YOUR GUIDE TO FACING DIFFICULT TIMES

HOPE OPTIMISM BELIEF

BRAD BURTON

ALSO BY BRAD BURTON

Get Off Your Arse

Get Off Your Arse Too

Life. Business. Just got easier.

Now What?

YOUR GUIDE TO FACING DIFFICULT TIMES

HOPE.
OPTIMISM.
BELIEF.

BRAD BURTON

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Dedicated to BonBon,
stay Sigma lad.

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CHAPTER 1

Mountaineers don’t stay at the top of mountains

Somewhere within you, there's an answer that needs a question.

Or a question that needs an answer. Something you're carrying.

Something you're trying to work out.
Maybe someone or something you need to let go of.

Things could be good, things may be hard, or maybe you're sat there thinking,

When does it get better?
When's my turn?

Or maybe you just need someone to tell you honestly, not from an Instagram meme and not because, as a motivational speaker, it's the line I'm supposed to say from stage, but because I genuinely believe it.

It's going to be OK.

Now, I need to qualify that. I can't promise that whatever you want to happen is going to happen. Nobody can.

But what I can tell you, because I've lived it many, many times over, is that you always do find a way through. Sometimes the problem goes away. Sometimes you adapt to whatever you face and become stronger because of it. Sometimes you just learn to live alongside it.

But you do get through.

Which is kind of the point of this book.

Life is never linear. Never.

I've spent years saying everything happens for a reason. Though that reason isn't always obvious when it happens.

We only really find the meaning afterwards. But these things that happen go on to shape us. The good things. The shit things. The people. The conversations. The decisions.

Especially the decisions.

There's a reason you're reading this sentence right now, even if that reason is that you bought a book with a rather majestic-looking lion on the front and now feel financially obligated to carry on. Whatever the reason, read on, because this book will change your life and direction in some small or large way, for the better.

The stories in this book are mine. But the point of sharing them is for you.

What happened to me is less important than how it may help you see a way forward and through in your own life.

Charlie.

Remember that name, because a huge amount of what follows starts with him.

Twenty-odd years ago, he asked me a question.

One question. And without that conversation there is a very good chance none of this exists. The businesses. The speaking career. The four books before this one.

Possibly not even this sentence.

You'll find out what he asked.

But not yet.

I started writing this somewhere in Australia, ten thousand miles from "home", sat in a twenty-foot shipping container that had been converted into a tiny house. A kitchenette. A raised bed with a desk underneath where I typed these words.

Bare minimum room to live, with lots of room to think.

Not enough room to swing a cat.

Which was probably fortunate, because there was a cat, more about him shortly.

A few weeks earlier, "home" was a detached five-bedroom house in a Somerset village.
Two dogs. Two cats. Three kids. A wife. Now a different life.

And then I got on a plane and flew ten thousand miles away from it.

Not running away. Well, maybe a little bit.

Distance can give you a view you just can't get when you're stood in the middle of something.

Business built. Business collapsed. Rebuilt. Pandemic. Another collapse. A stalker. Police. Court. TV. Pressure. Breakdown.

Twenty-nine years of life together, fourteen of those married, along with all the change and strain that comes with it, now reaching a point I never imagined it would.

As I write this, we've decided to call it a day.

By the time you read the final chapter, I'll know where that story went.

As will you. High-stakes book writing, even I don't know the ending.

Charlie knows something about that. His marriage ended after twenty-two years. There are similarities between his story and mine that neither of us could possibly have known when we first started talking.

Twenty years apart, different lives and some of the same questions and the same answers.

Anyway.

Amigo.

Orange male cat. Fifteen years old. Face like a majestic lion. Underweight. Intestine problems. Survives largely on expensive proper meat.

Every morning, afternoon and evening, he turned up at the tiny house. We had a deal. He meowed. I went to the fridge.

Chicken breast.

Seven dollars' worth a day.

How do you know if someone's a vegetarian or has a rescue dog?

Don't worry. They'll tell you.

I'm vegetarian.

So the chicken isn't mine. It's his.

Whose cat is Amigo? The neighbours would say theirs. But for the moment he was with me. I was feeding him. He'd become my responsibility.

My cat.

Borrowed.

Maybe everything is.

People. Places. Houses. Businesses. Moments. Cats. Time. A wife.

Nothing belongs to any of us forever. That doesn't make what we had less real. It just means it was ours then.

At the time.

I think we forget that. We behave as though the things currently surrounding us are fixed parts of the scenery. Permanent fixtures in our lives.

They're not. They're chapters.

Someone can enter your life for thirty seconds, thirty days, or thirty years and can end up changing your life for better or worse.

A mentor on the other side of the world.

A fifteen-year-old cat with expensive tastes, or, in my case, someone you speak to for thirty seconds at a seminar who asks for a selfie.

You just don't know at the time.

And a side quest can become the main quest without anyone telling you the game has changed.

Someone had changed the direction of my life before I even existed.

Christmas Eve 2020.

Mum was staying over. Lockdown rules had finally eased enough for us to spend a couple of days together after months apart.

Paul O'Grady's For the Love of Dogs was on.

Sad piano music. Some scrawny rescue dog, probably called Rex, who based on the way he looked hadn't had the best of starts in his short life.

Mum sipping brandy.

Sobbing.

Forty-five minutes later, through the magic of edited television, Rex is no longer scrawny. Weight back on. New owners. Zooming around a field after a tennis ball.

Mum still sobbing.

Different tears.

Meanwhile she's putting away my VSOP cognac like it's Carling.

