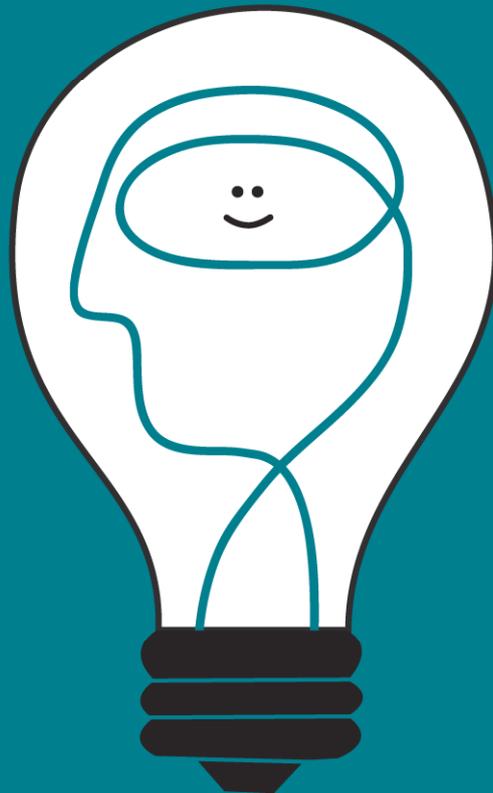


*If you're always being told "You're too hard on yourself",  
this book is for you.*

# PRACTICAL PERFECTION

Smart strategies for an excellent life



KELLY EXETER

## **A NOTE FROM KELLY**

First of all, thank you for your interest in this book. I am truly humbled by the number of people who have requested an advance copy. A quick note about this copy you have here:

It's not the 'final final' version – it's in the hands of my editor currently and he is sharpening up my sentences as we speak. So if you spot any typos, no need to let me know as he will pick those up.

### **The feedback I am most after?**

1. Does the book deliver on the promise the title and the introduction makes?
2. Are there any bits that you consider irrelevant or uninteresting?
3. Are there any things you feel could be explained better/fleshed out?
4. Is this book helpful to you? If so, in what way?

**This book is 20,000 words in length which means it should take 3-4 hours to read.**

**If you get the chance to read it before the 9<sup>th</sup> February and provide me with feedback that will make it better and more useful, I will be eternally grateful (and I will give you a shout out in the acknowledgements!).**

Please email your feedback to [kelly@kellyexeter.com.au](mailto:kelly@kellyexeter.com.au)

**THANK YOU! I APPRECIATE YOU SO MUCH x**

## INTRODUCTION

"I think you're being too hard on yourself."

Ever heard those words? I certainly have. And I'm sure you have too. (If you haven't, then perhaps this isn't the book for you.) They're the bane of any committed striver's life.

Always well-meaning. Often true. Seldom helpful at the time.

Because of *course* we're hard on ourselves! It's how we achieve big things: by setting high standards and then working our butts off to meet them.

And yes, we do know about the problems that tend to go with our typically Type A, striver personality:

- Burnout
- Overwhelm
- That sense of working so *very* hard but getting nowhere.

Are you nodding? Me too. Because for a long time these were the stories of my life.

Yes, I got to tick lots of boxes and strike lots of things off lists. But it all came at a cost: I wasn't being the person I wanted to be.

*Constantly tired and irritable? Tick.*

*Always vague and distracted? Tick.*

*Completely unable to sit still and just relax already? Tick.*

Ugh.

Then kids came along.

Oh boy.

Some people say having kids killed their ambition. Not me. Having kids *added* to them. Now, as well as wanting to hit all my personal goals *and* be an amazing wife, daughter, sister, boss and friend, I also wanted to be a kick arse mother.

Except I now had a lot less time to achieve it all.

So it will come as no surprise when I tell you that 18 months after my first child was born I had a complete breakdown. All that striving and holding myself to unrealistic standards didn't so much tip me over the edge as hurl me into a deep, dark hole of stress, anxiety and depression.

I used every strategy and tactic I knew to try and claw my way out of that hole. But in the end I succumbed, completely losing myself, my confidence, and any sense of who I was.

So what got me out of the hole?

Well, I became *very* self-aware (therapy will do that for you). And this allowed me to notice myself repeating certain patterns of behaviour. Once I started seeing these patterns in myself, I also began seeing them in the highly-driven people I tended to surround myself with.

We were all constantly flirting with overwhelm and burnout. It felt like if we *weren't* right on the edge then we weren't pushing hard enough.

If a tiny bit of space opened up in our lives, we had to fill that space immediately. And yet we were constantly rueing that we felt like hamsters on a wheel—running our little butts off but getting nowhere.

What was driving our behaviour? More often than not, it was the pursuit of perfection.

## What does perfectionism look like?

When we think of perfectionism, we tend to think of someone who needs to be perfect at *everything* they do (which means I've never thought of myself as a perfectionist because there's plenty of stuff I can be half-arsed about!).

In reality, however, perfectionism presents differently in different people.

Researchers Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett offer three sub-scales of perfectionism:

- **Self-oriented perfectionists** adhere to strict standards while maintaining strong motivation to attain perfection and avoid failure. They also engage in stringent self-evaluation.
- **Other-oriented perfectionists** set unrealistic standards for significant others (e.g. partners, children, co-workers), coupled with a stringent evaluation of others' performances.
- **Socially-prescribed perfectionists** believe others hold unrealistic expectations for their behaviour (which they feel they can't live up to). And they experience external pressure to be perfect, believing that others evaluate them critically. [\[Source\]](#)

So it appears I'm a self-oriented perfectionist. (And if you're reading this book, I suspect you're one too.)

And you know what? It's not all bad news.

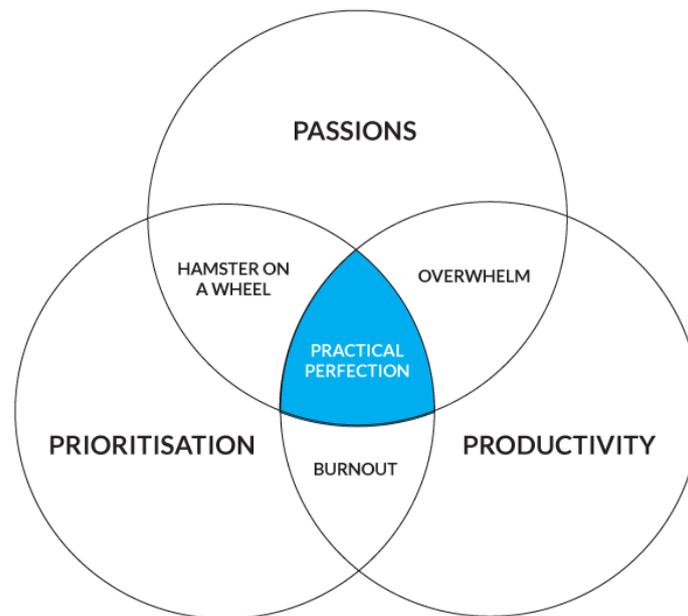
A 2005 study by Jeffrey Kilbert, Jennifer Langhinrichsen-Rohling and Motoko Saito found that

*"... self-oriented perfectionists are those who derive a sense of pleasure from their labours and efforts, which in turn enhances their self-esteem and motivation to succeed and eventually helps them to develop a sense of control over their environment."* [\[Source\]](#)

This is important in the context of this book because it reflects where I have gotten to with my own brand of self-oriented perfectionism: a place where I feel like I'm in control of my life (as much as anyone can be in control of their lives) and thriving as a person instead of constantly teetering on the edge of overwhelm and burnout.

How did I get here? Well, I developed a framework for myself.

## The Practical Perfection Framework



One thing I learned from therapy is that you can't really change the aspects of your personality that are hard-wired into you. (In other words, once a striver, always a striver.)

What's easier is to be self-aware; to understand what's stopping you from living your best life, and to develop strategies to manage those things.

When I started paying attention to what was going on in my life, I found that in order to feel happy, content and fulfilled, I needed three things to be present:

- **Passions:** things that got me out of bed in the morning with a smile on my face.
- **Prioritisation:** knowing what actually mattered most to me, and then making the conscious decision to focus hard on those and let go of the rest.
- **Productivity:** the ability to get things started *and* finished.

When I look back over my life, I can see that whenever one of those three key things was lacking in my life, problems arose.

For example:

Productivity + Prioritisation = Yes, I got a lot of stuff done. But without any of my Passions, I **burnt out** because there was nothing to buffer the stress and anxiety that tends to go with the striver life.

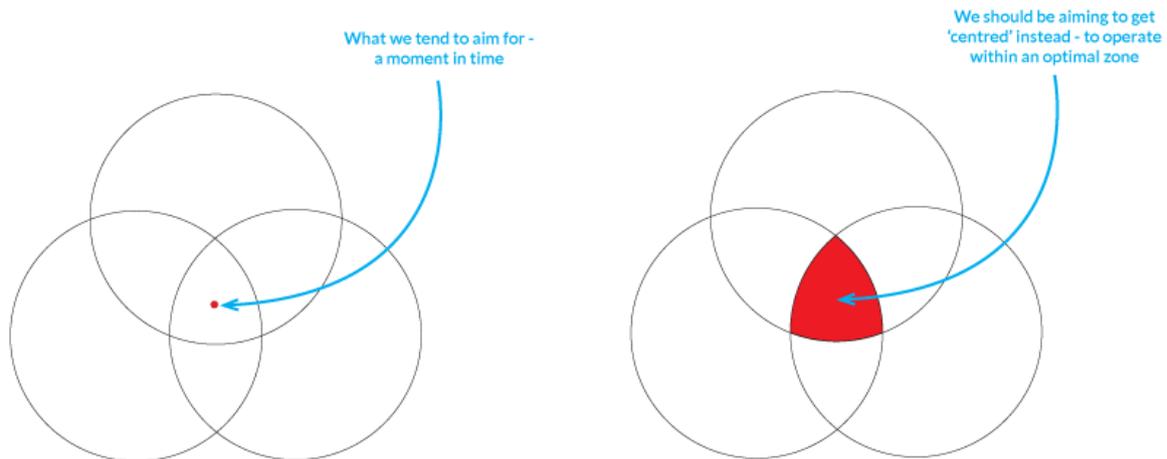
Passions + Productivity = I was doing a lot of things I loved. But without Prioritisation I was stupidly busy and in a permanent state of **overwhelm** because every opportunity or request seemed like a good idea.

Prioritisation + Passions = I thought it was important and appropriate to try out every cool new idea that entered my head, and chase after every bright, shiny object that crossed my path. But I never finished anything before moving on to the next. I was the proverbial **hamster-on-a-wheel** and my Productivity was suffering as a result.

When all three were present in my life, however, I was able to operate in a **zone** of what I call **Practical Perfection**—a place where I could achieve the things I wanted while also being a good person. Which meant I was living a content and happy life.

And that whole ‘zone’ thing is part of what I love most about the Practical Perfection Framework.

Those of us with perfectionist tendencies usually strive for a ‘sweet **spot**’ in life—a place where all the planets align and we feel like we’re ‘there’. Unfortunately, that state of perfect balance only lasts for a moment before things inevitably shift and the moment is gone. How utterly depressing and demotivating!



Striving to operate within a ‘zone’, however, is much more achievable. And when you *do* slip out of the middle zone of Practical Perfection and into one of the other areas (which will inevitably happen), the framework tells you what you need to get centred again.

- **On the brink of burnout?** Time to inject some more Passions back into your life.
- **Overwhelmed?** Time for some ruthless Prioritisation.
- **Feeling like a hamster on a wheel?** Time to put your head down and get Productive.

If you’re a self-oriented perfectionist like me, then you probably like to feel in control of your life (as much as that’s possible). The Practical Perfection framework gives you both the feeling of control you crave while also providing a strong foundation on which to build an excellent life.

## What does an excellent life look like?

As a life-long striver I feel qualified to presume to speak for other strivers here. I am going to posit that, for people like us, an excellent life is one where:

- You get to achieve the things you want to achieve, but without the constant stress and overwhelm that usually goes with being a person who sets high standards for themselves.
- You have time and space to be good to the people closest to you.
- You have time and space to be good to the world.
- You have time and space to be good to *yourself*.

