

7 STEPS TO

finding *flow*



flip the script
on stress

NICKY ROWBOTHAM

First published by Tracey McDonald Publishers, 2021
Suite No. 53, Private Bag X903, Bryanston, South Africa, 2021
www.traceymcdonaldpublishers.com

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ISBN 978-1-77626-086-7
eISBN 978-1-77626-087-4

Text design and typesetting by Patricia Crain, Empressa

Cover art, diagrams and illustrations by Andrea Barra

Cover compilation by Andrea Barra

Digital conversion by Wouter Reinders

 Printed by **novus print**, a division of Novus Holdings

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balance is a flow

Life is a dance between making it happen and letting it happen.

– Arianna Huffington

Balance is a choice. And it's not a once-off decision. How we achieve balance between priorities in our lives flows daily. Some days we get it right and some days we get it wrong. Most days we try to do better again tomorrow. With modern day pressures, technological enablers and real time, streamed availability 24 hours a day and seven days a week we are constantly choosing where to put our energy. And sometimes stress dictates where our energy flows, whether it's intentional or not. It's not about giving equal attention and prominence to all areas of our lives at the same time. Life can be completely imbalanced at times, but is often a conscious choice to go all out and build a business, or spend time with family due to birth, death, illness. Or even a decision to focus on a passion. And it often see-saws back and forth as our priorities shift and flow, day to day, as we find the balance that works for us in our lives.

Everything is also a choice, whether we are conscious of it or not, as is choosing to stay stuck in the status quo. Using work or a leader's demand as an excuse, is actually making a choice. Unless we're in a war zone waiting for the next bomb to drop, staying stuck in a stressed out nervous system state of fight or flight is usually also a choice. It's often just convenient or easier to blame something outside of ourselves for our lack of personal power in a situation. We sometimes lack the perspective to claim our voice back and stand in our personal elegant power with a sense of ease and grace

– possibly by stepping back from a situation or making a different choice for ourselves. With the expectations we place on ourselves, whether it be to conform to societal norms or not, it is something I know all too well. As a woman who spent the majority of her time in recent years in a state of stress, I know this even better. This societal pressure applies to men too.

I played small and abdicated some of my personal power to stress for many years. I became the co-pilot in my own life for a long time. Driving, but not really – I kept one eye on the road and didn't really claim the driver's seat. I was completely comfortable to switch on to autopilot occasionally and subconsciously blame anything but myself if things went slightly off course.

But when we give up our choices and personal power, consciously or not, our bodies intuitively know it. It knows you're not in the driving seat of your life and yourself; hijacked by stress and in complete incongruence with ourselves and how we should be showing up in our lives. Your body is constantly sending signals to your nervous system through the age-old biological genetic wisdom. Small fluctuations in blood pressure, temperature, breathing, movement, sound and our intuitive, or instinctual reactions to them, are all constantly sending signals to our nervous system in an instantaneous feedback loop. Are you safe? Is there danger? This intelligence, giving us life, runs through our nervous system. All we have to do is get out of the way and listen. And, just when we think we're back in the driving seat and have our personal version of balance back in the see-saw of our lives – maybe between work and life – things shift. Life happens. And then it's about how we pay attention to tweak, pivot and take action in small steps, daily, to bring us back into a new state of balance or flow, aligned to our values, goals and the type of life we want to lead.

In this book, I'll take you through my personal story and how, as a high performing, high functioning corporate leader, I ended up living in a *straitjacket of stress* and how being in a state of *always on* kept me there. I've come to realise that a state of flow is less about a state of doing and rather a state of being, as we utilise and transform energy in supportive ways to live a life that supports our dreams. My *7 Steps to Finding Flow* are minor course corrections that I was guided to by experts, and after careful research these were intuitively used and incorporated into my life to easily flow back into a state of less stress, better health and wellness. I was able to fast-track my healing and achieve wellness in under six months, that most take two to three years to achieve. These *7 Steps to Finding Flow* are easy steps that add up to help you get back in the driving seat, own your life intuitively and find a sense of usefulness and flow in your life with an energy that feels open and expansive.

Each of the *7 Steps to Finding Flow* chapters will have a *Fast Forward to Flow* summary of each chapter to help you get started on your personal plan to find flow in your life, whatever that means for you. We are all different and you need support in a way that works for you. These are all simple techniques and tools that you can implement right now, at very little expense. I've also provided journal prompts at the end of each chapter to help you create an awareness that I avoided for a long time. These prompts will help you identify areas where you need focus or require support in your own life. You'll get an idea of how tuning into your nervous system and being present and aligned in your body supports all of this for an useful life that is full of flow, soul and grace.

At the end of the book, once you're ready to put your personal flow plan together, I have included support resources and templates in the final chapter, *Finding Your Flow*, as well as a number of pages for notes at the back of the book to help you get started. Whether

you're dipping your toe in the pond or going all in, there is support for you. It's a journey to find flow and embrace our elegant power in our lives, to live our best lives right now.

There is no waiting for Monday, January or a white knight. If you've picked up this book, your time to start is right now. Join me.



CHAPTER 1

the invisible straitjacket of stress

It's not stress that kills us, it is our reaction to it.