Eighty quid a bottle.

A relic of the good old days.

She turns to me. By this stage we're somewhere between Christmas merry and hammered.

"I don't know if I've ever told you this."

Never a sentence that ends with someone asking if you'd like another mince pie.

"You were an accident."

No, Mum.

You hadn't mentioned that.

"There was a nine-year gap between you and your sister. And with the way things were with your dad back then, well, I wasn't sure whether I was going to keep you."

Pause.

"I'm glad I did, though."

Another pause.

"You were the best thing that ever happened to me."

"You gave me purpose..."

Think about that.

One decision, over fifty years ago.

Different decision, no me. No businesses. No books. No stages. No Kerry. No kids. No this. No you reading these words.

What would you be doing instead?

We'll never know.

And that's the point. Your life has already been shaped, in ways you'll never fully know, by choices you didn't make. How you think. Who you know. Where you live. All of it nudged by decisions made before you knew they were decisions.

Most of them don't arrive wearing a fluorescent jacket and a sandwich board saying,

THIS ONE IS IMPORTANT.

You make them with the information you've got, from where you are, as the person you are at that moment. Only afterwards do you get to see where they led.

Occasionally decades afterwards.

Salford. Working-class estate. Single-parent family.

I was a kid when I got a second-hand Commodore 64. Seventy quid. I told Mum I needed it for homework.

The lie of an entire generation.

My dad also insisted it was for homework. "Of course, Dad."

LOAD. "Jet Set Willy".

Forget the homework.

Gaming became an obsession and, fortunately, quite a useful one, an obsession that continues to this day.

By twenty-one, that passion for gaming had helped me blag my way into working as a games reviewer on magazines, and I ended up appearing as a co-commentator and reviewer more than twenty times on Channel 4's GamesMaster.

Didn't set the world on fire. But as a street kid from Salford, it absolutely did show me a different world and light something in me. A tiny bit of evidence that maybe I did have talent, that I could do something with my life. The life and future I could see around me wasn't the only life or future available.

That's still true today.

That's the strange thing about your environment. When you're inside it, you don't realise you're inside it.

A fish doesn't spend its day thinking about the water. What water? Water is just water.

Growing up where I did, the streets, the people, the low-level thinking and expectations, all felt normal. Of course they did. They were all I knew.

You don't see the edges of the tank until you get outside it.

I fell in with the wrong crowd. Although at the time they didn't feel like the wrong crowd.

That's another pretty annoying feature of bad decisions. They don't always feel bad while you're making them.

Then, in 1995, two bullets came through my bedroom window and my life turned upside down.

Think The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. Except instead of Philadelphia, Salford. And instead of Bel-Air, I ended up in Weston-super-Mare, Somerset.

At the time, none of it felt remotely positive. It genuinely felt like the end of my life.

And it was. That life.

I was twenty-two.

The future I thought I had was gone.

Except it wasn't.

It was a future I could no longer see.

Which brings us back to Charlie.

We met on a computer-game message board. Before WhatsApp. Before social media became whatever the hell it is now.

One of those friendships that makes very little sense on paper but makes complete sense when you're in it.

He was seven years older than me. At first, just a gaming buddy, then a friend.

Over the years, something else happened.

He became a kind of big brother and father figure. Not deliberately. No ceremony or adoption papers. It just emerged through conversations, advice and the way he looked at things. Wisdom earned. A wonderful moral compass, and a make-a-positive-difference approach to everything and everyone he met. A great man, who has always been a long way further along the road than me.

When I first knew him, by most conventional measures, Charlie was successful. He'd built an international engineering business with fifteen staff. International travel. Big house. Family. Three boys.

A life built.

Then his marriage fell apart. The life he knew stopped being the life he knew. Legal battles. Loss. Money pressure. Separation from his boys. Identity gone sideways.

One night I rang him. Just a catch-up. Although looking back at some conversations, you realise there was nothing "just" about them.

He told me he was sitting in his car by the beach, watching the sea. Broken.

"I've wasted twenty-plus years of my life. For what?"

I said, "Have you ever been to a really nice restaurant? Amazing food. Beautiful meal?"

"Yes."

"What happens to that delicious food a few hours later?" He laughed. "It turns to shit."

"Exactly."

The penny dropped.

"It doesn't mean you didn't enjoy the meal, does it?"

That was it. Two blokes talking from opposite sides of the world.

Nothing really profound, I thought.

I wouldn't understand until much, much later how much that conversation mattered to him.

How much words can matter. Positive ones. Negative ones. Careless ones. Kind ones.

Things said in ten seconds can stay with someone for twenty years.

I didn't know it then, but maybe I was already starting down the road of becoming a motivational speaker, long before anyone was paying me to be one.

The conversation moved onto me.

"Why don't you start your own business?"

"Me? Don't talk daft."

"Seriously. What's stopping you?"

"Kerry," I told him. Not Kerry stopping me. Her fear about what might happen became ours, and before long I was carrying it too.

What happens if it doesn't work? What happens if I can't pay the mortgage? What happens if we lose the house?

Charlie paused.

"If I paid your mortgage any month you couldn't cover it, for up to twelve months, what's stopping you then?"

I had nothing.

"Nothing."

"Think about it."

There were times over those formative years, when Charlie did have to step in and help me with the mortgage.
I had a safety net.

But the important bit was what that safety net did before I ever needed it.
It removed the thing I was hiding behind.

Fear deals beautifully in worst cases. It takes a possibility and presents it to you as a certainty.