In the past, when the pressure was on, I’d fall back into the same old behavioural patterns time and again. And those behavioural patterns always led me down the paths of overwhelm, burnout and feeling like a hamster-on-a-wheel.

These days, the Practical Perfection framework allows me to pick up the fact that my feet are heading down a certain undesirable path much earlier in the piece, and it tells me what I need to do to 'return to centre'.

## **How this book will work**

There are three main sections: one each for Burnout, Overwhelm and Hamster-on-a-Wheel. Each section discusses how we end up feeling these ways ... and then shows how Passions, Prioritisation and Productivity respectively work as antidotes.

The final section of the book, the conclusion, brings everything together and shows how they, with the help of another two vital ingredients, will deliver you an excellent life.

The first time you pick up this book, it's best to read everything in order because each section builds on the one before. But certainly, down the track, you can refer to each chapter individually as and when you need some practical tips for dealing with certain things.

Speaking of practical ...

Everything I talk about in this book, I've tried it myself. None of what I share is 'in theory'. I know these things work, not just for me, but for other people like me, because I've shared most of them on my blog. And I've had people tell me my methods have helped them achieve significant breakthroughs.

It's my dearest hope that some significant breakthroughs are lying on the coming pages for you too.

Let's get started ...

## SECTION 1: BURNOUT

*"I want to sell the business. Or shut it down. I don't care which."*

*"What? No! It's a good business. Why?"*

*"I just can't do it anymore. I hate it. I haven't created a business, I've created a job for myself. And I hate my job."*

*"Kel, I get that, but there are things you can do ..."*

*"I've. Tried. Every. 'Thing'. Everything. I've lost count of the times friends have asked, 'How are things going?' and I've said, 'Not so good, but I'm doing x or y and that's going to make things better'. But things are just not getting better. I hate my life Ant. I hate the person this business has turned me into."*

*"Ok. Well, here's a thought. Why don't you take a break from the business and let me run things?"*

*"What? You're a teacher! You can't run a design business! And you won't look after my clients the way I look after them."*

*"Kel, you're talking about walking away from the business or shutting it down – so you're clearly a bit beyond caring about your clients. What difference does it make if it's me 'not looking after your clients properly', or someone else?"*

*"..."*

*"Am I right?"*

*"Yes, ok, you're right. I actually just don't care anymore. If you want to run the business, go right ahead. I'm done."*

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What does burnout look like? Well, the Merriam-Webster dictionary describes it as:

*"Exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress."*

How do you know you've reached the point of burnout? A clue lies in these five words:

*"I just don't care anymore."*

By the time I had the conversation with my husband at the top of this section, I was very much the dictionary definition: stressed out of my ever-loving mind; emotionally shattered and exhibiting a complete lack of motivation and zest for life.

How did I get to that point?

The same way most people do: slowly and insidiously.

When the calendar ticked over into 2009 I'd been running my own business for three years and loving it. I loved being in control of my own destiny, being in control of who I worked with and the business was growing rapidly.

The only small concern I had was that I was also pregnant. Unfortunately, I was spending so much time running the business, managing staff and doing client work, I never got around to setting up my business to run without me in it. I had designers to do the client work in my absence, but all the rest, accounting and marketing and general shit-kicking? That still fell to me.

So I didn't end up having a single day off work. My son was born on the 31<sup>st</sup> of the month and the very next day I was sending out invoices from hospital. My clients were horrified but if I didn't send out invoices, we didn't get paid ... and I had three staff including myself drawing a wage from the business.

Those early days weren't too bad. The instant my new baby fell asleep, I'd jump on my laptop and take care of business. But as the months wore on I started to wear down.

Ironically it was my productivity and ability to prioritise that kept me going for as long as I did. If I was on my laptop I knew exactly what I needed to accomplish in the hours while my son slept (thank god he was a reliable sleeper), and I powered through my work like nobody's business. People constantly marvelled at what I was able to achieve despite experiencing motherhood for the first time: I ably ran our household, dealt with our builder (because yes, we were also building a house at the time), ran my business and even found the time to exercise and get my pre-baby body back. Yep, from the outside looking in, I had it all going on.

Until I didn't.

We know from the dictionary definition of burnout that prolonged stress is the main culprit. But how is it that some people are able to deal with huge amounts of stress without ever burning out?

Here's Emma Isaacs, CEO of Business Chicks:

*With four kids aged six and under, running a global business and a recent re-location to the US, there are some days where it can feel impossible for me to get out of bed ... I couldn't do what I do without control of my mindset, belief and commitment; knowing that what I do has the power to change the world in some way. As an entrepreneur, you build a business for that reason alone - you won't get far if you're doing it for money, ego or any other reason. At the end of the day it's about that passion.*

## **Let's talk about 'Passion'**

Admit it – when I mentioned the word 'passion' above, you rolled your eyes right? Probably because in today's society, 'passion' is both a bit of a nice-to-have-but-not-really-that-essential kind of thing, and also something we sub-consciously link with 'work' thanks, in part, to Steve Jobs who famously said:

*“Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle.”*

William MacAskill points out another reason for the link between passion and work in [an article for 99u.com](#):

*“We have more freedom now to choose our careers than at any point in history. Maybe that's why talk of 'following your passion' has become so popular, allowing us to indulge in fantasies of pursuing what we currently enjoy full-time—and getting paid well for it.”*

And Cal Newport talks about why the call to ‘follow your passion’ is so attractive in [an interview with The Minimalists](#):

*“It's appealing because it's both simple and daring. It tells you that you have a calling, and if you can discover it and muster the courage to follow it, your working life will be fantastic. A big, bold move that changes everything: this is a powerful storyline.”*

These are storylines pretty much anyone with a striver-type personality has gotten caught up in at some point in their life. The pursuit of this:



No wonder people flinch whenever I mention the word ‘passion’! So many of us have tried for that magical state of ‘do what you love and you’ll never work another day in your life again’ and come up short.

Author Liz Gilbert has some thoughts on this topic that are perhaps the most useful I’ve come across. She draws a distinction between:

**HOBBY:** *A hobby is something that you do for pleasure, relaxation, distraction, or mild curiosity ... in your spare time. Hobbies can come and go in life — you might try out a hobby for a while, and then move on to something new ... The stakes are SUPER low with hobbies.*

*[They] are important because they remind us that not everything in life has to be about productivity and efficiency and profit and destiny.*

**JOB:** *Unless you have a trust fund, or just won the lottery, or somebody is completely supporting you financially ... you need a job. A job is how you look after yourself in the world. Now, here's the most essential thing to understand about a job: IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE AWESOME. Your job can be boring, it can be a drag, it can even be "beneath you". Jobs don't need to be soul-fulfilling. Really, they don't ... Don't judge yourself about your job and never be a snob about anyone else's job. We live in a material world and everyone has to do something for money, so just do whatever you have to do, collect your **pay check**, and then go live the rest of your life however you want. Your job does not need to be how you define yourself; you can create your own definitions of your purpose and your meaning, pulled from deep within your imagination. A job is vital, but don't make it YOUR LIFE.*

**CAREER:** *A career is different from a job. A job is just a task that you do for money, but a career is something that you build over the years with energy, passion, and commitment. You don't need to love your job, but I hope to heaven that you love your career — or else you're in the wrong career, and it would be better for you to quit that career and just go find yourself a job, or a different career. Careers are best done with excitement. Careers are huge investments. Careers require ambition, strategy, and hustle.*

**VOCATION:** *Vocation has nothing to do with money, with career, with status, with ambition ... anything that brings you to life and makes you feel like your soul is animated by purpose. Tending to your marriage can be your vocation. Raising your children can be your vocation. Teaching people how to take care of their health can be your vocation. Visiting your elderly neighbours can be your vocation. I have a friend who finds his vocation in picking up garbage off the streets wherever he goes; this is his gesture of love toward his fellow man. A vocation is the highest expression of your human purpose, and therefore you must approach it with deepest reverence.*

## How I define 'passion'

To me, a passion is nothing to do with work. Sitting somewhere between hobby and vocation on the 'Gilbert Scale' above, it's something, anything, that gives you a gentle squeeze in the stomach; that gets you out of bed in the morning with a smile on your face, puts a sparkle in your eye and when you're talking about it to others, you feel energised and alive.

And here's something else that's important to know: we are all multi-passionate people. That's another problem with the 'do what you love and you'll never work another day in your life' mantra. It suggests that there is this 'one thing' out there for all of us and if we can identify that 'one thing' then we'll be happy.

But there is no 'one thing'. There are many things!

I've mentioned some of my Passions already, but here's the long list:

- Wellness
- Fitness

- Creativity
- Competition
- Simplicity
- Effective communication
- Achieving my potential
- Helping others achieve their potential
- Productivity
- My family
- Learning
- Connecting people
- Kindness
- Achievement
- Recognition

As you can see, some of these are abstract concepts. Some of them are obvious (I mean, who's not passionate about their family?). And some of them are things I've even been fortunate enough to make money from.

It's important to note that there is no one 'thing' in there. When I'm at my best as a person, I'm nurturing a combination of the above. And at different times in my life, certain of these things come to the fore more than others.

This is the real beauty of our Passions. The way they are able to come in and out of our lives as and when there is room made for them. And when we make room for them we go to bed each night with satisfaction and wake up each morning with excitement.

### **How do Passions prevent burnout?**

When we're stressed and stretched for a prolonged period of time we experience resentment because it seems that everyone else around us is happy and we're not. We see other people enjoying themselves doing stuff they love, and feel bitterness that we don't have the same enjoyment in our life.

This can lead to a sense of powerlessness and despondency; a feeling that we're lacking control in our lives and are trapped in the situation we're in. When we feel trapped, we feel we don't have choices ... and that further increases the resentment we're feeling.

This is a horrible cycle to get into and it's easy to see how quickly it leads you down the path of emotional exhaustion and complete lack of motivation.

Finding the time to nurture our Passions, however:

- Makes us happy
- Removes those insidious feelings of resentment and bitterness
- Gives us the feeling that we're in control of something in our life.

Note my emphasis on the plural here. Passions.

Because if you spend your days immersed in the pursuit of a single passion:

- The serial entrepreneur who has 10 ideas every minute and never switches their brain off;
- The activist who loves feeling like they're making a significant impact on the world every day;
- The stay-at-home-parent who takes huge pride in running a tight ship on the home front while also being ever-available to their kids;
- The Olympic volley-baller who spends 30 hours a week training for their sport and another 30 hours a week thinking about that sport;

well they're all ripe scenarios for burnout too.

That's why we all need to remember we're all multi-passionate beings and ensure we're making time to nurture those multiple passions:

- The serial entrepreneur above is also passionate about competition and learning. He might nurture these two things by doing a weekly Parkrun event and ensuring he reads for 10 minutes each night before going to sleep.
- The activist is passionate about her dog. Each afternoon she might meet fellow dog owners at a local park. The dogs can have a great 'play date' while their owners get to gush about them to each other. She's also passionate about teaching so once a month she could run a class on social media for small business and get a buzz from seeing lightbulbs go off in people's head as she shares the simple strategy she's developed for herself over the years.
- The stay-at-home-parent? He might be passionate about body building and connecting like-minded people. So he could start a blog and use that as a platform for sharing training tips and creating an online community. When people from within that community start helping each other in the comments and making arrangements to meet up in real life – imagine the kick he'd get out of that!
- Meanwhile the Olympic volleyballer could be a huge movie buff. So what's stopping her from meeting a small group of friends at the cinema every Tuesday night to catch the latest flick – or from going to someone's house to revisit an old classic. If she was also passionate about giving back she could make herself available to do school visits to encourage more kids to get into volleyball.

When I reached my own point of burnout here's what was going on:

- I was passionate about my *family* - but I was too stressed out to be fully present around them.
- I was passionate about *good health and wellness* - but my daily exercise habit was starting to slip in favour of getting more work done. My diet was also poor and my mental health was in tatters.
- I was passionate about *helping others* - but at the time I could barely help myself much less others.
- I was a passionate *creator*, but at the time I felt I wasn't so much creating as I was constantly churning out sub-standard stuff under huge time pressures.

