bit by bit.

BECOMING REAL

In Margery Williams' classic children's book *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the Rabbit asks the wise old Skin Horse what it means to be Real, and whether it happens all at once.

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept."

The same is true for us. The scuffs and worn edges are not signs that we have failed. They are evidence that we have shown up, repeatedly, with all of ourselves.

A SIMPLE CHECK-IN

> Think about a big moment coming up in your work or your life, and ask yourself:
>
> **H:** Why does this matter to me?
>
> **E:** What am I feeling, and what is that feeling telling me?
>
> **R:** What can I control, and what do I need to let go of?
>
> **O:** What could I learn from this, however it goes?
>
> **E:** Where can I give myself permission to be human?
>
> **S:** What do I need to hear from myself to show up fully?

THE TAKEAWAY

Heroes are not fearless, flawless or finished.

They are people who know why they are there, feel what they feel, stay flexible, keep learning, accept that they are human and stay on their own side.

They embrace their humanness and build a deliberate toolkit. They prepare, show up, recover and grow. And then they do it again.

You do not need to wait for someone else to write your story.

Lift. Rise. Elevate.

Become the hero in your own story.

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.

Want support showing up fully in your own big moments? Connect with **Attollo Mental Health + Performance** at attollomentalhealth.com.

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