Miss one mortgage payment? Obviously homeless by Thursday.

Life and banks rarely work like that. There's usually more road between where you are and any catastrophe than fear lets you see.

Charlie offered me something I didn't really have at the time. Not just money.

Hope. Optimism. Belief.

He saw something in me that I couldn't yet properly see in myself.

I was a street kid from Salford whose idea of having made it probably involved a nice two-bed new-build house and a Ford

Escort RS Turbo parked on the street. Now I suddenly had someone successful on the other side of the world saying,

Why not you?

Really? Me? Maybe.

Fast-forward to 17 December 2004.

I was working in a marketing job in London. I had ideas. Loads of them. Most were apparently daft, unworkable or not how things were done, the directors told me.

Eventually I reached that point where you either stop having ideas or stop working somewhere that doesn't want them.

So I chose option two.

"You know what? Shove your job up your arse." And walked... that day.

Not exactly the business-school-approved way to become an entrepreneur.

For the three-hour drive home to Somerset, it felt wonderful. Liberating.

Right up until I reached my front door.

Then reality set in.

I was now unemployed. I had a mortgage, responsibilities and an idea that may or may not work. Oh yeah, and a frightened wife beyond that door, who had every right to be.

No grand plan. No investment deck. No five-year forecast.

Just a decision.

This is the bit that gets cleaned up when people tell their success stories years later. They join the dots backwards and make the whole thing sound inevitable.

It wasn't.

I didn't know I was starting something that would eventually become a national business. I didn't know where it would lead, the stages I'd end up standing on, nor the books I'd go on to write.

I knew what I knew then.

That was all I had to go on to make the decision.

We tend to judge old versions of ourselves with information they didn't have. We look backwards from the destination and wonder why the person at the starting line couldn't see the route.

Because there wasn't a route. There was just the next decision.

Then another one. And another one. And another one.

Looking back, those decisions were the route.

Years later, I'd built the business. Written the books. Stood on stages around the world. Done things the twenty-two-year-old version of me just couldn't ever have imagined.

And this is where most success stories finish.

On the top of the mountain.

But mountaineers don't stay at the top of mountains.

They reach the summit. Take the photograph. Enjoy the view.

Then what?

They come back down.

That isn't failure. That's mountains.

Yet we've somehow created this idea that life should work differently. That once you've reached a certain level of success, happiness, money, relationship, house, career or whatever

your particular summit happens to be, you should somehow remain there.

Forever. But nothing remains exactly as it is, as I've painfully learned over the years.

Businesses change. Relationships change. Your health changes. People leave. People arrive. Kids grow up. Parents get older. What matters to you changes.

You change.

And occasionally life changes so quickly that you barely recognise the person or the circumstances you were living in twelve months earlier.

I really know that feeling.

Trust me when I say, a year ago, my life looked completely different.

Five years ago, different again.

Ten years ago, almost unrecognisable.

Maybe that's the question.

Is it one life? Or several different lives we each get to live inside one?

Yet every one of those lives was mine.

And this one is too.

I started writing this sitting outside a tiny house in Australia. Amigo was somewhere nearby.

There was a meow to signify it was Chicken o'clock. Again.

But I was a long way from the detached five-bedroom house in a Somerset village with no neighbours. I'd still tune into the Ring camera several times a day and watch my family, my life,

my wife, going about their business. The house was still there. I just wasn't in it.

A long way from where I thought I'd be living in 2026. And certainly a long way from where the bloke I was in 1996 thought I'd be living thirty years later.

Which is the point.

Remember, mountaineers don't stay at the top of mountains. They're not supposed to.

You climb. Then at some point you come back down.

Maybe deliberately. Maybe because life gives you no choice.

You rest. Regroup. Learn a bit. Lose a bit. Gain a bit.

Then you fall, or walk down, to find another mountain to climb again.

Right now, I'm somewhere near the bottom of another one. Again.

And strangely, some days I'm OK with that. Some days I'm not.

It's not where I thought I'd be.

It's not where I want to be.

But it is where I am.

Acceptance.

CHAPTER 2

Fear. Pessimism. Doubt.

It was a glorious summer day, right at the height of lockdown.

We were walking in a farmer's field that we probably shouldn't have been in. My kids running around. My labradoodle doing dashes through the long grass. Blue sky. Sunshine. The kind of day that looks absolutely perfect from the outside.

And at some point I sat down. Then I lay down. And stopped.

Not dramatically. To my family it probably just looked like Dad was having a nice nap in the sunshine. From my perspective, I was a man with absolutely nothing left to give.

Best metaphor I can give you is a phone on 1%.

You know when it starts doing weird shit. Flickering. Glitching. Things stop working properly as it desperately tries to preserve whatever power is left.

That was me. The human version.

Powered down in a field on a "Phew! What a scorcher" of a day while my wife and kids carried on around me.

I closed my eyes. I remember the black.

I'd been doing fourteen, sixteen-hour days for months, trying to save a business that, because of lockdown, couldn't be saved in its old form. I didn't know that then. I was also dealing with a persistent, deliberate and malicious female stalker. The adrenaline and determination that had kept me going had finally gone.

Nothing left in the tank. Nothing.

I couldn't compute. I couldn't think properly. The most I could manage was to lie there and let the world carry on without me for a while.

That moment is burnt into me. Power-saving mode. Except there was no power left to save.

Let me take you back.

Did anyone have a global pandemic on their business plan? Me neither.