The worst thing about the above was that I knew what my passions were, I just wasn't making time in my life for them. But what if you're not me? What if you genuinely have no idea what things light you up in life?

## Three ways to identify your Passions

### 1. Open your eyes

I wish I could find a better way to say this better than [Mark Manson](#) but I can't. So please excuse the language and listen up to what he says to the hundreds of people who have written him asking for help on this topic:

*"You already found your passion, you're just ignoring it. Seriously, you're awake 16 hours a day, what the fuck do you do with your time? You're doing something, obviously. You're talking about something. There's some topic or activity or idea that dominates a significant amount of your free time, your conversations, your web browsing, and it dominates them without you consciously pursuing it or looking for it.*

*It's right there in front of you, you're just avoiding it. For whatever reason, you're avoiding it."*

If the reason you're avoiding it is because you're in that 'for a passion to be worthwhile I must be able to make money from it' mindset, then ...

### 2. Ask yourself these questions:

#### 1. What am I willing to experience a large amount of discomfort for?

Are you someone who will stand in line for hours to be the first to get the latest Apple device? Will you get up at 5am every day for six months to train for an Ironman triathlon? Do you think nothing of spending eight hours researching, writing and editing a single blog post before hitting 'publish'?

These are all clues. And what they're suggesting about you is not always what you think. For example:

- The girl who lines up for the first crack at the latest iPhone isn't necessarily passionate about Apple. She's more likely passionate about being an early adopter; being someone who is 'ahead of the curve'.
- The guy training for the Ironman triathlon is probably less passionate about triathlon and more passionate about pushing physical boundaries.
- The blogger who will spend eight hours on a single post could be more passionate about the *ideas* they're trying to communicate than they are about 'writing'.

#### 2. What am I curious about?

Here's Elizabeth Gilbert again. In her wonderful creative manifesto, *Big Magic*, she urges us to follow our curiosity and see where it leads us. The beauty of curiosity being that it:

*"... only ever asks one simple question: "Is there anything you're interested in?" Anything? Even a tiny bit? No matter how mundane or small? The answer need not set your life on fire, or make you quit your job, or force you to change your religion, or send you into a fugue state; it just has to capture your attention for a moment. But in that moment, if you can pause and identify even one tiny speck of interest in something, then curiosity will ask you to turn your head a quarter of an inch and look at the thing a wee bit closer. Do it. It's a clue. It might seem like nothing, but it's a clue. Follow that clue. Trust it. See where curiosity will lead you next. Then follow the next clue, and the next, and the next. Remember, it doesn't have to be a voice in the desert; it's just a harmless little scavenger hunt. Following that scavenger hunt of curiosity can lead you to amazing, unexpected places."*

This focus on 'curiosity' really hits the mark with many as it removes the sense of desperation that tends to go with finding your Passion.

### **3. What am I good at?**

Oliver Embleton believes [passion comes from success](#). He says:

*"All of our emotions exist for good reason. We feel hunger to ensure we don't starve. We feel full to ensure we don't burst. And we feel passion to ensure we concentrate our efforts on things that reward us the most.*

*Imagine you start a dance class. You find it easy. You realise you're getting better than others, and fast. That rising excitement you feel is your passion, and that passion makes you come back for more, improving your skills, and compounding your strengths."*

We're all good at something. And we tend to think if we're good at something, or know a lot about something, then *everyone* is good at that thing/knows lots about that thing too. But they're not. And they don't.

So a good way to identify the stuff you're good at (that you might currently be taking for granted) is to ask your friends and family. You might also want to pay attention to the things people come to you for advice for.

Clues. These are all clues!

### **4. What's one thing that, when I do it, is guaranteed to lift my mood?**

The next time you find yourself particularly 'buzzy' or high on life, pay attention. What are you doing? What exactly is it about what you're doing that's making you feel that way?

As with question one, the answer is usually beyond the obvious.

For example, I always feel really high after speaking/giving a presentation. Is it the act of speaking that's making me buzzy? Or is it the opportunity to share my ideas with a large and captive audience?

When I finish a running race and I have a big, silly grin from ear to ear, is it the act of running that's excited me? Or the thrill of competition?

Take the time to look below the surface of your excitement because when you do, you will find there are multiple ways of getting that 'passion hit'. I know it was exciting for me to find out that there are many ways I can experience the thrill of competition that don't involve running; that public speaking is just one of many ways I can get my ideas out into the world.

### **5. What can't my friends shut me up about?**

We've all experienced that thing where we're sitting with friends chatting and then they get 'that' look on their face. The one that says 'here we go, she's on her soapbox again.'

Don't let that 'soapbox' comment or the fact that their eyes have started to glaze over deflate you. Own that thing and then go find a more receptive audience!

I have a real passion for self-improvement but it's something few of my friends or family really care about. That's why I have a blog! It allows me to share my ideas and passions with people who care!

### **6. What do I want my legacy to this world to be?**

In his stunning essay [The Moral Bucket List](#), written for *The New York Times*, David Brooks looks at people who have achieved a real sense of inner peace and contentment and tried to divine the difference between them and him:

*"Commencement speakers are always telling young people to follow their passions. Be true to yourself. This is a vision of life that begins with self and ends with self. But people on the road to inner light do not find their vocations by asking, what do I want from life? They ask, what is life asking of me? How can I match my intrinsic talent with one of the world's deep needs?"*

So ... what is life asking of you? What might you be ignoring? What gift would you like to leave with the world when you are gone?

### **3. Understand yourself better**

The third thing you could do to get an understanding of what your Passions might be is to try some personality typing. Some people love this stuff, some people hate it. I am in the 'love' camp because I've spent a lot of my life fighting against certain aspects of my personality (my quietness, antipathy for large and loud social gatherings and disdain for writing out systems and processes to name a few). And that fight has been exhausting and frustrating.

Once I did some personality typing and discovered those traits are hardwired into me, I became a lot more self-accepting, and learned to work with those traits rather than railing against them. This was life-changing for me.

Now there are many, many tests out there and Googling any of the below will offer you both paid and free versions of each:

- Strengths Finder 2.0
- DiSC Profile
- Sally Hogshead's Fascination Advantage Assessment

- The Myers Briggs Personality Test (MBTI)

Of the above, the MBTI is my personal favourite. So much so, I collaborated with Carly Toomey from type-coach.com to address, 'What makes each personality type feel particularly 'buzzy' and alive?' (In other words, what is each personality type particularly passionate about?) Here's what we came up with. I'd love to hear if any of the following sparks something for you!

(If you don't know what your MBTI Personality Type is, try the paid Verifier test at type-coach.com for the best results or the free test at 16personalities.com. Appendix 1 of this book also contains a 'quick and dirty' way to figure out your MBTI and many people have told me the results they have gotten from doing it that way match up well with what paid tests show.)

### **What makes each personality type 'buzzy':**

#### **INFJ**

INFJs are life's advisors and have a deep need to help people 'sort their shit out' by bringing order to their lives. (It should come as no surprise to you that I am an INFJ and this book and everything I write on my blog supports my passion for the above.)

#### **INTJ**

INTJs have the highest need for continuous learning – they thrive when they are progressively working towards higher and higher levels of competency and excellence. They are driven to improve both themselves AND the world around them.

#### **ISTJ**

ISTJs are naturally motivated to go 'deep into the weeds'. They love to get their hands on nitty gritty details and logistics; to take a messy process and make it tidy, smooth and step-by-step efficient.

#### **INTP**

INTPs are the most intrinsically motivated of the 16 types. They enjoy solving complex logic problems almost as sport. They find solutions for the problems others don't know how to fix.

*For real life case studies about INFJs, INTJs, ISTJs and INTPs doing their 'thing' [go here](#).*

#### **ISFJ**

ISFJs like to help people in practical, tangible ways with great use of their attention to detail. Driven to achieve closure, they are all about concrete, objectively productive results. (Think personal training or sports coaching for instance.)

#### **ISTP**

This is the James Bond type – the most calm, cool and collected of the 16 types. ISTPs thrive in crises (ie where there is a real sense of urgency). Extraordinarily efficient, they don't take one step, say one word or go to any extra effort they don't need to in order to get the result they are after. They also

tend to be exceptionally kinaesthetic (great with their hands, very coordinated, mechanically inclined).

### **ISFP**

ISFPs have strong personal values and crave the freedom and space necessary to feel like they are living their lives in accordance with those values and what “feels” right to them. They also care deeply about people and take great pleasure in tangibly contributing to the well-being and happiness of others in the moment.

### **INFP**

INFPs love learning new things and constantly developing themselves. When it comes to bettering themselves, you name it: self-help books, food plans, religions, meditation, yoga, certifications in coaching, heart math; they’ve tried it. INFPs get bonus satisfaction from applying their learnings to the benefit of others.

*For real life case studies about ISFJs, ISTPs, ISFPs and INFPs doing their ‘thing’ [go here](#).*

### **ESFJ**

ESFJs are life’s mothers. They love to nurture and care for others, especially in ways that are clear cut and easily appreciated.

### **ESTP**

ESTPs love excitement, change, variety and adventure. Not ones for pacing steadily towards a future goal, ESTPs are most driven by the need to wing it; to be happy in the moment.

### **ENTP**

ENTPs are inventors and innovators at heart. They are idea generation machines, energised most by future possibilities and motivated by the need to leave a legacy behind when they are gone.

### **ENTJ**

ENTJs are the powerhouse ‘CEO’ type. They thrive in leadership roles that take advantage of their unconventional minds and knack for developing long-term strategies and solving complex problems that involve a lot of moving pieces.

*For real life case studies about ESFJs, ESTPs, ENTPs and ENTJs doing their ‘thing’ [go here](#).*

### **ENFJ**

ENFJs are driven to maximise their own potential. They are also highly motivated to be recognised, to stand out as exceptional. Super-creative, ENFJs tend to be happiest when using their aesthetic sense – they are painters, writers, actors, designers, newscasters – artists of all kinds.

### **ENFP**

ENFPs are ideas people who generate a constant flow of out of the box ideas – mainly when talking with others (not alone). They thrive in situations where they can both inspire other people to be their best selves and in turn, perform for those same people at their best.

### **ESTJ**

ESTJs are driven to feel productive in very measurable, concrete ways and are also highly motivated to give concrete advice to others. Their mood is exceptionally linked to how productive they feel they've been that day ... how many things they've checked off the list or how they've set others on the right path in a concrete way.

### **ESFP**

Exceptional multi-taskers, ESFPs have amazing powers of observation – they notice everything, they remember everyone. They are lots of fun, naturally happy-go-lucky and have a strong need to feel connected to others.

*For real life case studies about ENFJs, ENFPs, ESTJs and ESFPs doing their 'thing' go [here](#).*

## **So what now?**

Howard Thurman famously said:

*"Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."*

Hopefully I've now convinced you that Passion is both an important and necessary ingredient in an excellent life. And hopefully you're also now convinced that you don't need to be making money from a passion for it to be a worthwhile use of your time.

If you're sitting there thinking 'Yes, yes, I'm convinced. But where on earth am I going to find the time?' then you're in luck. Because the next section of this book is all about Prioritisation.

## SECTION 2: OVERWHELM

*“Kel, I’m going to be honest here. I don’t see the point of therapy for you. Nothing has changed.”*

*“What? How can you say that? It’s been a huge help.”*

*“Really? Everything looks the same from my end. You’re still filling up your days with too much. You’re still trying to help the whole world at the expense of your family. You’re still constantly stressed out, vague and distracted all day, every day.”*

*“...”*

*“Am I wrong?”*

*“No. You’re not wrong. I’m sorry.”*

*“Look I know you’re sorry but you have to understand your apparent inability (or is it unwillingness?) to find a real solution for this is very frustrating for me.”*

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The feeling of overwhelm can be summed up by the words: “I’ve got a lot on my mind at the moment”. This makes overwhelmed people easy to identify – they’re the ones walking around in a vague and distracted manner with stressed expressions on their faces. Their faces are reflections of their brains desperately trying to process the hundreds of things they ‘have to do’, all at the same time.