– Hans Selye

My teeth bit into my lower lip as I struggled for self-control. My breathing was shallow and fast as I stared down at my leopard-print pumps, my hands gripping my knees. My mind had gone blank, almost numb, as I struggled to focus. My thoughts scattered and fragmented as I tried to make sense of them, but they just couldn't seem to land. My iPhone was clutched in my hand and I was staring at the screen. I knew that I needed to do something, but I couldn't remember what. I heard toilets flush around me as I sat in the toilet cubicle, the toilet lid down and the cubicle door safely secured. But I wasn't in the bathroom for the normal reasons that someone usually

needs the bathroom. The toilet cubicle was my escape pod. I was a 38-year-old professional and leader in the corporate world who had capably delivered significant projects, built businesses and led large teams. And here I was, hiding in a toilet cubicle. I wasn't being chased, but I needed just a few minutes to myself. To breathe. To be alone with my thoughts and get them back in order. I breathed in deeply a few times, as my composure and veneer of calm control returned. 'This is a job for coffee,' I mumbled. As I stood up and reached to open the door, I mentally filed away all those emotions that had been so close to the surface moments before. 'Suck it up.' It was barely a whisper as I inhaled deeply before I left the toilet cubicle. It was time to face my day again.

A few hours later, I found myself in a similar situation, feeling stuck in a feedback loop. But this time it was worse. I wasn't alone and I couldn't hide. There was no locked door to hide behind. My teeth bit into my lower lip in a moment of physical *déjà vu*. My knuckles turning white as I gripped the arms of the chair, and time slowed as I willed that tear not to fall. That tear that threatened to burst through the wall of self-control that I'd built up and held onto for so long. The wobble of my chin, tremor in my voice and mistiness of my eyes already a dead giveaway of the emotion simmering under the surface, as I cast my eyes to the ceiling. Trying desperately to look anywhere other than at Gillian Ford. I'd gone to see Gillian, a nutritionist, who specialises in clinical functional dietetics with a focus on integrative medicine and therapies, looking for support. And, if I am honest, I was looking for solutions for the hole that my health was in. As Gillian sat across from me having heard my story, I couldn't rationalise my way out of this one, however much I tried. Gillian's calm, empathetic yet completely factual voice broke through my emotional struggle as she delivered the damning verdict.

'You're stuck in freeze.'

It was a truth that I didn't want to hear and I knew she wasn't referring to my body temperature. As those words landed, I could feel my body intuitively recognise a truth. It was almost as if my body had been crouched down, hiding in absolute stillness, doing no more than was absolutely necessary, waiting for the danger to pass. 'Yes,' I admitted quietly as that tear dropped onto my cheek. I quickly wiped it away as her words reverberated within me. Freeze? I had no idea what that even meant, but with every cell in my body I knew that it sounded about right and that there were no excuses and no more hiding.

Two days earlier, I'd been lying on Dr Marie Rosenberg's chiropractic table, face down and staring at the floor. As she felt my back, feeling her way past knots and tension, I felt her fingers focus on my left shoulder, lingering longer than usual. After years of needing tension released in my back, I had come to joke of my visits to the chiropractor as my version of wheel alignment for my body. A way to straighten me out to keep going, keep delivering, keep soldiering on. As her fingers prodded my left shoulder blade, I assumed the next words spoken would be about an errant rib that stress or training had nudged out of place, or a massive knot making itself known amidst the solidified mass of muscle that stress often turned my upper back into. I'd normalised my lack of alignment and the tension that had taken up residence in my neck and shoulders. I'd always justified that this was where my stress landed. That somehow made it more acceptable. Or so I thought.

'You have a partial dislocation of your shoulder.'

Again, words calmly yet empathetically delivered. I'm not one for dramatic reactions and usually my approach is calmly finding the source of the problem and fixing it. Find, fix and repeat. The ongoing, almost mechanically calm cycle representing the past few years of my life.

‘Really?’

My response was nonchalant on the surface. This was a new one for me. Not what I’d been expecting. I was trying desperately not to react. But her second question was the one that floored me.

‘Did you feel it?’

I could feel Marie’s hands bracing for the answer, as if she already knew what my response would be. After years of undoing the stress that regularly took up residence in my back, neck and shoulders, Marie had become skilled in sensing how my week had gone just through touch alone.

‘No.’

I’d felt nothing; rather just an intuitive whisper on the periphery of my consciousness that something was out of alignment. But I’d brushed it off yet again as my normal lack of alignment, often evidenced by my complete skewness when I lay on a yoga mat or how lopsided I was when I squatted at gym. I’d think I was straight when I lay down, but I was generally never squarely positioned on the yoga mat and my feet stuck off to the side. My body had become skilled at working around a problem – adjusting and coping, almost as if it knew how important it was to me to appear as if everything was under control. My mind was adept at rationalising and I’d always compensated, fixing the symptoms when my body couldn’t. But I’d felt nothing. Aren’t people normally in agony when they partially dislocate their shoulder, screaming for painkillers and anti-inflammatories? This was a new level of numbness and coping. I felt my self-control starting to crack.

I breathed in deeply as Marie pressed down with a fair degree of force and adjusted my shoulder back to its full range of motion. As I exhaled, I recalled the exact event the week before that had triggered this.