I'd started my business with £25,000 of debt. Back then, I'd lived the sort of life where I'd borrow a tenner off my mum on Friday and give it back a week Tuesday.

The short version. In 2006, I'd founded a networking organisation called 4Networking. I'd hit gold, and it doubled year on year. I built an HQ, a national business, a team spread across the UK. Within five years I was running thousands of events, with a reputation and what I regarded as my own little working-class empire. A business I'd started from nothing had put more than £10 million through its accounts over its lifetime.

Then, fourteen years on, lockdown arrived.

Revenues dropped by 90% overnight.

That's quite difficult to prepare for.

And suddenly the entire world was stressed at the same time.

People under stress don't make great decisions.

Remember that sentence because we're going to come back to it.

The people you'd normally turn to for support were dealing with their own version of the same thing. Friends. Family. Customers. Team members. Everyone had something going on.

So you didn't want to add to their load. Many didn't want to add to yours.

Net result? A lot of people went inward. Not in some good, spiritual way. Locked down not only inside their homes, but increasingly inside their own heads.

I know. I was one of them.

The things people normally used to take the edge off stopped working properly. The glass of wine. The scrolling. The caffeine. Staying busy. Netflix. Whatever your thing was.

Coping mechanisms that had previously worked started feeling like trying to walk with a crutch, a splintered one. You needed more of them just to get the same result.

Something that got you through the day now only got you through the hour. Then the next ten minutes.

That wasn't really coping anymore. It was delaying the crash.

For me, what replaced almost everything else was three things.

Fear. Pessimism. Doubt. These don't tend to arrive announcing themselves.

They creep in.

Fear is particularly clever because it dresses itself up as logic. It tells you it's just being sensible. Preparing you. Protecting you.

What if the business goes? What if the money runs out? What if this doesn't stop? What if it gets worse? What if I can't fix it?

Then your brain starts joining dots that haven't even happened yet.

One problem becomes three. Three become ten. Before long you're mentally living through catastrophes that may never actually happen.

Then pessimism turns up. Fear at least has energy. Pessimism has none. Don't bother. It won't work. Nothing works. And the dangerous bit is, I started agreeing with it.

And doubt. The worst of the three, because doubt doesn't attack the business. It attacks you. Fourteen years of building something, and a voice in your head asking, was any of that actually you?

Fear says it will go wrong. Pessimism says it always does. Doubt says it's because of you.

That's what stress does.

Stress is a multiplier. An amplifier.

It takes whatever problem you've already got and turns the volume up.

When you're stressed, tired and running on empty, any problem can appear twice as big, twice as urgent and twice as impossible.

Stress doesn't just make any problem look bigger. It eats mental bandwidth.

You've only got so much mental capacity. It's like when everyone in the house is streaming at the same time. The more mental bandwidth one thing takes, the less there is for everything else. Keep loading stress onto it and even straightforward things start slowing down. Decisions get harder. Thinking gets foggier. Eventually, things stop loading altogether.

Take the stress down and the problem hasn't magically disappeared. The business still needs sorting. The relationship still needs dealing with. The bill still needs paying. The difficult conversation still needs having.

But it does look different.

You can now see the actual problem rather than the version of it that fear has been projecting onto the inside of your skull.

That was a big shift for me because my operating system had always been straightforward.

Problem. Decision. Action. Move.

Something's wrong? Fix it. Fast.

And for most of my life, that had served me pretty well.

Until it didn't.

Because there are some situations where charging harder at the problem just creates more stress. And the more stressed you become, the worse your decisions get.

Which leaves you with an obvious problem.

You need to make good decisions at precisely the moment your brain is becoming less capable of making them.

That's where Uncle Croz came in.

Uncle Croz is one of my mentors, thirty years older than me. He took me under his wing a decade or so ago, and shared some of what his life had taught him about loss, making it and losing it. There's something really useful about having somebody around who has already walked part of the path you're on.

He once said to me,

"Have I done everything I can reasonably do to fix or improve this situation?"

That's the question.

If the answer is no, then work out what it is, and go do it.

If the answer is yes?

Relax. Relax. Relax.

The first time I heard that, part of me probably thought, Yeah, cheers, Croz. I'll just relax whilst my world's on fire. Good one.

But that of course wasn't what he meant.

Relaxing doesn't mean pretending the problem isn't there. It doesn't mean sticking your fingers in your ears or putting your feet up while your house burns down.

It means recognising the point at which more thinking, more worrying and more frantic activity are no longer improving the situation.

Because if stress is multiplying the problem and eating into your mental bandwidth, adding even more stress isn't going to make you cleverer.

Quite the opposite.

So do what you can reasonably do.

Then give your brain some mental bandwidth back.

Play a game. Go for a walk. Have a coffee. Go to the gym. Take a cold shower. Sit outside for ten minutes. Whatever works for you.

The problem might still be waiting when you get back.

But hopefully you're now meeting it with a different brain.

There's another part to this.

You're allowed to have a bad day.

You're allowed to feel sorry for yourself for a bit. You're allowed to be pissed off, frightened, angry, sad, confused or just completely fucking fed up with everything. I know there have been times when I've felt this way.

I think we sometimes make recovery harder because we decide we shouldn't be feeling what we're feeling.

So now you've got the original problem, plus the stress, plus the guilt about being stressed.

Brilliant.

If you need ten minutes to wallow, wallow.

If you need an hour, take an hour.

There isn't any stopwatch.

The question is whether what you're doing is helping you process what's happening or keeping you stuck inside it.

Because there's a difference between feeling something and repeatedly feeding it.