And, as you can see from the conversation with my husband above, ‘vague and distracted’ used to be my default state.

I’m a naturally efficient and productive person so when I’m in tune with my passions and then throw my striver mentality into the mix, what you have is the perfect overwhelm storm: so many ideas to be executed, amazing things to ‘try at least once’ and opportunities to be grabbed.

Where does the overwhelm come from? From the fact that there is never enough time to do all the things we want to do.

Where does the vagueness and lack of presence come from? From the fact that we’re constantly moving things around in our head, trying to fit it all in, despite said lack of time.

You’ll know from the **Practical Perfection Framework** that ‘fitting it all in’ is not the answer. The answer is *prioritisation*. Yet paradoxically, that answer is also part of the problem – exactly how do you choose between all the amazing things you could be doing?

## Let's talk about Prioritisation

The Business Dictionary defines Prioritisation this way:

*As a principle, it means doing 'first things first;' as a process, it means evaluating a group of items and ranking them in their order of importance or urgency.*

Here's where we run into trouble: we have so many priorities. How on earth do we effectively rank them? How do we do 'first things first' when we don't have a clue what the first thing should be?

In terms of the Practical Perfection framework, Prioritisation comes down to being able to make good decisions about how we're spending our time. This sounds like it should be a simple thing to do, but the reality is, hardly anyone is managing it.

I know this because the opposite of good prioritisation is overwhelm, and everywhere I look I see overwhelmed people. The vast majority of emails I get from readers of my blog come from people who want to know how to deal with this overwhelm.

The problem was so evident I ran a survey on the topic as research for this book.

I was curious about a few things:

1. Had overwhelm become the new normal?
2. What were people missing out on in life because of the overwhelm?

Over 1700 people responded to my survey and 52% indicated that they felt overwhelmed either a lot of the time or all of the time. In other words, yes, overwhelm was a 'normal' part of these people's everyday lives.

The major *reason* for this overwhelm varied greatly but the *result* of overwhelm was the same for the majority: increased irritability and compromised mental health.

Stop and think about what that means for a second.

**If overwhelm is a normal part of people's lives, then so too are irritability and compromised mental health.**

Worst of all though were the things people said they'd have time for if they weren't overwhelmed all the time. The following is a *very* indicative sample of responses to the question: "Finish this sentence: when I'm not feeling stressed out and overwhelmed I have more time for ..."

*"Pursuing creative activities like singing, playing, recording, drawing and cooking."*

*"Fun, frivolity and spontaneity. More time to be the person I like being."*

*"Having fun and being in the moment with my kids and husband - laughing, being silly and wasting time."*

*"Being in a happy space with my family."*

*“To just breathe and to just be.”*

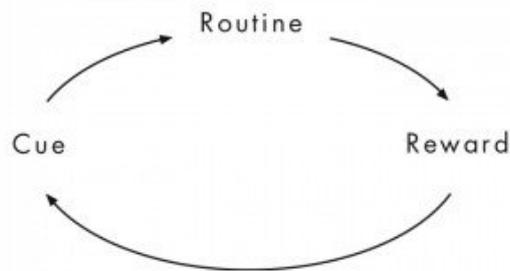
*“Being a giver: a giver of my time, my listening, my support and my love. If I am in my happy place I have abundantly more capacity to give.”*

It was heartbreaking reading through the stuff people knew they were missing out on because of their inability to Prioritise effectively. It was doubly heartbreaking to see that while they knew what they were missing out on, they just didn't have the tools (or the capacity) to incorporate better Prioritisation into their lives.

To understand how we've gotten to this point, we need to unpack one key thing about overwhelm first.

## **Overwhelm is a very bad habit**

At the core of every habit (good or bad) is a simple three part loop:



The cue triggers a routine/action which ultimately leads to a reward. Habits that are highly automated and thus extremely hard to break are the ones where your brain anticipates the pleasure of the upcoming reward simply on seeing the cue.

For example:

Right on **cue** at 3pm, you hit a bit of a slump. This triggers the **routine** of heading over to the coffee shop where you **reward** yourself with a coffee and 'something sweet' for getting through to this point in the day. After months of doing this same thing every day, it's such a strong habit that the simple act of seeing '3pm' on your watch causes the pleasure centres in your brain to light up at the thought of how good that coffee and 'something sweet' is going to taste.

It's that **craving** that leads to the habit becoming something very automated.

If you love helping other people (like I do), a similar scenario plays out when someone asks you to do something for them:

Your friend Annie comes past your desk at work and says:

“I’ve been asked to stay back to help with that big tender we’re working on. But I’ve got no one to pick up Sally from school ...”.

You say:

“Oh gosh, no dramas. I can pick Sally up for you and take her back to my place. Come through and grab her once you’re finished up here.”

What’s the reward here? Your friend’s beaming face and the dopamine hit that comes with that.

Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with the above scenario – friends helping friends makes the world go round. The point where problems start, however, is when you get addicted to the dopamine hit the beaming face delivers. Before you know it, just someone coming to you for help can give you that hit. Which means you’ve said yes in your head before they’ve even asked their favour. And before you know it, you’re not just helping your friend Annie, you’re helping out every single person who asks anything of you.

This is the point I got to. (You’re probably understanding my husband’s frustration now.)

Worst of all, that wasn’t the only bad habit I had when it came to over-committing myself. I also had a craving for the same thing every other striver-type in the world craves: achievement.

And opportunities for ‘achievement’ are presented to us every day:

- Someone we admire wants to collaborate with us.
- A friend signs up for a marathon and asks if we want to do it too.
- A great job comes up and even though we don’t have time for it, we apply anyway. (Why? Because simply being offered the job would be an achievement. We don’t have to actually take the job right?)

If it was just the habit loop above that we needed to address in regards to Prioritisation, it would be relatively easy to do so. But there are a few other things that are causing overwhelm in those looking to live an excellent life.

## **What else drives overwhelm?**

### **1. Our need to use up every available minute in the day**

This one particularly rears its head when your Passions are in full flight. If you’re anything like me, you have *so* many ideas sitting there on the sidelines waiting for a call up. But you also *do* have the odd sensible bone in your body and while you’ve always been able to do a LOT, you also know you can’t do *everything*.

But then some time would free up and I’ll bet my house that this conversation is what ensues:

*Wait – is that a tiny opening in my schedule I’m seeing there? Unreal! This is my chance to finally do project x; that one that’s been hovering on the edge of my mind for ages. I’ve been*

*ever so good in not giving in to its seductive siren call till now so it would be a crime not to do it given I can't stop thinking about it right?*

Well, maybe.

But in reality, probably not.

## **2. FODO: Fear of disappointing others**

I've already mentioned FODO in terms of people asking us to do stuff for them, and us being unable to say no. But the need of strivers to rise to the expectations others have of them (regardless of whether those expectations are reasonable) causes problems too.

I've had emails from people who, because of FODO:

- Spent 30 years in a career they found incredibly unfulfilling.
- Found themselves on hugely time-consuming fundraising committees simply because they had a tenuous link to the thing being fundraised for and the committee assumed they'd be up for it.
- Found themselves horribly in debt and struggling to pay that debt because all their friends were going on a trip to Europe and it was simply expected that they'd find their way on to that trip too.

The problem with FODO is it's self-perpetuating. The more we do for people and the more we rise to meet their expectations, the more they expect from us and the less able we feel to 'disappoint' them by saying no.

## **3. FOMO: Fear of missing out**

In 2013 the Oxford dictionary added 'FOMO' as a word. And while the fear of missing out on something cool has long been part of the human make-up, it's ramped up to unbelievable levels with the advent of social media.

Wikipedia defines it as:

*"a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent".<sup>[2]</sup> This social angst<sup>[3]</sup> is characterized by "a desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing".<sup>[2]</sup> FoMO is also defined as a fear of regret,<sup>[4]</sup> which may lead to a compulsive concern that one might miss an opportunity for social interaction, a novel experience, profitable investment or other satisfying event.<sup>[5]</sup> In other words, FoMO perpetuates the fear of having made the wrong decision on how to spend time, as "you can imagine how things could be different".<sup>[4]</sup>*

That last bit is the key to where social media sends FOMO into the stratosphere. The fact that it *perpetuates the fear of having made the wrong decision on how to spend time, as you can imagine how things could be different.*

Previously, in order to imagine how things could be different, we needed to actually be out and about seeing people doing cool things. Or we might hear about it from them after the fact. Now,

because of social media, we're seeing all the things we *could* be doing in real-time – and we're changing our behaviour as a result.

- We see people out together, wonder why we weren't invited ... and then start spending time doing things that will ensure we *are* invited next time.
- We see our peers achieving things that are on our very long bucket list, and because our peer has done that thing, we now feel we need to have a crack at it sooner rather than later.

Perhaps worst of all, however, is when seeing something on social media makes us feel we *should* be doing things or striving for things that deep down we know aren't for us.

For example, as driven as I've been my whole life, I've never wanted to do stuff on a global scale. I've never wanted to rule the world. But seeing what some of my female entrepreneur friends are up to sometimes makes me think I'm aiming too low. That what I *am* doing is not 'enough'.

This is dangerous territory to be getting into as it introduces the word 'should' into the mix.

What's so bad about the word 'should'?

Hannah Braime makes a strong point in a post for TinyBuddha.com when she says:

*"When we use the word "should," we're not accepting reality. We're talking about things that we wish were so, but aren't (or vice versa). Whenever I used the word "should" when talking to myself, it was motivated by a lack of self-acceptance rather than encouragement."*

So how do we get a better grip on reality? How do we bring greater self-acceptance into the mix?

## **We need to get in touch with our values**

### **What are values exactly?**

They are:

*"... those elements of your life which you find personally important. They are core beliefs which guide you on how to conduct your life in a way that is meaningful and satisfying for you.*

*Values are the things against which you measure your choices, whether consciously or not. You use them to rationalise your behaviour to yourself and others. And they determine your level of satisfaction with your choices, even if decisions are not freely made but constrained by other factors."* [\[Source\]](#)

### **What do our values have to do with prioritisation?**

Roy Disney has been credited with saying:

*"It's not hard to make decisions when you know what your values are."*

Given the ability to make good decisions is what effective prioritisation is all about, it's really important to understand what your values are before trying to prioritise your time effectively.

## So how do you figure out what your values are?

I asked several very qualified people this question and did considerable research on the topic myself. In the end, psychologist Ellen Jackson summed things up well:

*Values is actually a really under-researched area in psychology.*

Translation: there is no sure-fire way to get a good understanding of what your values are.

Ellen went on to say that the simplest and most often-used tool is a values inventory. Ellen generously provided me with the values inventory she uses in her 'Find Your Groove' course and you can find that inventory along with some introductory prompts in Appendix 1 of this book.

Equally generous is Lee Alexander from Brightside Coaching who has provided the Core Values Exercise that she uses in her program The Flourish Project®. That can be found in Appendix 2.

An exercise I have walked people through on my website in the past incorporates elements of both the above, and I share it with you here as I feel seeing one of these exercises in action can be quite helpful.

Here are the questions I get people to work through:

### **1: Describe a (hopefully relatively recent) situation where you felt super 'buzzy'/energised/on top of your game.**

- Where were you, who were you with and what were you doing?
- How did you come to be there?
- What was it exactly about the situation that made you feel so buzzy/energised?

### **2: Describe a (hopefully relatively recent) situation or moment where you felt ridiculously content.**

- Where were you, who were you with and what were you doing?
- How did you come to be there?
- What was it exactly about the situation that made you feel so buzzy/energised?

### **3: Quick analysis**

- Going on your answers to the above, what is jumping out at you as things you value highly/bring out the best in you?

So you can see the above in action, here are my own answers:

### **1: Describe a (hopefully relatively recent) situation where you felt super 'buzzy'/energised/on top of your game.**

- **Where were you?** The ProBlogger conference on the Gold Coast
- **What were you doing?** Speaking!
- **Who were you with?** A large group of blogging peers

- **How did you come to be there?** I put in an application to speak four years in a row ... and finally got a YES!
- **What was it exactly about the situation that made you feel so buzzy/energised?**  
The fact that I was speaking (because I love speaking/presenting), to a group of my peers (ie people who already 'got' what I was going to be talking about). There was also the validation of being chosen to speak and the lovely feedback I got afterwards. I was on a high for a week after the event.