An email exchange with colleagues. After discussions and agreement, the contrary of what we'd agreed had been escalated to leadership, creating a stream of emails and wasted precious hours as I responded. Everything had been under control, or so I thought. That unnecessary incident had landed in my body the week before, triggering a cascade of stress responses. One incident should not have been a problem, but stress had relentlessly worn me down and I had lost any impermeability to events simply passing me by without landing – and landing hard. Instead, this stress took up residence without paying rent and bunkered down atop layers and layers of invisible tension that had accumulated in my shoulders, neck and back. I felt like a wind-up toy soldier. Each exchange and every time I pressed send on my email, I felt like I was involuntarily being wound tighter and tighter. I felt the muscles in my neck physically contract and twist, my chin being pulled just slightly to the side – nuanced, but noticeable. Instead of paying attention to the impact of stress on my body, I brushed it off. I took a shallow breath and grabbed my seventh cup of coffee for the day. I say seventh, but by this stage of the day, I'd generally lost count. My desk was often littered with half-drunk cups of coffee after a few hours, as I'd often get distracted midway through a cup, letting it go cold. Responding to this perceived urgent crisis, my fingers would hit the keyboard. I composed an email that was logical, reasoned and politely politically correct, whilst feeling like the duck paddling on a calm pond with its webbed feet in a panicked paddle below the surface. *Keep calm and carry on* was more than a British wartime slogan for me.

I'd become self-conditioned to treat these misalignments and tension in my back as annoyances and inconveniences that I had to deal with – when they were actually signs and symptoms. I was so tightly wound that my nervous system felt close to breaking and was completely overwhelmed. If another person placed yet another

demand on me, over and above the weight of my own expectations, I felt I may scream. Or maybe even hit someone. Figuratively speaking, of course. I used to joke that when I passed ten *Ally McBeal* moments for the day, the ones where you want to mentally throw, drop kick, or figuratively slap sense into someone in self-satisfied slow motion, it was time to go home. This often happened by lunch time, with hours of back-to-back meetings still ahead.

These moments were all in my head, often physically manifested by the mere raise of an eyebrow. It's not normal, I know. That's the beauty of retrospect and perspective. But back then, perspective on my own health and stress was not something that came easily to me. I was stuck – frozen in fear. The fear of not being enough for everyone, other than myself. I'd traded my ability to deliver amazing businesses, projects and results for my self-worth and sense of self-love. My body had been nudging me for so long and I'd become a pro at justifying any symptoms. Ignoring those subtleties, my body had started to up the ante and present me with blatant signs that I needed to pay attention to.

For years I'd blamed any digestive discomfort on a legacy illness from when I was 11 years old. Lethargy, pain and a deep fatigue for over three months as a pre-teen had doctors performing almost 20 blood tests, insisting that it must be glandular fever or yuppie flu, as they searched for a diagnosis that explained my symptoms. My mom, trusting her intuition, took me for a second opinion to another Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist. He took one look down my throat and booked me in to remove my tonsils the following morning at 7:00. Rotten, swollen, grey and leaking pus, my tonsils had been dropping all manner of waste products down my throat into my stomach for months. Post removal of my rotten tonsils, my recovery had been swift and significant. Thereafter, any digestive niggle was blamed on the damage done to my stomach back in my teens. It was

a chink in my health armour after my stomach had suffered from my rotten tonsils leaking into it for months. I popped probiotics like Tic Tacs in my 20s and 30s, with a bottle permanently in my handbag as a Band-Aid for any feeling of unease in my gut.

But that wasn't the only chink in my health armour. Stress had long been my sidekick. I used to talk about *running* around the office, and I'm not so sure it was figurative. Before a partial ligament tear to my right ankle, I'd run around the office in six-inch heels. Carrie Bradshaw had done it in *Sex and the City*, why couldn't I? If I had been listening, that injury was a literal cry for me to slow down and listen. Instead of slowing down, I used the time when I couldn't go to gym and train as an opportunity to build Inspired Change, my journal and productivity business, in my personal time. Post recovery, I switched to corporate appropriate pumps which had always been in my bottom drawer at work. They were my occasional go-to shoes for busy *back-to-back* days or project *go-lives* in the office, so I could keep up with my day. Now they were my daily uniform. The relentless pace I was moving at and the constant onslaught of stress were not passing me by and it was taking a massive toll on my body. My resilience was depleted. Weekend afternoons were reserved for naps with the protectiveness of a mother lion under the guise of *me time* and self-care. I could sleep for three to four hours on the couch on a Saturday afternoon, waking at 5:00 pm and have no difficulty sleeping again for eight hours that night. I'd even joked with friends that *naps were the new black*.

But little did I know that the excessive need to nap would be one of the signposts leading to my path to healing. Gillian flagged that the fact that I could fall asleep within seconds of lying horizontal on a couch, my bed, on a massage table, or sleep through the extraction of blackheads in a facial session were all symptoms that I was stuck in a nervous system state of freeze. These symptoms caused her to

dig deeper. I couldn't stop yawning when I sat down on a comfortable chair at work when I'd actually taken a few seconds to slow down and no longer *run around the office* and multitask the hell out of myself. These were all signals of my stressed out, frozen state. A state I now refer to as the *straitjacket of stress*.

But in this state, locked in and locked up, perspective was like looking through a keyhole: narrow and not seeing the full picture. I could only react to what was right in front of me, often when it was too late. During stressful situations, I could almost feel my body asking me to run and hide; to wait for the stress to pass. Often, I felt I couldn't even run anymore and would try and duck the stress, figuratively speaking. As an emergency response, I'd just react, feeling defensive and taking everything personally.

Was I burnt out, I wondered?