I've done both.

You can lie in bed going over the same conversation again and again. Replaying what somebody said. Rewriting what you should have said. Predicting what they'll say next. Imagining outcomes. Solving arguments that haven't happened.

Three o'clock in the morning and your brain has turned into its own rolling twenty-four-hour news channel.

Same story.

Breaking news.

Again.

And every time you run it, your body responds as though something new has happened.

Nothing new has happened.

You've just paid for the same problem twice.

At some point, though, you do have to choose to stop whining and start winning.

One thing I've learned is that your brain only has so much room.

Think of it like a pizza.

You've got the whole thing, but every problem wants a slice.

Work takes one. Money takes one. Family takes one. Something you're worried about takes another. Something somebody said yesterday takes another. Something that might happen next month wants a slice as well.

Before long there's no pizza left for anything else.

And the strange thing is, the biggest slice isn't always being taken by the biggest problem. It can just be taken by the thing you're thinking about most.

That's where worry gets expensive.

At three o'clock in the morning, there's nobody to ring. Unless, of course, you've got Charlie, in Australia, where it's already lunchtime.

Helpful.

There's nothing useful you can do.
No new information coming in.

But your brain keeps working anyway.

So it predicts. It catastrophises.

It tries to solve tomorrow using the information you had yesterday.

And the problem earns compound interest while you sleep.

Or, even worse, you don't sleep.

By morning, without a rested brain, something that was difficult at ten o'clock the night before can now feel enormous.

Same problem.

More tired. More stress.

Less mental bandwidth.

That's why lowering the stress isn't avoiding the problem.

Sometimes it's the first and most sensible thing you can do about it.

There's another source of stress we willingly invite into our heads every day.

News. Rolling news 24/7.

Bad news, mainly.

Wars. Murders. Scandals. Disasters. Somebody saying something awful. Somebody doing something worse.

And we consume it as though being informed automatically makes us better equipped to live our lives.

I'm not convinced it does.

No news is good news.

There are things you need to know. Things that affect your life, family, business. Your decisions.

Then there are things you can do absolutely nothing about that are still being allowed to occupy your valuable mental bandwidth.

I've reached the point in my life where I'd rather be uninformed and happy than informed and miserable.

That doesn't mean stick your head in the sand. It does mean be selective about what you let into it. Because once

something gets in your head, it can be more difficult to get it back out again.

Bad news. Tinnitus for the soul.

A constant and negative background noise that eventually becomes a low-level part of how you feel without you even noticing where it came from.

And when you're already stressed, already running low, already struggling to think clearly, you have to ask yourself,

Is knowing the news a good use of my limited mental bandwidth?

At one point during the pandemic period, I was sitting in my home office a few minutes before I was due to go on a live Zoom "Surviving lockdown" interview, when Kerry came in and asked me whether I wanted tea or coffee.

Tea or coffee.

Er... err... err... errr. Errr.

I couldn't decide. My brain was fried.

Something so basic, yet I just couldn't compute.

I've always prided myself on having a super-fast brain. Decisions. Problems. Ideas. Bang, bang, bang.

And suddenly it just wasn't working.

I remember thinking, what's going on? Is this permanent?

Have I, or this situation, broken me?

Either way, it was terrifying.

Then I was live, game face on, for this Zoom interview as a hundred-plus joined. The Surviving lockdown session. The irony.

For ten minutes, I was *fine*.

Smile. Talk, with enthusiasm, say something motivational. But I was losing it.

If that interview had been eleven minutes rather than ten, I would have been in noticeable trouble.

Fortunately, I ran out of time.

That's one of the dangerous things about being capable. You can continue *looking* capable long after you are.

Two weeks earlier, somebody had asked me how stressed I was with everything that was going on.

"1.1 out of 10."

And the worst bit?

When I answered, I genuinely believed it.

That's the crazy thing about being in survival mode for long enough. It starts to feel normal.

Your baseline moves.

You forget what relaxed, what normal, actually feels like.

And that's why you sometimes need to stop asking, Can I keep going?

Of course you can keep going.

Human beings are remarkably good at that.

A better question might be,

What is keeping going costing me?

There were nights when my head was absolutely stacked full of everything that could go wrong.

Business. Money. Family. Reputation. The future.

All of it at war with itself, competing for mental bandwidth.

So I started stripping things right back.

Lying in bed, I'd ask myself three questions.

Am I going to starve today? No.

Am I going to lose my house today? No.

Am I going to die today? No.

That didn't mean everything really was fine.

It wasn't. And the fact I was asking myself these questions shows where I was at, mentally. A bit like being hammered and trying to convince someone you can walk normally.

Those questions didn't make the problems disappear either. But they did give them edges.

At some point, the big black cloud in my head stopped being one enormous, shapeless thing called everything is fucked and started becoming individual problems again.

Problems I could look at and start dealing with. And problems I couldn't deal with just yet.

That's when I went back to the pizza.

Piece of paper. Circle. Six slices. One problem per slice. Under each one, three things I could actually do. Not solve. Move.

Some slices filled up straight away. One or two stayed blank. Nothing I could do about those. Not yet.

And the blank slice is the one most of us spend the whole night staring at.

Acceptance isn't giving up.

It's recognising where you are rather than exhausting yourself fighting the fact that you're still there.

You can want things to be different and work to make them different.

But first you've got to stop arguing with reality.

There isn't a magic switch for any of this.

I wish there was.

You don't wake up one Tuesday morning, flick something in your head and announce, "Excellent. Stress sorted."