**2: Describe a (hopefully relatively recent) situation or moment where you felt ridiculously content.**

- **Where were you?** At home in our backyard
- **What were you doing?** Chatting to my husband (Ant) and kicking a footy around with the kids.
- **Who were you with?** Ant and the kids.
- **How did you come to be there?** Ant and I have worked quite hard to put ourselves in a position where we're both home in the afternoon so we can have some good quality time with the kids each day.
- **What was it exactly about the situation that made you feel so content?** The fact that everyone was very chilled out. The kids were stoked to be out in the backyard with both their parents, Ant and I were feeling (at the moment in time) very un-stressed so we were able to have a nice conversation without any angsty-ness! It was just nice being able to be fully present with my family and enjoying time with them without any tension or distractedness because of worries and stresses!

**Part 3: Quick analysis**

- **Going on your answers to the above, what is jumping out at you as things you value highly/bring out the best in you?**

Recognition from my peers. The ability to help people by sharing my knowledge.  
Quality time with my family. The ability to be fully present in the moment with my family.

The good thing about the questions above is that from now on, whenever you find yourself in a situation where you are ridiculously buzzy or ridiculously content, you can run through the 'sub' questions above, hone in on exactly what it is about those situations that are making you buzzy and translate that knowledge into a value.

If the questions above haven't sparked anything for you, please do utilise Ellen and Lee's resources as it seems with values, sometimes you need just to come at things from a slightly different direction in order to achieve that real 'aha' moment. And I can assure you, when you do, it's very worth it. As you'll now see.

## How do you use your values to drive good decision making?

Let me share my own experience:

As mentioned previously, it's easy for someone as highly driven as I am to look at friends with young families who are doing massive things on the world stage and think, if they're managing to do those things, I should be aspiring to those things too. (There's that word 'should' again.)

Then I remember one of my absolute core values is the need to *be at home*. I could never travel as much as those friends do because I get terribly (and I mean *terribly*) homesick. Note, this value is separate to the strong values I have around 'family'. My successful, world-dominating female friends have strong family values too – but they don't have that deep-seated need that I do to *be at home*.

Some of my core values are slightly contradictory and I have to find a way for them to work together. For example: my core values of *achievement* and *recognition* have the potential to clash rather badly with the values I have around *privacy* and *space*.

I learned early in the piece that the best way to make these things work was to aim for recognition from my peers, but no further. (In other words, I never want to be 'famous' – the kind where random people might recognise you on the street.)

Knowing all of the above means I can check myself when opportunities present themselves:

- Will this cool opportunity being presented to me regularly take me away from being at home in the evenings or on the weekends? Then the answer is probably going to be no.
- Will this cool opportunity give me wider exposure than I'm comfortable with? Then the answer is probably going to be no.
- Will this cool opportunity put me in the position of losing much-valued privacy and space? Then the answer is probably going to be no, (no matter how much my ego is screaming "Yes, oh God, Yes!").

## Practical tips for tackling overwhelm

So you now have a better understanding of what your values are and you feel better able to make good decisions about how to prioritise your time, here are eight other mindset shifts that will help you keep a lid on overwhelm:

### 1. Don't compare someone's highlight reel with your every day

Social media is great for showing us the highlights of people's lives. But what social media doesn't show us is the stuff that sits behind those highlights.

- The friend who's currently at a resort in Bali isn't Instagramming herself in her hotel room trying to make deadline before she can go out to dinner.
- The colleague who won that award isn't telling you about how the ridiculously long hours they've worked in the last year has affected their relationship with their partner and kids.
- Your brother might have just moved into a beautiful new house but he's not sharing about how he can't actually afford the mortgage on it.

- The mum at school who's lost all that weight hasn't confessed it from the stress of her marriage failing.

As much as we hear it over and over again, we can't help being envious of the nice things that we see other people experiencing. But it's really important to remind ourselves that we don't know the story behind the highlight reel. The best way to remind ourselves of this is to take note of what we're not telling people the next time we share something cool on social media.

## **2. Understand that no one has it 'all'**

In the same vein as above, somewhere along the line we decided that this person exists - the one who:

*Is training for an Ironman triathlon, while going on holiday to The Maldives, while maintaining a house that looks like a magazine, while making Nigella-style dinners every night, while attending their kids' award assembly, while running a fundraiser for their friend who's got cancer, while winning a much-coveted business award, while having a weekly date night with their partner.*

Yep, we cherry pick all the best part of everyone's lives on Facebook or Instagram and put them together to equal one awesome life that absolutely no-one is living!

And we label this life 'having it all'.

Crazy right? We all do it, even the most self-aware of us.

Overcoming this is as simple as catching ourselves when we do ... and reminding ourselves that 'having it all' does not exist.

## **3. Understand that other people's goals are not your goals**

As a writer, it goes with the territory that I have a lot of writer friends. For many of these friends, the big goal is to have a publisher come and tell them 'I love your book and I want to publish it'. So it would be easy for me to think that should be my goal too.

The thing is, as much as I'd love to see my book sitting face out in an airport bookstore, I cannot deal with all that goes with that: the long lead times, the need to get your manuscript past several gatekeepers, the loss of creative control. I love the nimbleness self-publishing gives me. I love being able to get my words into the hands of readers as quickly as possible. I love having control over my own destiny.

It's REALLY important to know that just because your peers aspire to something, that doesn't mean you should aspire to that thing too.

It's a hard thing to push back against sometimes (ok, a lot of the time) but when you check in with your values and make decisions that are more in line with those and less in line with what everyone else is doing/suggesting you should do, the relief you will feel will tell you everything you need to know.

#### **4. Understand the things you might think are a priority actually aren't**

I caught myself being a bit jealous of a friend the other day because she had an article published on a site that I've long dreamed of being published on. The big irony, however, was this: even though I dreamed of being published there I'd not:

- Followed that site in more than a cursory manner,
- Taken note of the types of things they've published,
- Built any kind of relationship with the people who run the site, and, most ridiculous of all,
- Ever actually submitted a piece to them for publication.

So clearly, getting published on that site wasn't actually as much of a priority for me as I thought it was. Because if it was, I'd have done something a little more proactive about it.

#### **5. Get comfortable with disappointing others**

In 2012 my guiding word for the year was 'No'. After battling extreme overwhelm for my whole adult life, I decided it was time to quit the people pleasing and get comfortable with FODO.

What was I most scared about? That people would feel let down by me and upset with me when I said no to them.

What actually happened? People felt let down by me and upset with me when I said no to them.

But ... they also got over it. Really quickly!

As an added bonus, the whole process gave people a better understanding of my boundaries which meant I got asked to do less, which meant I didn't have to say no as much. Win!

#### **6. Understand the sunk cost fallacy**

One of the biggest enemies of getting on top of overwhelm is sunk costs. When we've invested a lot of time and effort to something, we just can't bear the thought of 'losing out on that investment' by walking away from it.

This is true of:

- The person who's started an online shop and invested time and money in creating products,
- Athletes who have spent years and sacrificed lots toward training for a certain event,
- People who have paid a significant deposit towards an overseas conference.

We all need to understand that while our sunk costs for something may be huge, the costs of pursuing that thing might be greater than any benefit we might ever derive from it. I'm not saying we should all throw in the towel when the going gets tough but if your gut is telling you loud and clear that it's time to walk away from something, give yourself permission to listen.

#### **7. Make peace with your striver personality**

When you're a highly driven, very productive person, who's very clear about what their passions are in life ... the sky is the limit! But the resources available to us (resources, energy, space) are not limitless. That means we have to accept that:

- We can't go after everything that presents itself to us.
- Sometimes things will happen more slowly than we'd like.
- Sometimes we will miss out on stuff because we can't always be in the right place at the right time.

This is where knowing our values comes in handy. They allow us to know that the things we're spending time and energy on are truly important to us. They allow us to be more realistic in the expectations we have both of ourselves, and of life in general.

## **8. Learn six simple words**

Originally this book was going to be called *How to Say No* – specifically 'how to say no to overwhelm'. Then I ran into a bit of trouble because I realised everything I wanted to tell people about learning to say no came down to six simple words.

*'Let me get back to you.'*

These six words are what got me through 2012, the 'Year of Saying No' I mentioned above.

They are what allowed me to override the very bad 'saying yes to everything and everyone and horribly over-committing myself on an ongoing basis' habit that I mentioned at the top of this section.

They allowed me to go away, check in with my values, get a good feel for what I was really saying yes to ... and then go back to the person with my answer. An added bonus of those six words was that it let the person making the request know that 'no' was a possibility ahead of me saying it (if that was my answer).

And really, if the answer was 'no', that was seldom the word I used. More often I used some variation of:

- Thank you so much for the opportunity but it is not right for me right now.
- I'm unable to help with that thing at the moment but perhaps you could try x.
- I wish I could be involved but the current constraints on my time don't allow for it.

## **So what now?**

Overwhelm has become such a normal part of our lives we tend not to question its presence. And this is not great because it then means we're failing to Prioritise the things that are really important to us, the things that match up best with our core values.

My hope is that this section has made you both more aware of what your Priorities are, and left you feeling better equipped to tackle the overwhelm in your life.

But wait, we're not done yet! It's all well and good to have identified our Passions, determined our values and become more aware of our Priorities, but how do we make the most of this new knowledge and self-awareness? How can we achieve the things we want to and perform to the levels we desire, without ending up feeling like we're Hamsters on a Wheel?

Let's move on to the third piece of the Practical Perfection puzzle – Productivity – and find out.

### SECTION 3: HAMSTER ON A WHEEL

*“Ant, I need you to register a domain name for me.”*

*“Another one? What’s this for?”*

*“Just an idea I’ve got.”*

*“Another idea ...”*

*“What?”*

*“It’s just that you’re supposed to be at home getting better, but instead you’re chasing off after every single idea that enters your head. You’re busy, busy, busy just like you’ve always been ... but it just doesn’t seem like you’re actually getting anywhere.”*

---

*We’ve all met that person who seems to have a ‘new, great idea’ every time you speak to them. You get really excited for them and can’t wait for an update on where they’re at with it the next time you speak to them. But the next time you speak to them, they’re on to something new. Something they’re equally passionate about. And, again, you get really excited for them. But the next time you talk to them they’ve moved on ... again.*

In the end, this cycle repeats itself so often you come to realise there’s no point getting excited for them because they never actually make things happen.

For some people, this is their default setting. They’re ideas people who need ‘doers’ to take their ideas and make them reality.

When strivers, people who are generally good at Making Things Happen, fall into this pattern of behaviour, it’s for a different reason. It’s because (to borrow a phrase from Zig Ziglar), they’ve started to confuse activity for accomplishment.

This generally happens when we’re a little lost.

When I had my breakdown and my husband sent me home to get better while he took over running my business, I was completely lost.

I felt guilty that I was home doing ‘nothing’ and not contributing to the household budget. I felt completely rudderless because ‘getting better’ was a pretty vague thing to be working towards. And I felt very, very agitated because I wasn’t achieving anything.

So I did the only thing I knew how: I got busy. I started signing up for courses and taking on passion projects and, worst of all, starting new businesses!

It felt so good to be busy. It felt like I was achieving something.

But I actually wasn’t making any kind of forward progress. I was simply reverting to a time-honoured behaviour pattern: when in doubt, get busy.

Before long, I was a proverbial Hamster on a Wheel.

## **Let's talk about Productivity**

Most people think of 'productivity' as the ability to fit more into the available hours of their day. And I certainly used to leverage productivity in this manner. As you know from Section One, when I had my first baby I managed to fit an insane amount of stuff into my days ... and all that netted me was burnout.

These days? As counter-intuitive as it may seem, I use productivity to allow me to move slowly at certain points during my day – to do what I call 'meandering'. This ability to meander is a key pillar of what I write about on my blog, A Life Less Frantic, and the happy, content and fulfilled life I want the Practical Perfection Framework to deliver to people.