I was sleeping seven hours a night, so I thought I was fine. As in *The Italian Job* movie, F.I.N.E. really stood for *Freaked out, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional*. I was not fine. For years I had more than six or seven hours sleep a night in order to keep going, but it wasn't really restorative sleep that supported resilience. I often woke up tired. It was a coping mechanism. If I didn't sleep well, I used to joke at gym with my trainer, Sam Ryder, that unlike my mobile phone, I hadn't been charged fully overnight. Someone hadn't plugged me in. Someone, or something else, not me of course. I'd started to treat my body as something separate from me.

I was falling asleep within a minute or two of switching off the light. An attribute I used to view as a skill and which friends viewed with envy. Instead, it was another signal that my body was tired and screaming for me to rest. Really rest. My body was tired of being treated as a machine, separate from me. A relentless workhorse that, if supported on the surface with supplements, massages and runs, should just keep on going in service of the work I needed to do. I

was paying temporary, superficial homage to self-care, recovery and healing through *me time*.

At high school, I had been driven to excel academically. It became my ticket to success for which I had been repeatedly praised. But over the years, it had morphed into my sense of self-worth. It wasn't particularly the external validation that I craved, but my own. Since my 20s, the work that I delivered and my ability to have impact were my yardstick for self-love. I collected titles and accolades until they became merged with my identity; it was who I was. My friends joked that I wasn't just a Type A personality, but an A++. My ability to control things and make things happen was my superpower. At work I'd been labelled delivery-driven – a badge of honour I'd once worn proudly, as if it validated my success and it encouraged a repeat performance.

The years of conditioning that as a woman trying to succeed in corporate environments designed to reward delivery at all costs, meant that I always had to cope. Or appear that I was. Living in London at 28, I volunteered for special projects and investigations, working ridiculous, high-pressure hours. We often had to catch London black cabs home as the Underground had stopped running by the time we left work. Extreme levels of acid build-up in my intercostal muscles tightened around my chest like a vice. A stiff smile, an antacid, and I'd grin my way through it to maintain the façade as my teeth ground against one another; and my nail polish often picked at and chipped off out of view under the table as a way to vent my frustration. The state of my nails quickly became a barometer for my stress. The internal speech bubble in my head was constantly being filtered. Occasionally that filter failed and I'd smile sweetly, toss my blonde locks and exit stage left before anyone would notice – or so I hoped. Anything less than making things work, any sign of weakness, any chink showing in my armour was

akin to career suicide. In previous jobs and places of work, I'd seen people figuratively taken out (or worked out of the system) due to workplace politics. Colleagues made a career of pointing out others' faults or mishaps. Corporate clones developed where the smallest detail was scrutinised. Non-conformance with an unofficial dress code was met with a raised eyebrow and a subtle 'You bought that from *where*?' Always said loud enough for everyone to hear. You could never let your guard down. Those years had battle tested me over and over again.

Sarcasm and condescension were tools of the trade in many of those environments. Any sign of weakness or not meeting the bar set by others was akin to failure. And this is not just the domain of women in the workplace, as I saw many male colleagues struggling too – though, I saw women coworkers struggling significantly as they navigated environments incongruent with how they really want to show up, or want to be supported. Instead of support and collaboration, I often saw women treat other women as competition in a less lethal version of workplace *hunger games*. And when I did offer support, the automatic response was, 'I'm fine.'

Fine?

Aren't we all?

Years of this perfectionist, coping indoctrination began to feel normal. Even when I arrived in my current place of work, which I knew, saw and felt was different, I struggled to release my old ways. This new environment where people came first was asking me to be me and show up authentically as myself. Flip, that felt vulnerable, so I decided initially that they'd get the cool, calm, professional me who continued to deliver; more of myself than I'd shown in other work environments, but still a 'lite' version of me, just enough to adapt and be successful. Until I got some straight feedback, delivered with care, empathy and a box of Kleenex just

in case I needed it, followed by a hug. I'd met my match in an incredible leader whom I've worked with for the last seven years. He saw through my veneer, recognised my panic about showing myself, and supported me with compassion, nudges and freedom. After an internal struggle that I might be exposed in a way that would have been taken advantage of in other work environments, I started to realise that I was supported and trusted and it was safe to be me. Or as much of me as felt safe to reveal in a corporate environment. My wiring of the past would take some time to undo. This was not something that a leadership course could unravel. This was wiring that I'd laid down over years, embedded in my foundation. And my delivery was still being rewarded so I carried on – rewarded with bigger projects and more responsibility. Cue that cycle of self-worth and self-love through my work and delivery.

Romantic relationships had always felt like a side gig since my late 20s, after I'd armoured up post a break-up that left me feeling wounded after moving countries and unconsciously questioning the need to be vulnerable. The risk hadn't felt worth the residue that it left. An amazingly supportive network of friends were my tribe and quickly became my partners in crime in global travel and adventure. I became more and more discerning, preferring energising debates about life and ideas with friends, than sitting across from a man fielding that inane barrage of generic first date questions. I was often left wondering when would be polite to ask for the bill. Boyfriends or man-friends, which are what I prefer, became an occasional priority when I felt I had the energy for it. Which wasn't often.

But I never lacked energy for travel, adventure and exploration, preferably where the WiFi signal was weak and phone signal non-existent. I always have the next holiday or adventure planned as something to look forward to and I don't think I have ever knowingly carried over a leave balance from year to year in my life.