It takes time.

And what I've found is that getting better rarely happens in a straight line.

You can have a good day and then a shit one. A good week and then something happens, somebody says something, an email lands, a memory turns up uninvited, and for a few hours it feels like you're right back where you started.

You're probably not.

A bad day doesn't necessarily mean you've gone backwards.

It might just mean you've had a bad day.

There were periods when I genuinely thought I should be back to normal, and doing better than I was. I'd look at everything I'd already survived and think, come on, Brad. Sort yourself out.

Not especially helpful. What helped me more was movement.

Walking, exercise and getting outside helped, especially when you really don't want to. Just go. Force yourself. Doing something, anything, however small, helped. It beat that lying-in-bed-feeling-sorry-for-yourself stage.

Exercise isn't a magic instant cure.

But in my experience, it was harder to remain completely stuck when I was physically moving.

And on the days when I really couldn't? Then maybe the job was just to get through the day. That counts too.

Eventually the fog does start lifting. Not all at once, just enough to see the next few feet in front of you.

Enough to make the next decision.

Enough to breathe.

Enough to realise that the way you feel right now isn't the way you're going to feel forever.

And occasionally somebody else spots what's happening before you do.

My mum certainly did, during a phone call.

One sentence.

"You sound stressed, son..."

CHAPTER 3

“You sound stressed, son…”

Those twelve to fourteen-hour days I did in the first ten years of 4Networking were fun. Driving up to 40,000 miles a year.

Year fourteen, grinding out sixteen-hour days in a pandemic lockdown, was not.

Right smack bang in what I described at the time as a digital war zone. Two phones. Computer screen. Missed call. Missed call. Ping ping ping. Decisions that needed to be made yesterday having to be made right now. Everything urgent. Everything important. Everything apparently requiring me.

Reactive.

Ping ping ping

React. React. React.

No time to think. Barely enough time to do.

And then Mum rang.

She was seventy-six at the time and checking in most days, as mums do. She started chatting about broccoli, dog jackets for Hamish and sprouts. Apparently, if you score an X at the bottom, they cook faster.

Who knew?

On any normal day, exactly the kind of conversation I'd have happily had with her.

Not today. Not right now. Not in the middle of all this.

"Mum, can I ring you back? I've got quite a lot on my plate at the moment."

"Okay, love."

Then the woman who knows her little boy better than most said it.

"You sound stressed, son."

I wasn't. Until she said it.

And then I was.

It was like she'd stuck a pin in this imagined balloon marked I'M FINE that I'd been carrying around.

Pop. *Ping ping ping*

I mentioned the conversation afterwards to a friend and mentor I call the Wizard.

He said something that stopped me whining.

"That's your job, Brad. One day you're going to wish you could talk to your mum about broccoli, dog jackets and Paul O'Grady. That's what she needs from you right now. That's the job."

He was right.

The job.

Interesting word, that.

Because for years I thought I knew what my job was.

Build the business. Make the money. Keep things moving. Provide. Solve problems. Be the person everyone could rely on.

And there's nothing wrong with any of that.

But somewhere along the way, the job can quietly change without you noticing.

Mum didn't need me to fix anything that day.

She didn't need a strategy, nor Brad the motivational speaker.

She just wanted her son to listen to her talking about sprouts, whilst she was also locked down. The difference is I had my family. She had her dog.

That was the job.

The Wizard has, in my experience, something close to a 100% success record of getting it right. Like a human computer. A man who built his own life and massive success through making decisions and learning from them. He has what I call a gamer's mindset, the kind of thinking you only get from someone who, like me, has devoted their life to gaming.

He never tells me what I want to hear. He tells me what I need to hear if I'm going to get through whatever is in front of me.

Somewhere along my 4Networking path we met and hit it off straight away, and for well over a decade we walked a parallel personal and professional path. I've probably helped shape his life in some small way, and he's helped shape mine in some massive ways.

He's not only a great mentor to me. He's also a great friend.

Actually, when I think about it, all my mentors are friends. And a lot of my friends have been mentors.

The Wizard was right about Mum.

One day there won't be another phone call about sprouts, dog jackets or whatever Paul O'Grady has just done on the telly.

There'll be no interruption, no unfortunately timed conversation.

And in that moment, I'd probably give anything for one.

We're all a bit guilty of spending so much of our life wanting to get through whatever is happening now so we can get to whatever is happening next.

Finish this.

Sort that.

Get through today.

Get to Friday.

Get to the holiday.

Get to the next deal.

And then one day you realise that quite a lot of the stuff you were trying to get through was in fact your life.

Not the important bit before your life starts.

Actual life.

The moment that was never allowed to be a moment.

The "boring" conversation that might have been the important conversation.

And the person apparently getting in the way of what you were doing might have been the person you were doing all of it for.

Going through a marriage separation makes you question lots of things.

I was driving my youngest son, seventeen at the time, to work, whilst I was in a particularly wounded and reflective mood, and said, "Brandon, let me ask you a question, son. And don't feel you've got to answer immediately. Have a think about it before you answer."

Then I asked him.

"What could I have done better as a dad?"

Dangerous question.

Because if you're going to ask it, you need to be prepared to hear, as in really hear, the answer rather than defend yourself against it.

He thought for a moment.

Then he said,

"The only thing I would say is that when I was younger, eight or nine, I didn't really see much of you."

Ouch.

And the worst bit? He was right. Absolutely right.

For years I was on the road overnight, away over two hundred days a year. Speaking. Building a networking business. Running events.