So how do we introduce more Productivity into our lives in a way that supports the Practical Perfection Framework?

Well it's a four-step process:

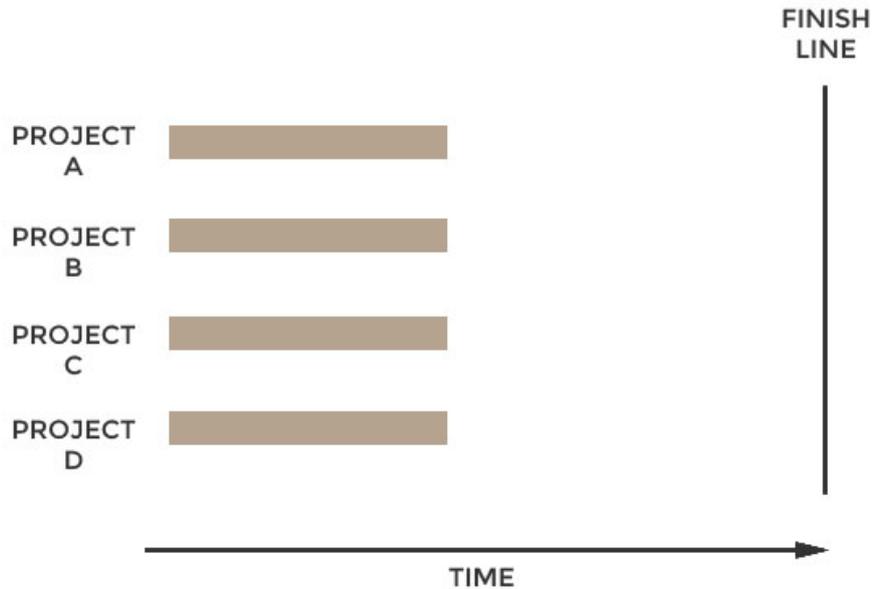
1. Get your focus right
2. Get your energy levels right
3. Create whitespace
4. Get stuff done

### **1. Get your focus right**

My clever friend Nicole Avery once said:

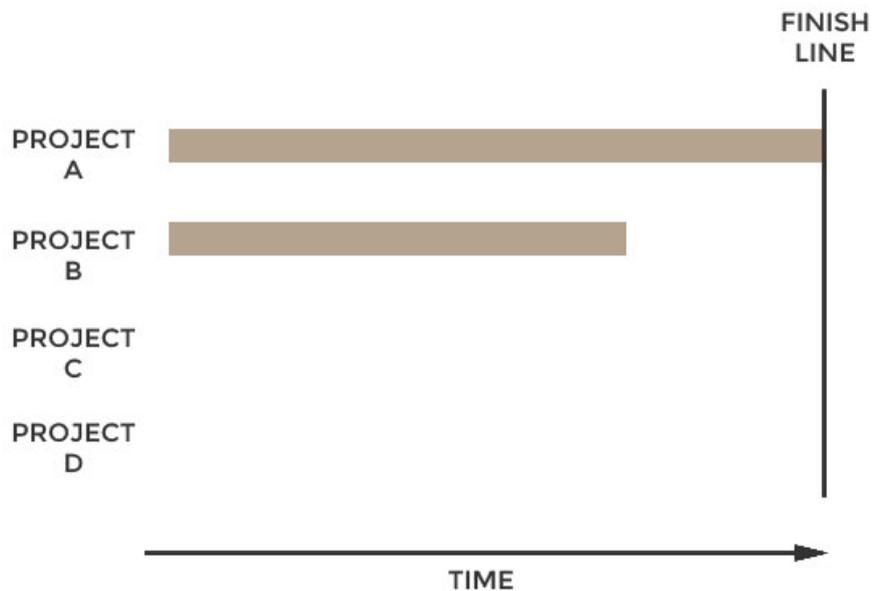
*'If you're spending your time on the wrong activities, no matter how well you manage your time, you won't be productive.'*

When we're highly in tune with our Passions in particular, and when we've made time to Prioritise those Passions, all our ideas seem great and they all seem worthy of our time. So we have a crack at everything that catches our eye. Here's what this looks like:



Yep, we're really busy, and we're certainly 'doing' a lot ... but we're not finishing anything. We're not getting anywhere. If you've been there, done that, you know how demotivating this is.

Here's what happens when we choose to focus that same amount of time, but on fewer projects:



That's right. Project A is done. Project B is nearly finished. And Projects C and D are still there, waiting their turn.

So before we can get Productive in a way that removes that Hamster on a Wheel feeling of 'never getting anywhere', we first have to narrow our focus. It doesn't mean we have to narrow our Passions or take on fewer projects. It just means we need to understand that to actually get somewhere, we need to take it one thing at a time.

And I get it, I do. When you're a striver there are just so many things you could be doing. And more and more things are presenting themselves to you all the time. Maintaining focus is hard! But it's so very worth it when you do.

Once you've zeroed in on what your focus is now, the next step in the Productivity process is getting your energy levels right.

## **2. Get your energy levels right**

I've heard it said before that we all have the same hours in the day so you can't change the amount of time that is available to you, but you can change the energy you're able to bring to that time you have available. This is incredibly true. So many people think that in being able to burn the candle at both ends, they're being incredibly productive. In reality, however, all that does is put them on the fast path to burnout.

I believe there are three key foundations to having the right levels of energy:

### **1. Exercise**

Too many people look at exercise as a weight loss tool only and figure if they don't need to lose weight, or if weight loss is not a priority for them, then they don't need to exercise. The fact is, our bodies are designed to move and if we're not moving them, they're not operating at optimal capacity.

Exercise is essential for good mental health and as counter-intuitive as it sounds, exercise also boosts energy levels.

We don't all have to be hitting the gym or training for a marathon. Something as simple as a 30 minute walk each day is enough to give us the energy boost we need.

When should you exercise? Whenever you can fit it in really. Morning exercisers love how beautifully it kicks off their day and report feeling very mentally sluggish if they don't get their morning exercise. Midday exercisers love how it gives their brains a rest in the middle of the day and boosts their afternoon productivity. Afternoon/evening exercisers loves how it dissipates the stresses of their day and allows them to sleep better. Figure out what works best for you and commit to it.

### **2. Sleep**

Speaking of sleep – this is often the number one thing that goes out the window when you're a striver type with your eye on a goal. Now I don't subscribe to Arianna Huffington's theory that we all need 8-9 hours a night. I am more with Hal Elrod (author of *Miracle Morning*) in thinking we all need different amounts of sleep to function well, we just need to figure out what that amount is ... and then ensure we're not only getting that sleep, but that it's good quality.

And really, it's the quality that most of us struggle with, especially if we have kids.

The ironic thing is, we all KNOW how important sleep is. We all know how unproductive we are when we're tired and only able to get through the day fuelled by five coffees and matchsticks

holding our eyes open. Yet we continue to stay up really late. We continue to take our phones to bed with us and spend an hour scrolling through Instagram. I won't say that getting great sleep is easy, but we sure do a lot of things to sabotage ourselves in this regard.

Some simple tips for getting good sleep:

1. Go to bed at the same time each night (our bodies like routine and rhythm).
2. Go to bed at a decent hour: my favourite 'tool' for this is to be reading a good book that I'm really looking forward to – that gets me off to bed.
3. No screens an hour before bedtime. (What I do is head to bed with a great book an hour before I ideally want to fall asleep.)
4. No electronics in the bedroom. Studies have shown they interrupt our sleep.
5. Exercise each day.
6. Write down your 'must dos' for the next day before you head off to bed. That way your mind can relax because it knows what's in store for it the next day.
7. Eat dinner at least two hours (but preferably three) before bedtime.
8. Have a notepad next to your bed so that anything that wakes you up at 3am can be quickly written down and let go.

### **3. Food**

Another key pillar of energy is, of course, food. And this is another area that gets ignored when we're caught up trying to get stuff done. The conversation around food feels like it's gotten really complicated lately. Should you go paleo, Whole 30, no sugar, vegan, vegetarian ... pegan?

The truth is, we all already know how to eat healthily: avoid packaged and processed food where possible; stick to eating food we've prepared ourselves, food that is made from scratch where possible; and control our portion sizes.

Don't have time? Don't like cooking? That's ok. I don't either! I keep things *really* simple.

I've also found that generally speaking, the hardest thing with moving from a diet heavy in pre-prepared foods (a diet I used to have) to food I mostly cook myself (my diet now) has always been the first time I make something. It takes time learning how to prepare something new. But from that point on, I know how to make it and can be efficient about it.

For example, I can have a spinach and roast pumpkin salad made for lunch from scratch in 10 minutes these days (5 minutes if I've been organised and roasted the pumpkin the day before). This sure beats warming up a meat pie!

And while I am on the topic of lunch, the thing busy people who are trying to be productive often do is grab something quick and easy for lunch and eat it at their desk while continuing to do work, or scroll mindlessly through Facebook.

When I started forcing myself to step away from my desk and all screens at lunch time and instead read the paper or sit on the verandah in the sun while eating my lunch, my afternoon productivity skyrocketed. 15 minutes is all you need. And we all have 15 minutes for lunch. Trust me.

### 3. Create whitespace

As I mentioned previously in this section, many people see Productivity as a tool that allows us to fit more into our days. This way of thinking leads to what I call the trap of productivity:

*The more productive we are, the more we can do. But the more we do, the more productive we need to be.*

You can see the dangerous cycle we're getting caught up in here. It's one where we find ourselves having to be insanely productive *every single day* in order to get through everything we've signed ourselves up for.

It's when we get in this mode, the one where every day is scheduled down to the minute, that the tiniest things can and will completely derail our days:

- A client who sends a narky email that requires a long answer.
- An unexpected phone call from a friend.
- The doctor who is running behind even though you're their first appointment.
- The slow driver you're stuck behind.
- The toddler who does a poo just as you've finished buckling them into their car seat.

How do we react to these very everyday events? With frustration, anger and declarations about how people are constantly wasting our time. I don't know about you, but feeling frustrated and angry all the time kind of messes with my life of practical perfection. So what's the antidote to this?

Using productivity for the purpose of creating whitespace instead.

#### What's whitespace?

Well, it's actually a graphic design element. One that:

- Allows the other elements on the page to breathe.
- Reduces tension between elements.
- Allows the most important things to come to the fore.
- Is essential for balance and harmony in a design.

If this is what whitespace can do for a design ... imagine what it can do for a person!

Well, I don't have to imagine. Let me tell you a story.

It was one of those days at the bank. The line was long and slow-moving – it seemed every person in front of me had a long and complicated transaction to do. By the time I got to the teller to do my own long and complicated transaction, I'd been waiting in line for 20 minutes. She smiled at me apologetically and then got to work. Another 20 minutes later I was finally done. As she stacked and

stapled all my paperwork and handed it to me she was profuse with apology. "Thanks so much for your patience," she said, "I know you don't have time for this."

I smiled back at her. "It's all good." I said.

Meanwhile, in my head I was having a revelation. I DID have time for this.

Sure, in the past I would have been one of those people in line ostentatiously checking their watch, tapping their feet and sighing. And, shamefully, I would have probably also stood there dreaming about sending the bank an invoice for Wasting My Time because my time is money right?

But not that day. That day I had time to be 'wasted'. I had time to stand around in the bank for 20 minutes longer than anticipated. And boy it felt good.

It felt good not to be angry and fuming. It felt good to be able to re-assure the harried teller that it was ok. It felt good to be able to get in my car and not have to rush to my next destination feeling harassed and dangerously distracted.

Think of all the times in a day where someone can be 'wasting your time' or 'messing with your plans'. Then think about how you react to someone doing these things (anger, frustration, making them feel bad about themselves). Now you're seeing why whitespace is a worthwhile thing to be using your capacity for productivity towards.

### **How do you get more whitespace in your life?**

Well firstly you have to stop scheduling your days down to the minute. You need to create pockets of time in your day where you are able to move slowly (have the ability to 'meander') and have plenty of time to do what needs to be done.