Leave was meant to be used, right? At my current job, my leave balance was the main priority I negotiated when I joined. Maybe I intuitively knew that I needed every day off I could get to rest and recover. I feel completely energised every time I stand on the other side of passport control with boarding pass in hand – and often with a visa too. My South African passport is the most expensive document I've ever owned as we generally need visas to travel anywhere, barring some countries in Africa and South America. The hassle and expense of visas aside, it's my most treasured and colourful memento of my travels, littered with entry and exit stamps for border crossings. Remote, adventurous destinations were my preference where I could hike to new destinations, explore nature and meet new people and cultures. Kayaking in Antarctica and hiking to Everest Base Camp were some of my favourite travel experiences, where I could be completely present and in awe of my surroundings with new smells, sounds and tastes. I never feel more myself than when I travel. Maybe I just felt free.

Little did I realise that these remote destinations were intuitive choices to exhale, disconnect and avoid the incessant pings from my phone and email that would normally have my fingers flying across my phone keyboard: I must respond; I must be on top of things – even on holiday. By ensuring I could switch off where signal was sketchy, I was allowing my body and mind to feel safe, grounded and present. I could rest, regenerate and rewire temporarily, and finally breathe. Holding my breath and shallow breathing had become yet another habit I'd fallen into.

A year before that fateful day in Gillian's office, I'd been struck down with a stomach bug. This was the start of a period of my body making a stand and refusing to be ignored; the time for subtle hints and nudges was over. My reaction to the stomach bug was like a red card from the referee on the sidelines of my life. I'd been benched

and I wasn't happy about it. Debilitating cramps had me running to the doctor's office for a quick fix. Antibiotics and painkillers were prescribed. I walked out of the doctor's rooms, clutching my prescription like a safety blanket. Everything would be fine now, I thought. Just as I started to feel better, more cramps, constipation and bloating struck. Back at the doctors – more antibiotics, painkillers, laxatives and fibre were prescribed as a quick fix. I was keen to get back to my usual routine of training and running. Again, I saw the illness as an inconvenience to my life that science and medicine must fix, rather than yet another plea for help from my body.

But what I didn't realise is that running, or any form of fight or flight stress response moved blood flow away from my gut lining, prioritising energy to face whatever danger my body perceived it was facing. My entire being was still recognising running as an age-old form of flight – say, from a lion, rather than my modern day rationalised release of tension and head space to process my day as my feet hit the pavement. I was no longer supporting my recovery, but hindering it. I was also overloading my body with medication, expecting my liver to soldier on and process all of these toxins while my body healed itself. So, it's no surprise that I cycled through a series of more antibiotics and painkillers as my resilience was depleted. My ability to bounce back had all the bounce of a flat tyre – all thud and no spring.

By Christmas, four weeks later, I was on my third prescribed dose of antibiotics, and even higher doses of painkillers, with little relief in sight. And I still wasn't listening. Or rather, I was conveniently ignoring the inconvenient signals, expecting my health to relentlessly keep pace with delivering, that was feeding my sense of self-worth and perceived personal meaning. Until it didn't. My white-knuckling through life and the pain of early warning signs was no longer a life raft that I could cling to. I could no longer deny

that all was not okay and that the way I'd been living, or merely existing, could continue. I had normalised this state of stress when physiologically it was trauma being inflicted daily upon my body and I had become too proud or ashamed to ask for help. Part of me felt embarrassed. Like my body and I couldn't cope. I'd been known as the person who made things work and I couldn't make my own body *woman up*.

'Failure.'

I pushed that small whisper of self-doubt aside. I'd become renowned for living by the motto that *hope is not an action plan*. I knew that hoping that my health would magically heal on its own wouldn't cut it and I needed a plan. Action plans are my crutch; my coping mechanism. They make me feel safe, as when I have a plan I can take small steps daily without feeling overwhelmed. I'd built my entire Inspired Change Journal business on this premise and I knew it had worked to help me professionally, as well as for others to achieve their goals. Control the steps in small one per cent changes daily and progress follows, even if it's slower than I'd like. On the surface I was doing all the right things, but it was no longer enough. My body was taking a stand on behalf of my health.

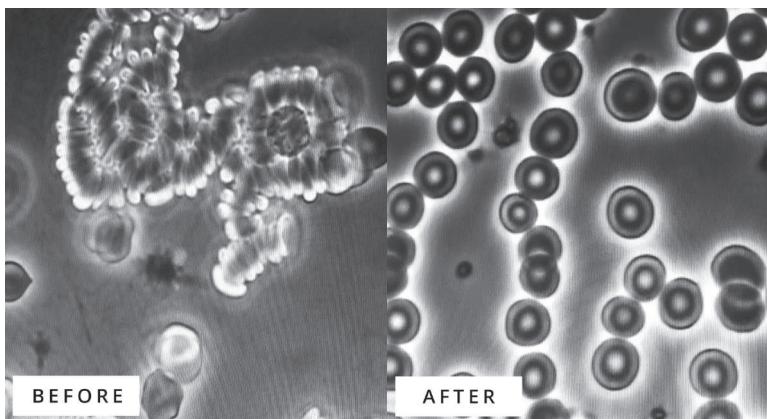
After all the antibiotics I knew my body needed a break, even though I was still in pain and significant discomfort. Cramps continued and a bloated belly that became too sore to sleep on had me thinking maternity jeans were an option. I remember looking at those maternity jeans adverts online, envying their expandable, elasticated waistlines that looked so comfortable and supportive. Similar to a pregnant woman, I was already sleeping with a pillow supporting my stomach to take the pressure off my side. I never knew when my stomach would decide to puff up, feeling all spongy and swollen, possibly caused by a stressful meeting, a meal, or by the end of a long day. I'd tried eliminating foods and reintroducing

them to see what caused it. It was as random as a lottery wheel. To ease my pain, I resorted to unbuttoning my jeans under the table whilst in a meeting or at a restaurant for a few moments of relief, until I had to get up again and quickly *Houdini* my jeans button back into place.