I loved it. It was fun.

I worked like a machine because I thought that was what you do. It was the job. Founder.

Provide.

Build something.

To give my family opportunities I never had.

And I did.

We had a beautiful home. Back then, Kerry was there full-time. Unlike me, she didn't have to work. I'd later find out that being a mum to three children, preparing lunch boxes, ironing and washing clothes, shopping at Lidl, taking the dogs out twice a day, the cleaning, the upkeep of a house and managing the finances was also a full-time job. Who knew?

The kids, though, had things, opportunities and holidays I could only have dreamed of when I was growing up. Or even as an adult.

I never missed a sports day for any of the kids. I made a point of being there for every one of those. Those things mattered.

But Brandon's answer made me realise something.

Both can be true.

I can have been a good dad who loved his kids and worked his bollocks off for his family.

And my son can still remember not seeing enough of me.

One doesn't cancel out the other.

That's the uncomfortable bit about looking backwards. You can think you did something for all the right reasons and only later discover it still had a price.

Before I started the business, I was the bloke ringing Mum on a Friday night.

"Hi Mum, can I borrow a tenner? I'll give it back a week Tuesday."

That was how it started.

So when I started earning money, I wanted the options that success gives you. After all, I'd earned them.

And that's what money does give you.

Money paid for experiences with my family that I'm grateful we had. Holidays. Eating out. Trips. Memories. Things that became written into our family story.

But there's a danger when financial focus becomes the primary version of provision.

You can end up on a hamster wheel without even realising you're on one.

And the problem with an enjoyable hamster wheel is you're enjoying it too much to notice.

I was self-employed. Master of my own destiny. I could travel anywhere in and around the UK, meeting people, building my own business, speaking on stages. That was the job.

Living the dream.

And in many ways, I was.

Externally, it certainly looked like I was.

But the more successful the business became, the more there was to maintain. More people. More events. Bigger wage bill. More National Insurance. More tax. More responsibility. More miles. More money coming in, but more money going out and more money needed to keep the whole thing moving.

So you keep running faster and faster.

And because you're progressing, you assume faster and bigger must be better.

Except you're now also getting exhausted.

The longer you run, the weaker you become. Out by a degree at home becomes, over many years, out by a big distance.

I've taken my family on a once-in-a-lifetime holiday, fourteen times.

And I'm glad I did.

Really glad. As those memories can't, and don't have to be, split as part of any future financial settlement.

That money gave us trips around the world. California, Florida, Bahamas, Australia, Miami. Wild, when I think back. I'd guess £250,000 on holidays. The places we went. The things we saw. Meals we ate. Stupid moments that still make us laugh...

Ben sleepwalking nude at 2 a.m. in the corridors of a Disney cruise. I'll move on.

Each of these holidays was meticulously planned by Kerry like commando raids.

We worked for it. I paid for it. Kerry planned it. And she was the one who held the family and the home together.

We lived it. The working-class-to-middle-class dream.

Beautiful.

Maybe I could have bought a Lamborghini. Or certainly leased one. I considered it.

I'm glad I didn't.

That's one of the reasons I'll never tell you money is bad.

It isn't.

I've been skint. I've had money.

I'd always rather have money.

But if you're not careful, what once felt extraordinary can become normal.

If you always travel first class, eventually first class just becomes the standard.

So, you keep running.

Get this month done. Get through this event. Get that invoice paid. Come on, get to the big holiday.

Fast-forward. Fast-forward. Fast-forward.

Then another year has gone.

And another. One year older as well.

You're making a living.

You just need to make sure you're not also missing your life.

Question for you. Which is going to run out first, your ambition or your ability?

For me, it certainly isn't ability, and I'm still ambitious.

I still want more from whatever life I have left. I just don't want "more" at the expense of enjoying the life I've already got.

Be ambitious. Be driven. But above all, be happy.

Because when your ambition and drive make you consistently unhappy, maybe, just maybe, you've found your level.

We can't all be Elon Musk.

And actually, we don't all need to be.

For a long time, winning meant more.

More turnover. More events. More people. Bigger house. Better car. Bigger audience. Another milestone.

The problem with more is that it doesn't come with an automatic stopping point.

There's always another level.

And if you don't decide what enough looks like, the world will happily keep selling you the next version.

I know people with more money than most of us could ever spend who are still running at nine thousand revs trying to maintain the life they've built.

Successful?

By most measures, absolutely.

Happy?

Different question.

That word matters.

And increasingly, so does another one.

Contentment.

Not giving up. Not losing ambition. Not settling for a life you don't want.

Being able to look at what you've got, where you are and who you're with and recognise that, for this moment at least, it's enough.

Because otherwise you can spend your entire life reaching for the next thing and never actually arrive anywhere.

For years, one of my sayings was,

"If you ain't redlining, you ain't headlining."

Catchy. Motivational. Memorable.

Also, looking back, slightly stupid.

Because an engine can redline for a while. That's what it's designed to do.

It just can't live there.

Neither can you.

There were times when my intensity served me brilliantly. It helped me build things, get through difficult periods, deliver when other people might have stopped and create opportunities that probably wouldn't have existed without it.

I'm not going to rewrite history and pretend my drive was the enemy.

It wasn't.

It was my secret weapon.

But you can't sustain Founder energy forever. That's something I didn't understand at the time. You can run on adrenaline, excitement, ambition and sheer bloody-mindedness for a long time.

Just not forever.

Drive without recovery eventually becomes depletion. And with depletion comes more stress, less mental bandwidth and less capacity to deal with whatever life throws at you.