For me, between 7am and 8.15am take out 'in the morning' represents one such pocket of time. All I have to do in that hour and a bit is get my toddler up and dressed, make a green smoothie for myself and my husband and then clean up everyone's breakfast dishes.

I could fit a LOT more into that time if I wanted to. I could put a load of laundry on. I could prep dinner. I could check and answer emails.

But I don't. Because that chilled out hour or so in the morning means I don't find myself yelling at the kids because we're running late. It means if one of the kids spills their milk all over the floor, or my son announces he has a spelling test he needs to study for, it doesn't derail the whole morning (and by default, the entire day). It means I get to walk out the front door feeling chilled and ready to take on the day ahead rather than frustrated and flustered. (I have found if you start your day frustrated and flustered, that it is very hard to pull things back from there.)

What else helps with whitespace? Having a routine.

### **The importance of routine**

Every single successful person you will ever come cross is a believer in routine. Hand on my heart, I haven't yet met one that loves to fly by the seat of their pants when it comes to getting stuff done on any given day.

That's because the main benefit of a routine is the way it reduces cognitive load. The more stuff you get to do on auto-pilot on a given day, the more room you have in your life and your brain for ideas and chilling the heck out.

Having a routine also reduces problems and curveballs and thus reduces reactivity (which in turn reduces stress).

Routine is also crucial for productivity because it allows you to despatch frequently done tasks more quickly and efficiently.

The biggest irony of routine?

The fact that it allows you to create space in your day for spontaneity, while also reducing the need to call on willpower and motivation.

### **So how do you go about building routines into your days?**

Well it's important to understand this: it's not your day that is routine – your day has routines in it.

Here's one of the routines in my day for illustrative purposes:

#### **My morning routine**

***4.15am:** Wake up, drink two big glasses of water while browsing Instagram and making a coffee.*

***4:30am:** Quick scan of emails\*, deleting the crap and answering anything that can be answered in one line.*

***4:45am:** Write for 45mins to 1 hour.*

***5:30am-ish:** Morning exercise (any one of running, rowing, walking or CrossFit).*

***6:30am:** Home from exercise, make my 6yo's school lunch.*

***7am:** Get toddler up and enjoy morning cuddles with her on the couch before making a breakfast smoothie for myself and my husband.*

***7:30am:** Tidy up kitchen and have a shower.*

***8:15am:** School drop-off with my son.*

Here's why my morning routine is so important:

- It ensures I get time for myself each and every day.
- It ensures I get time to WRITE each and every day. My energy levels for writing are highest in the morning when no one else is around and wanting to talk to me, so that's when I do it.
- It ensures I am doing exercise of some description each and every day (I've hopefully already sold you on the importance for daily exercise).
- It ensures that I'm in a good mood when the rest of my family wakes up and am able to deal with any grumpiness on *their* parts with good humour.

- It ensures our mornings are chilled which means we're all walking out the door to start our days in a calm fashion. (Remember: the way you leave the house in the morning has a huge effect on the way the rest of your day pans out.)
- It gives my brain a break. Instead of spending my mornings trying to figure out 'ok, what should I do next', I don't have to think much in those early hours because I am operating on auto-pilot.

This morning routine is important but I have many other routines in the day.

For example, embedded in that morning routine is both a **writing routine** and an **exercise routine**. Having these two routines means I don't have to waste willpower trying to find the motivation to write or exercise – I just do those two things.

You'll notice I also have the same thing for breakfast every morning (green smoothie). I can't tell you how much mental space is freed up by not having to decide what to have for breakfast every morning.

We also have an **afternoon routine** in our house which starts when I get home in the afternoon from the school run and finishes with putting dinner on the table.

Then we have an **evening routine** which is around the kids having baths and then us chilling out as a family before the kids go to bed. Yes, we schedule 'chill out' time into our evenings!

Once the kids are in bed I have a '**get ready for the next day**' routine which allows me to feel on top of the next day and thus sleep better.

On the weekends I have a Sunday afternoon '**get ready for the next week**' routine which is all about feeling on top of the week ahead.

One of the biggest things having all these routines does is reduce surprises. I don't get to 8am only to find that there's no bread in the fridge to make my son's school lunch. I don't go to get dressed in the morning only to discover I have no clean clothes.

It also reduces surprises for my family. Ever had to spring it on your partner that they have 30 minutes to conjure up a book week costume? Or that they're going to have to do the school drop off this morning because you forgot you had an early appointment? Then you'll know the reaction is never pretty and creates unnecessary stress for everyone. Having routines allows you to identify things that are *out of routine* much earlier, and notify people about these things before they happen.

### **So how do you create a routine?**

Well you need to know the desired outcome first.

- The desired outcome of my morning routine is that instead of mornings being angsty and full of people yelling at each other because 'I can't believe you don't have your shoes on yet', the goal is for all of us to walk out of the house and head off to school, day care and work feeling chilled and ready for the day.

- The desired outcome of my writing routine is to ensure I write at least 750 words every day.
- The desired outcome of my exercise routine is to ensure I move my body for at least 20 minutes every day.
- The desired outcome of my afternoon routine is to set things up for the evening routine.
- The desired outcome of my evening routine is for us all to have some quality time together as a family.
- The desired outcome of my 'get ready for the next day' routine is to feel on top of the next day so I sleep well that night.

Once you know what the desired outcome is, you can create the steps necessary to achieve that outcome. For example, the steps involved in my **'get ready for the next day' routine** are:

- Checking my diary to see what's on.
- Putting out my exercise clothes for the next morning plus the clothes I will be wearing for the day.
- Making my son's school lunch.
- Moving the meat for the next day's dinner meal from the freezer to the fridge.
- Doing a final tidy to ensure that when I lay down on the couch to chill out before bed that I'm not feeling agitated by seeing mess out of the corner of my eye and also so that when I wake up the next morning, I'm not faced with dishes in the sink.

The most important thing with any routine is that it's able to be executed over and over again, and reduces your cognitive load. If you're struggling to execute a routine you've created for yourself, it's either because you're trying to fit too much into the time you've allocated or because your energy levels are too low.

The best thing about routines? When 'things happen' and whole days come completely unstuck ... that's ok! Because tomorrow, you get to start again fresh. And your routine provides an amazing platform for that.

### **How do routines create whitespace?**

Well, as mentioned previously, they create *mental* whitespace by reducing cognitive load. And they create *literal* whitespace because when you're executing a routine all the time, you become more efficient at doing things.

The key here is to resist the urge to use that efficiency to fit more stuff in. Use those periods of space to allow you to move more slowly, or simply do 'time wasting' but fun things like messing around on Facebook or Instagram.

A key goal of the Practical Perfection Framework is allowing you to feel like you've got time to move slowly.

## **4. Get stuff done**

So you've created routines in your life that have created whitespace. You've made time to meander, but there are parts of your day where you need to be uber-productive. So how do you ensure you're getting the most out of those parts of your day?

Here are eight practical tips that will elevate your productivity:

## **1. Know what needs to be done**

Sounds silly and simplistic right? But how often have you sat down at your computer and thought to yourself, “Hmm, what do I need to get done today?” or “Where should I start?”.

I never ever sit down at my computer without a firm idea of what I’m actually going to do because it’s pretty much guaranteed that what I will do is open a browser window and click on Facebook. So even if what I am going to do is ‘create my to-do list for the day’, I never sit down at my desk without a purpose in mind.

Now I’m not going to get into the nitty gritty of how to make a to-do list for yourself. Everyone has their individual preferences about the best way to do this and I am certainly not going to claim that my way is the best way. But I will say this:

Your to-do list should be doable – don’t make long to-do lists that always migrate to the next day’s list. Make lists that can actually be executed.

The ‘must-do’s’ should be at the top of the list followed by the ‘nice to-do’s’.

They should factor in the fact that at some stage in the day you’re going to have to answer a long email you didn’t anticipate dropping into your inbox. Or that a friend is going to call out of the blue and you’re going to have a half hour conversation with them. Or that you’re going to get caught in a long queue at the bank.

They should group like items together. For example, if you have to pay three bills – pay them all at the same time. If you have five emails to answer, set aside thirty minutes and do them all in one hit.

## **2. Reduce the time available to do things**

You’ve heard the adage that the time taken to do something will expand to fill the time allocated to do it right? Well it’s true. If you have four hours to get a report done, then you will use every one of those hours to do so. If you have one hour to get it done, you’ll get it done in that time. Will the report that took four hours to write be better quality? In most cases, no, it won’t.

My favourite way of reducing the time available to do things is to mandate to myself that I have a five-hour work day. My husband and I run a design business together and while it would be easy for me to be jealous of his 8.30am-5pm working day the truth is, I probably accomplish just as much in my 9.30am-2.30pm work day. When you have a five-hour work day you don’t go on Facebook ‘just for five minutes’. You don’t jump into a forum and write a 500 word reply to someone. You don’t spend 20 minutes in the kitchen making a coffee for yourself.

You get to your desk knowing exactly what needs to be achieved for the day (because you’ve done your to-do list) and then you get busy doing it. I’ve mentioned reducing cognitive load several times in this section already. Having a good to-do list is another thing that reduces cognitive load because you’re not trying to remember things.

### 3. Know the difference between urgent and important

I'm sure you've seen the Eisenhower Decision Matrix (and if you haven't, here it is!):

	URGENT	Not urgent
IMPORTANT	Urgent and important	Important but not urgent
Not important	Urgent but not important	Not urgent and not important

Where do we tend to spend most of our time? In the:

- **Urgent and Important** quadrant; and the,
- **Urgent but Not Important** quadrant.

That **Urgent but Not Important** quadrant is the big productivity killer. It involves things like responding to emails (which generally contain other people's priorities, not our own), putting out fires and generally speaking, just being reactive. It's very, very hard to get anything done when you're always operating in these quadrants.

The most important things to our mental and physical wellbeing – the things that tend to make us nicer people and allow us to live more fulfilled lives – are the ones that fit into the **Important but Not Urgent** quadrant.

These are things like exercise, business development, dreaming, reading, relaxing. All too often these get set aside in our lives because we're too busy putting out all the fires that exist in the **Urgent but Not Important** quadrant.

How do you make time for the **Important but Not Urgent** stuff? You must schedule it.

### 4. Create a schedule and stick to it

In researching his book *15 Secrets Successful People Know About Time Management* Kevin Kruse interviewed hundreds of successful entrepreneurs and athletes and the thing that kept coming up as a secret of their success was that if something was important to them, they scheduled time for it in their calendars. Note, they didn't put these things on their *to-do* lists – they put them in their calendars.

Which is why I block out every morning in my week for writing and exercise. I used to wake up early in the morning, 'quickly check my email', and then fritter those precious early hours away responding to the urgencies that had dropped into my inbox overnight. Worse, because people got

used to me responding to their urgencies like that, they started to send even more through overnight (rather than waiting till the next day).

Lesson learned. Nowadays I do not open my email until writing and exercise are done. And I try not to open email on weekends at all.

The weekends are scheduled for family time, recharging and getting my house in order. Remember when I mentioned above that I give myself 45 minutes each morning to have a shower, get dressed for the day and tidy the kitchen? What I am doing there is effectively scheduling a bit of whitespace into my day. It would be very tempting to 'quickly check my emails' in that 45-minute block. Or 'just put on a load of washing'. But if I did those things, I would introduce 'urgency' into my morning and my goal of walking out the door in a chilled fashion would be torched.

So how do you create a schedule that allows for things to be done?

Well I know people who schedule their entire week: this block of time is for email, this day is product development day, this block is for phone calls.

My schedule is a little simpler: 4.30am-6.30am is for writing and exercise, 9.30am-2.30pm is for work. A few days a week 2.30pm-4.30pm is blocked out for personal projects. My daughter's sleep time of 1.30pm-4pm on the weekend is blocked out for ME to have a sleep if I want to ... or simply to just lie on the couch.

I also have certain times of each day blocked out as 'buffers'. These buffers mean when I get to my son's school and am told he has swimming lessons that day, I have the time to do the 40-minute round trip to deliver his swimming clothes to school. When our builder rings me and tells me he needs me to drop something off on site, something I have to go home and get first ... it doesn't detonate my whole day.