I'd developed dark patches of discolouration across my stomach over the past few months that looked like a greyish-brown flying saucer over my belly button. The flying saucer expanded out from my belly button with the passing weeks, growing larger and larger, signalling that my moment of reckoning around my health was coming closer, like a looming alien invasion. Sweat on my skin and spending stressful hours hunched over at my desk with my pants pushing into my belly button created this reaction that my body was signalling wasn't healthy. The shame I unconsciously felt had me tugging my top down lower as I continued to hide my pain and discomfort. I knew I needed help, and that I could no longer run from my problems, but I justified doing nothing at the time. I didn't have time. More like I didn't make time. The old adage of *if you don't make time for your health, you make time for your illness* was becoming my reality. The choice of a one-piece swimming costume over a bikini was not going to solve this, only cover up and hide my shame. But it wouldn't hide the swelling. Heaven forbid if anyone had asked if I was pregnant. Forget the embarrassment; the thought of being intimate with anyone in my current bloated, blotchy state triggered a bright red blush of shame on my cheeks.

Wanting to run towards my problems and no longer be the proverbial ostrich with its head in the sand, I went back to the doctor detailing how I was still plagued with digestive issues, cramps and constipation. After a brief discussion I was given a long-term prescription of medication, often for those suffering from Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). A 30-day prescription with multiple repeats.

After three days I stopped taking the medication on the gut feeling that there had to be another way. I wasn't ready to permanently medicate the problem and felt, once again, like I was treating the surface level symptoms. I was starting to finally wake up. My shame and despair had shut down my pride and that small whisper of intuition was starting to creep in and finally to be heard. I started small – taking lemon juice and warm water first thing in the morning to help my digestion. The first scientific evidence of how bad things were was presented when I took the first step in my journey at a top endocrinologist's offices in Johannesburg when I went for a live blood culture test. As the medical technician slid the blood cultures under the microscope, the *before* picture confronted me on a large display screen in front of me. I didn't need to be an expert to know it wasn't good.



Before and After: My Live Blood Culture on a black-backed microscope. My wake-up call. Evidence that my body wasn't really breathing.

My red blood cells were stuck together. Forget a traffic jam in my body – the before picture looked like a multi-car pile-up on the freeway at rush hour. My red blood cells, which were supposed to transport oxygen to my lungs and the rest of my body, needed every ounce of surface area to do this. Instead, the cells were stuck together like a pile of pancakes absorbing less oxygen than was needed, as the surface area exposed was mostly just a thin edge. Not a lot of surface area to absorb oxygen.

How was my body breathing and getting the oxygen it needed to survive, let alone thrive? That question circulated in my head non-stop. I couldn't ignore what my blood under a black-backed microscope looked like; oxygen is life giving and I wasn't getting a lot of it. Cold, hard irrefutable scientific evidence that I couldn't ignore or explain away. If someone had seen what the speech bubble in my head looked like, it would have said: 'WTF!' 'What the Freak!' Or more like: 'Where's the Fuel?' If I wasn't getting sufficient oxygen to support my body, my body was running on energy saver mode, but I wasn't asking any less of it. I was running on oxygen fumes and expecting my body to deliver.

After my blood cultures were examined, high levels of candida, cholesterol, mild leaky gut (where my intestinal walls had become more permeable than it should be, allowing potential nasties through) and liver strain were diagnosed by the medical technician and confirmed by the doctor. A series of ten hydrogen peroxide drips, referred to by the nurse as oxygen drips, was prescribed as a course of intravenous therapy. At the end of it all, my blood cells popped out all bright, bouncy and happy as shown in the *after* picture. However, as I wasn't really fixing the underlying problem my life continued as usual. It was just another Band-Aid on the problem.

Three months later I was back, hooked up to another course of drips, as my blood cells had reverted to stuck shadows of their former glory, cowering together for support, screaming at me that they could do no more. This time the drips didn't work as effectively and I was still suffering from cramps, bloating and what felt like a very temperamental digestive system by the end of the treatments. The medical technician asked that I add digestive enzymes to the supplement regime of vitamins and probiotics that I was already taking. Let's just say that my kitchen counter was starting to look like a pharmacist's counter, or maybe just a hypochondriac's. I was spending thousands of rands on probiotics alone and the staff at the Wellness Warehouse health store had come to know me by name. The digestive enzymes were to support my stomach in breaking down fats, carbohydrates and proteins to digest my food more effectively. A year earlier, my sister's partner, a General Practitioner in France, had suggested Betaine HCl, which is a supplemental source of hydrochloric acid to support the body for low stomach acid production. I was already showing symptoms of poor digestion back then, as he noted during functional tests he performed on me. I'd just finished the bottle and thought that I was done. Healed and ready to get back in the game, so I thought. Given the need for digestive enzymes, I thought I may need to add the Betaine HCl back to my list of supplements. My sister, who is studying nutrition in Europe, had suggested a household *bicarb test*, using 1/8th of a teaspoon of baking soda or sodium bicarbonate (bicarb) in a small amount of water first thing in the morning, and again before lunch and dinner to test my stomach acid levels throughout the day, even though they are normally lowest in the morning.