The dangerous bit is that when you're used to operating at speed, always doing, doing, doing, slowing down can feel like you're doing something wrong.

Rest feels lazy.

A quiet day feels wasted.

Nothing happening feels like something's missing.

It took me a long time to understand that rest isn't the opposite of progress.

It's part of it.

I was reminded of that in Australia.

I was thousands of miles away, in that tiny, converted shipping container, trying to work out what I wanted my life to look like next. A few months after Kerry and I had called it a day.

Nobody gives you a manual for the bit that comes after.

Because of the time difference, getting hold of people back home wasn't always easy. One day I couldn't get through to Mum, so I texted my son Ben.

"Can you just check Nan's all right?"

A little while later, he came back to me.

She was fine.

A tree had come down where she lived because of the wind. Nothing dramatic. Nobody hurt.

But for those few minutes, thousands of miles away, that was the most important information in my world.

Funny what becomes important when you're forced to strip everything else away.

Not turnover or the size of the house or the BHP of whatever two cars are parked on the drive.

Is Mum all right?

That was the job.

And it got me thinking about all the stuff we spend years accumulating.

Houses, lofts, garages full of it.

That top-of-the-range thousand-pound television that eventually becomes an entry-level television. The telly hasn't changed, but it's no longer got its front-of-house place. One day it ends up on a tip run sitting alongside all the other once thousand-pound televisions.

Fun fact. You can never do enough tip runs.

If you've followed my career, my material pride and joy continues to be my full-size arcade machine. It cost thousands of pounds. Yet one day somebody will come along and offer three hundred quid for it on Facebook Marketplace. A house-clearance firm will probably offer £75.

That's where stuff ends up.

Things we worked hard for. Saved for. Upgraded. Protected. Things we convinced ourselves we absolutely needed.

Then one day somebody else has to clear it all out.

Your granddad probably owned things he was incredibly proud of.

Coin and stamp collections, things he worked hard to collect and buy.

Where are they now?

No idea.

A skip. Charity shop. Facebook Marketplace.

Passed down until nobody remembers who originally bought them or why.

That doesn't make owning things pointless. I like stuff. I've bought plenty of it.

But it does put things in perspective.

The things we own or have are all temporary.

So are houses. Careers. Health.

And, as uncomfortable as it is to think about, so are our lives.

So where we place our attention matters.

Because money can be made again.

Stuff can be replaced.

But there are conversations you don't get another go at.

Nights sitting outside looking at the stars that won't happen in quite the same way again.

There are days with your kids that you don't know are the last time they'll ever happen in quite that way.

There are phone calls from your mum about sprouts that, one day, you'd give anything and everything to receive again.

You rarely know it's the last time while you're living it.

It just feels like an ordinary Tuesday.

The strange thing is, while you're living these moments, most of them don't feel that important.

That's probably why we miss so many of them.

We're waiting for the big ones.

The holiday. The promotion. The house move. The deal. The wedding. The birthday. The thing we've been counting down to.

It's almost like we view life as a DVD, constantly fast-forwarding to the next good bit. The next big moment.

Maybe, in all that fast-forwarding, we can actually miss the plot.

Because maybe the small moments were the big moments all along.

Meanwhile, life is happening in all the gaps.

A drive somewhere with your kids.

A cup of tea with your mum.

Someone laughing at something completely stupid.

Turning off Netflix and sitting outside because the weather's decent.

Looking at the stars.

A conversation that doesn't seem remotely important until years later when, for whatever reason, you remember every word.

That's the stuff.

I spent a lot of my life believing the big moments were the reward for getting through the ordinary ones.

I'm not sure I believe that anymore.

Because the ordinary ones are where most of your life actually happens.

And the danger with constantly looking forward is that you can become very good at being everywhere except where you are.

I've done it.

Sat at dinner thinking about tomorrow.

Sat on a sun lounger on holiday thinking about work.

Walking down Main Street at Disney, "the happiest place on earth", with my wife and kids, while mentally somewhere else entirely, unhappy and stuck in my head.

I've been talking to someone while already preparing my response rather than listening to what they were saying.

Physically present. Mentally absent.

And you don't get that time back later.

You can make more money.

You can buy another widescreen television.

You can even buy another arcade machine.

But you can't buy another ordinary Tuesday.

I'm fifty-three as I write this.

And I'm starting to realise that success isn't only about what you build, what you buy or how far you get.

It's also about noticing your life while you're living it.

I'm still ambitious. Still have ability. Still driven. Still want to make things happen.

That bit of me isn't going anywhere.

But I don't want to spend the next twenty years, if I have them, fast-forwarding through those ordinary Tuesdays, waiting for some imaginary point where everything is finally sorted.

Because I'm not convinced that point ever exists.

There'll always be another problem. Another bill. Another opportunity. Another decision. Something else that needs doing. Another. Another. Another.

Until there isn't.

The plates never all stop spinning at the same time.

So perhaps the trick isn't waiting for life to become perfect.

It's recognising when life is good enough to be enjoyed. Then enjoying it.

A five out of ten day doesn't need fixing just because somebody on Instagram appears to be having a ten.

Five is life.

Tea with your mum.

Driving somewhere with your kids.

Sitting outside.

Looking at those stars. Again.

Doing absolutely fuck all for an hour and not feeling guilty about it.

That counts.

The Wizard was right.

Know what your job is.

And every now and again, make sure you haven't become so busy building a life that you've forgotten to live it.

READ ON.

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