Just do what works for you.

## 5. Set realistic deadlines

Another reason for spending a lot of time in the **Urgent and Important** quadrant is that you're really bad at setting realistic deadlines. How do I know this? Because for the longest time I was really bad at setting realistic deadlines.

In the early days of my graphic design business I used to make the most ridiculous promises to clients. Every time I was asked, 'When can you have this done by?' my answer was, 'Tomorrow'. And because my point of differentiation was that I delivered on my promises, I basically spent every waking hour delivering on those promises. Remember my moment of complete burnout in the 'Passion' section of this book? The reason I didn't have any time for my passions at that time in my life was because I was too busy delivering on all the ridiculous promises I'd made.

Here's what you need to know about deadlines: people will always want something 'yesterday' ... but they're also able to adjust that expectation very quickly if forced to. So force them to.

I won't lie – it will be hard at first! But the more you do it, the more you'll see how quickly people are able to make that adjustment. And it will give you the confidence you need to be firmer and more realistic in the future.

## **6. Get off social media**

Such an obvious thing, but something we all find it ridiculously difficult to do. I mentioned Kevin Kruse's book before: *15 Secrets Successful People Know About Time Management*. Kevin also interviewed over 100 high-achieving students for this book and he shared some of their time management secrets at the end of the book. I was floored by the fact that pretty much every one of these students mentioned social media and shared their tactics for managing the time they spent there.

But I shouldn't have been. Because what do adults do when they're procrastinating? Go on social media.

Go back ten years and we'd procrastinate by cleaning our houses or clearing out our desks. But there'd come a time where there was nothing left to be cleaned. Social media does not have this problem. Social media never runs out.

So how do you manage your social media time? This is the method I use, if it works for you, great. If it doesn't, work out what does and implement it STAT!

I schedule time for social media. I give myself 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the afternoon. Outside of these times, I mandate that if I want to go on Facebook, I can only do so while on my phone. Which means I only go on Facebook if I'm killing time somewhere or if I am lying on the couch chilling out. In other words, outside of the 40 minutes I've scheduled to be on there, I'm only ever on Facebook or Instagram at time where I am not doing anything useful.

## **7. Remove distractions**

Phones ringing, emails pinging, message apps flashing – the potential for distraction today is huge. We live in a society of instant gratification and need to be immediately part of every conversation that involves us. So we set up notifications on our phones and computers to let us know about these conversations the moment they happen.

And we think we're really good at processing these distractions. We think that just because we're not replying instantly to a mention on Twitter that we're doing a good job of managing the distraction of that notification that's just popped up on our phone. But we're not. Because now that we've seen that notification flash up, we're thinking about how to reply to it. Same with the email notification that quickly flashes up in the corner of our screen. We've seen who the email is from, we've seen the subject line. So even if we're not opening that email to answer it, part of our brain is thinking about what we're going to do with that email when we get to it.

The easiest way to manage these distractions is to turn off all phone notifications. These notifications don't just get in the way of work – they get in the way of life. If you've ever had coffee with a friend whose phone was face-up on the table flashing away while you chatted, and if you ever

watched that same friend lose track of the conversation as their eyes flashed to their phone, you'll know how sub-optimal those notifications are for proper human interaction.

So I will say it again: Turn. Them. Off.

You don't need to be notified the instant someone likes your latest photo on Instagram. You just don't! You can find out how many people liked it when you log into Instagram. Which is several times a day right?

Same with email. Turn off that little notification that pops up in the corner of your screen. In fact, close email altogether while you're working on something important.

It's time to push back against our 'need it now' society. We've all been conditioned to expect responses to everything we do instantly. Let's now work to reverse that conditioning and get back to doing what's actually important.

## **8. Stop multi-tasking**

Oooh boy – if there is something us strivers pride ourselves on, it's our ability to multi-task. But the fact is, there is no such thing as multi-tasking. What we're actually doing when 'multi-tasking' is task switching: moving back and forth between tasks. And every time we move back and forth, we're having to backtrack slightly to pick up from where we left off previously.

As John Naish points out [in a piece for the Daily Mail](#): "The human brain doesn't multi-task like an expert juggler; it switches frantically between tasks like a bad amateur plate-spinner."

An American study, reported in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, found multi-tasking has a negative physical effect, prompting the release of stress hormones and adrenaline.

This can trigger a vicious cycle, where we work hard at multi-tasking, take longer to get things done, then feel stressed, harried and compelled to multi-task more.

Not only is this smashing our ability to be productive ([reducing our productivity by 40%](#)), it's also unnecessarily increasing our cognitive load. So we're tiring more easily and have less energy to both get the tasks done *and* done well.

The simple fact of the matter is, if we want to get our tasks done quickly and efficiently, we have to stop splitting our brain – we need to get back to relentlessly single-tasking. And single-tasking is hard because we've spent the last however many years being conditioned to multi-task. To thinking that if we're waiting eight seconds for something to load that we should fill that eight seconds by opening a browser window and quickly logging into our internet banking to pay that bill.

## **So what now?**

If there is one thing I want you to take away from this section, it's the distinction between being more productive so you can fit more stuff into your day ... and being more productive so you can create more space to simply 'be' rather than 'do'.

This distinction is crucial to what the Practical Perfection Framework is trying to achieve.

And now that we've covered off all the key elements: Passions, Prioritisation and Productivity, it's time to talk about the elements that bind them together.

## CONCLUSION

So we've covered a bit of ground to this point in proceedings haven't we? And you've probably noticed as you've made your way through each of the three sections of the book that there is a bit of overlap between them all. That's because, in the real world, nothing operates in isolation.

Whether it's burnout, overwhelm or that feeling of being a hamster-on-a-wheel that you're fighting, in the perfect world, you'd be calling on all three of Passions, Prioritisation and Productivity to help.

But ... when you're feeling any of these things, the energy and headspace to manage several 'techniques' is a bit too much to ask. That's why I have found that:

- When I'm on the edge of burnout, making room for my Passions immediately pulls me back from that edge.
- When I'm drowning in overwhelm, Prioritisation brings much relief.
- When I'm feeling like a hamster-on-a-wheel, invoking Productivity immediately alleviates that feeling of 'busy, busy, busy, but not getting anywhere'.

There are, however, two additional things I wanted to share with you all that the Practical Perfection framework cannot function without: expectation management and self-compassion.

### Expectation management

When it comes to managing the expectations in our lives (the expectations others have of us and the expectations we have of ourselves), a framework created by Gretchen Rubin (author of *The Happiness Project*, *Happier at Home* and *Better than Before*) is the most helpful thing I've come across. Rubin has identified [Four Tendencies](#) in people when it comes to expectations:

- **Upholders:** respond readily to outer and inner expectations.
- **Questioners:** question all expectations; they'll meet an expectation if they think it makes sense.
- **Rebels:** resist all expectations, outer and inner alike.
- **Obligers:** meet outer expectations, but struggle to meet expectations they impose on themselves.

I'm an Upholder and I suspect many of the people reading this book are too (although Rubin has found that Upholders and Rebels are very much in the minority). If you're not an Upholder, and you're the striving type, then you're almost certainly an Obliger.

The reason I find Rubin's framework useful here is because, in identifying which of the above applies to you, it makes you more aware of what is driving your behaviour with regard to the expectations people have of you, and you have of yourself. This in turn should make managing those expectations a bit easier.

The reason expectation management is crucial to all sections of the Practical Perfection framework is because trying to meet expectations that aren't reasonable, (regardless of whether they're your own or those of others), makes it very hard to:

- Identify your Passions.
- Prioritise effectively.
- Be as Productive as you can be.

I feel Upholders are especially at 'risk' here because it's hard-wired into us to simply rise to meet all expectations. We seldom stop to assess the cost to us of meeting those expectations, much less consider whether those expectations are reasonable or not.

Obligers are also at risk because they're experiencing the frustration of never meeting the expectations they have of themselves, while also blindly rising to meet the expectations others have of them.

Questioners and Rebels – the above is not a problem for you and if you are either of these two, lucky you!

So what's a good way to tackle unreasonable expectations? Self-compassion is the answer.

## **Self-compassion**

If you imagine the Practical Perfection framework as a three-storey building, then the foundation on which that building sits is self-compassion.

As a rule, we strivers are very hard on ourselves. We hold ourselves to high standards, seldom question whether those standards are reasonable ... and then we're very unkind to ourselves when we don't meet those standards.

Gretchen Rubin shared one of her Secrets of Adulthood on Facebook while I was in the middle of writing this conclusion and I felt it perfectly summed up what the ultimate goal of the Practical Perfection framework is:

*Accept yourself and expect more from yourself.*

Whoah.

Pretty bloody tricky right? Yet – totally achievable if we're bring self-compassion into the mix.

And you can't talk about self-compassion without using the words and thoughts of Dr. Kristin Neff, the person who's really pioneered all the research on this topic. Many of the constructs I talk about in this book are either hard to define and/or no one can agree how to define them. Not self-compassion. Everyone agrees Neff has that well under control when she says:

*Instead of mercilessly judging and criticizing yourself for various inadequacies or shortcomings, self-compassion means you are kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings ...*

*You may try to change in ways that allow you to be more healthy and happy, but this is done because you care about yourself, not because you are worthless or unacceptable as you are. Perhaps most importantly, having compassion for yourself means that you honour and accept your humanness ... you will make mistakes, bump up against your limitations, fall*

*short of your ideals. This is the human condition, a reality shared by all of us. The more you open your heart to this reality instead of constantly fighting against it, the more you will be able to feel compassion for yourself and all your fellow humans in the experience of life.*

In short, invoking self-compassion involves extending the same level of kindness to ourselves that we give to others.

It doesn't mean we're lowering our standards.

It doesn't mean we need to hold ourselves back from striving.

It is simply a tool of reality and pragmatism. One that allows us to accept that we have finite resources (time, energy, support, patience) available to us at any given moment in time, and that we can only do the best we can with them.

This is not an excuse. This is reality.

And it's a reality that, once we become comfortable with, frees us up to be the very best we can be on any given day.

## **So where to from here?**

I've long been a fan of therapy – and I've long believed everyone in the world should have therapy. Not just to tackle problems, but to learn to how to get the very best from themselves.

What's so good about therapy?

Well it's not one person (the therapist) handing you the solutions to all your problems on a silver platter. Rather, the therapist provides the tools to help you manage yourself (and by extension, your life) in a more optimal way.

I want this book to be a tool that helps you live the excellent life you desire. So it's probably worth quickly revisiting what strivers consider to be an excellent life:

It's one where:

- You get to achieve the things you want to achieve, but without the constant stress and overwhelm that usually goes with being a person who sets high standards for themselves.
- You have time and space to be good to the people closest to you.
- You have time and space to be good to the world.
- You have time and space to be good to *yourself*.

It's my hope that if you're feeling any one of burnout, overwhelm or 'hamster-on-a-wheel', that you can refer to the Practical Perfection framework and clearly see what change you need to make in your life to bring you back to centre.

- When you find yourself teetering on the edge of burnout – you now know that ensuring there is something in your life that gets you out of bed with a spring in your step each morning might be just enough to pull you back from that edge.

- If you're completely overwhelmed by all life is throwing at you – you know that bringing your priorities into sharp focus will give you back that much-desired feeling of control.
- If you find yourself running your little heart out but never getting anywhere/achieving anything – you know it's time to ensure you're not mistaking 'activity for accomplishment'; that being more productive and actually finishing the things you start will be a truer measure of your 'accomplishment'.

But what if you're feeling more than one of these? Then my advice is this: tackle them in the order they appear in this book. Burnout first, then overwhelm, then 'hamster-on-a-wheel'. Whatever you do, don't try to take them all on at the same time! I've tried, it's just not possible. Trust me on that!

In the end though, the most necessary ingredient of an excellent life is the ability to be kind to ourselves and be able to balance the expectations we have of ourselves with reality.

My greatest hope for this framework is that it helps you practice better self-compassion as that's what sets you up to be the person you want to be: someone who is able to bring the best of themselves to the world more often than not.

**THE END**