Swallowing bicarb and water creates a chemical reaction in the stomach, causing burping, which is carbon dioxide gas. Whilst not a scientific test, a burp within three minutes generally indicates

adequate levels of stomach acid. The first time I performed this test in the morning, I burped at ten minutes, indicating low levels of stomach acid. My results were marginally better before lunch and dinner, as my stomach acid levels improved throughout the day. I thought then that I'd found a root cause and so set about doing what I could to boost my digestive juices and heal my gut. My meals became cocktails of lemon juice, digestive enzymes, Betaine HCl, ginger juice shots, glutamine and collagen coffees. Life started to become more bearable, but many of my symptoms still remained.

I found myself reaching for berries and bananas in the grocery store during my weekly shop and I could already feel my body asking for more natural, real, unprocessed and whole food. Let's be clear, I've always been and still am a great believer in modern medicine, and have always generally followed a conventional path when it came to health and healing, but I also come from a family where natural remedies, passed down from generation to generation, were trusted and used to supplement healing. Now, I was starting to trust my natural instincts and lean more towards natural solutions, but I was still soldiering under a banner of stress. I thought if I solved my health problems, that I'd be able to carry on under the continual onslaught of stress, delivery, deadlines and workplace challenges. I used to refer to any confrontations as discussions; another sign how I'd started to normalise stress and the daily assault of overwhelm – I'd come to expect and accept it. I had been layering the stressors of my life, one on top of another, rather than letting them go and passing me by.

My workplace has an incredible employee assistance programme to provide support in whatever way we need it. But I didn't need that. I was fine, wasn't I? The programme was something I referred my team to, always putting others' support needs first. I had to cope and soldier on, even when I knew I wasn't. I've always been a

believer in synchronicity and support from the universe that, if I'm open to it and trust, what I need will come to me. And sometimes it comes from unexpected places, especially when I haven't been listening. One of the next catalysts on my journey to heal was over a long weekend in Seattle for a friend's 40th birthday. Gareth, an amazing friend from university who had been a partner in crime on many global adventures, was celebrating his milestone birthday and I decided I wanted to be there to celebrate with him. I'm a firm believer that life is all about magic, moments and memories. This was a memory that was worth the charge on my credit card – I knew that it would be one of those priceless memories I'd treasure forever. Twenty-four hours of flying, the cost of the flight, a nine-hour time zone difference and jetlag were a small price to pay for drinking champagne and watching the sun set over the shores of Lake Union, sharing special moments with old friends. Another friend from university, Rosalind, had also flown in from London for us all to celebrate together, making it even more special.

On the first night in Seattle, in an effort to stave off jetlag and trans-Atlantic flight-induced yawns, we headed out for tacos and margaritas. I'd been sharing snippets of my health challenges, keeping things light and cheerful in line with the occasion. We were there to celebrate after all. Halfway across the parking lot on the way to the restaurant, Rosalind sympathised when I spoke about my workplace stress, and said that I should try doTERRA essential oils. Do what? Essential oils? That was something my sister, Julie, who lived in Provence in France was into. Julie had long ago embraced more natural solutions, so this was more her swim lane. Rosalind handed me some roller bottles to smell and I could feel my energy lift after a few seconds after inhaling. Being 100% pure, certified therapeutic grade essential oils, I was open to anything at this stage, especially as it was in alignment with my search for more natural solutions.

Conventional medicine wasn't quite delivering what I needed and I was ready to look at alternative therapies. I thought no more of it until Rosalind handed me two roller bottles at the end of the trip to take home with me. I used them periodically and could feel my energy was shifting. Even just slightly. Whether psychosomatic or not, I needed whatever support I could find.

A few Google searches later, and the Facebook algorithm did its job of putting in front of me that which I'd been searching for. I ended up on a Zoom call one Friday afternoon at 3:00 pm with Tracey-Leigh Stewart, an enthusiastic and compassionate doTERRA wellness advocate, who managed to get some oils to support my stress and digestion into my hands from the UK within a week or two. A drop of a digestive blend in my water, lavender on my pillow and the Serenity® calming blend in my diffuser and I could feel my body exhaling just slightly. Having made some progress, I knew I still wasn't really well.

Well.

That word had taken on a whole new meaning for me. Above all else, including my work, wellness had become my goal. Feeling well had been something I had taken for granted for so long in my rush from meeting to meeting, ticking the boxes of my daily life. Everything had become so much harder and felt like it took a whole lot more effort when I was unwell. At the gym I had to avoid doing burpees if my stomach was swollen as it put more pressure on my tummy, almost triggering the inflammation and discomfort that felt like someone was tightening a vice around my intestines. Not a great feeling when you're landing like a beached whale on the gym floor. What I wore to work depended on how I was feeling and how uncomfortable the trouser waistband felt. I was having to work around my illness and make space for it in ways that I had never considered. All of a sudden, my level of empathy and understanding

of others' chronic illnesses and daily health struggles became real. No longer imagined.

A *gut feeling* started to take on a new (and rather ironic) meaning for me, and I was starting to trust it. Mentally I kept getting images of something hunkered down in the folds of my intestines. The bloating felt like inflammation in my gut lining with any irritants creating friction and further inflammation. I'd had a nagging feeling that I needed to go for colon hydrotherapy to move things through and out of my gut. I had made appointments a few months before and then cancelled them. What people think, based on the stigma of the treatment, had gotten the better of me then, but that gut feeling had not left me and was starting to pester and nag me. Albert Einstein once said: 'The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created society that honours the servant and has forgotten the gift.' My intuition was something that I'd long ignored, pushed down in favour of rationale, logic and facts. It was now waking from a long hibernation and refusing to be ignored, with a hunger for space and attention.

Briony Botha at Trinity Health had come highly recommended for colon hydrotherapy and I finally took the plunge and booked my first appointment. This wasn't the first time that I'd tried colon hydrotherapy, but it had been 20 years since my last treatment so I was understandably apprehensive. Through a few regular initial treatments, we got my sluggish gut moving and what came out, that had been hiding within my intestine, confirmed all those intuitive nudges that I had long ignored. I felt my digestion easing and my skin began to clear. After a few treatments, Briony also suspected that there was something else causing the irritation in my body – possibly a parasite, which mirrored my earlier thoughts of something hunkered down in my intestine. Briony was the catalyst who referred me to Gillian Ford. Gillian is a nutritionist, but Briony had

cautioned me that she wasn't a nutritionist or dietician in the traditional sense. 'Don't expect a meal plan', had been Briony's closing comment as I walked out the door.

Trusting Briony, based on the incredible support she'd given me in the past weeks, I contacted Gillian and I had an appointment in the next few days. It's amazing how I had begun to feel safe. Because I trusted that I was being provided with all the support that I needed to eventually heal in such an intuitive way, I couldn't question the process. I always research suggested remedies, a hangover from high school and thanks to my bookish tendencies. I just had to be open to the journey, allow myself to be guided and embrace my path to heal and find flow in my life. The synchronicity and speed with which the referrals and appointments I needed become available to me, left me with no option but to allow myself to say yes and accept the healing and support I'd ignored for so long and hadn't thought that I needed.

And that is how I ended up sitting in that chair in Gillian's office, open but finally confronted. When booking the appointment, Gillian had told me that the initial appointment is normally two to two-and-a-half hours. I initially wondered what we'd be doing for that long, but as soon as I sat down and Gillian asked me to tell my story and what had brought me to her, I began to understand. Given the journey I'd been on and the research I'd done, Gillian didn't skip the science and talked me through the logic of her thinking to help me understand further. Once I understand the logic behind something it sticks, and I am able to connect the dots. After telling her my story, Gillian passed me the handle of her bio-scan machine, a product supported by the Rillings Institute. Within minutes her printer was spitting out page after page of test results detailing stress, balance and regulation across almost 250 parameters of my biochemistry. Gillian calmly talked me through page after page of

results; most of the biochemical markers confirming or supporting her original thoughts around the state of my nervous system, as well as levels of toxicity in my system, as I scribbled down copious notes, trying desperately to get it all down.

When Gillian looked me in the eyes and with direct, calm empathy delivered some realities I'd been avoiding, I was finally confronted with hard, unavoidable, scientific truths that I could no longer ignore. My nervous system, my vagus nerve in particular, was stuck in a state of freeze, locked in by the trauma of everyday stress, with my body and liver overloaded with everyday toxins, parasites, pesticides and certain heavy metals.

And in that moment I exhaled and decided to change.

And it was no longer a logical, rational thought that I could accept – it was an intuitive feeling that burst through the walls of every cell of my being and just said yes. There was no longer a choice or an option; ignorance was no longer bliss. It was now the only way forward with no looking back, so I let a second tear fall, and I remember the sense of relief that came in that moment.

I'm no longer afraid to tell the stories that once caused me shame. I've continued to heal through hard work, listening to my body and aligning with what I needed. In Gillian's experience, in the months after that initial appointment, I've healed more in six months than many do in two to three years. I've stopped avoiding the hard work and embarrassment, and now I'm stepping out of my fear and shame that kept me in my *straitjacket of stress* in the most vulnerable, exposed way. It's time to really start living a life that feels free and light and full of ease. Like a gently unfurling flower. This is my journey to find flow.



JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Do you feel well and full of vitality? If not, when did you last feel that way?
- If you had to rate your sense of overwhelm on a scale of 1 to 10, where would you rate yourself? 1 being none and 10 being completely overwhelmed.
- When someone asks how you are, how many times do you respond with an automatic platitude or 'I'm fine' response?
- Which version of fine are you? Fine or F.I.N.E (Freaked out, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional)?
- Do you ever suffer from Imposter Syndrome, where you feel you are not good enough?
- Are you associating personal worth with your work, delivery or projects?
- Do you ever feel yourself holding your breath? Almost waiting for something or your stress to pass?
- What moments and matters are you avoiding, whether conscious or not?
- Does your body feel tight and locked in?
- Do you fall asleep in seconds, waking from a sleep that never feels restful?
- Do you take everything personally?
- Is your perspective narrow and does everything feel confrontational?
- Where does your stress land?
 - Locked into tension in your shoulders, back and neck?

7 steps to finding flow

- Is your stomach in knots or are you permanently popping headache tablets?
- Do you find your jaw locked tight or do you wake up grinding your teeth?
- Do your shoulders lift and hunch up?