

ALISON HILL

BEST-SELLING CO-AUTHOR OF
DEALING WITH THE TOUGH STUFF

S T A N D
O U T

A real world guide to get clear, find
purpose and **become the boss of busy**

WILEY

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For all the Catherine's, Cath's and Kate's in my world.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ali Hill* is Australia's coolest Psychologist. A regular in mainstream TV and print media, she is the co-founder of Pragmatic Thinking, a behaviour and motivation strategy company that carries a client list such as Pepsico, Suncorp, McDonalds, Bond University and Siemens to name a few.

Ali is the co-author of best-selling business book *Dealing with the Tough Stuff: How to achieve results from key conversations*, which has been translated into 3 languages and is in its 2nd edition. An international and in-demand keynote speaker and even more in-demand mum.

Ali is highly sought after to assist individuals, teams and organisations transition through change. She presents her unique and authentic message through engaging humour, practicality and real-world thinking,

In her spare time she turns her hand to cooking and knitting, neither of these very successfully. So Ali has decided to keep focusing on what she does best — starting a global conversation about what it takes to live a Stand Out life. It does mean there will be no home-baked goods or a knitting corner in any work she delivers... sorry if this is a deal-breaker.

*yep, here I am talking about myself in the third person. Indulge me for a second.



PREFACE

I was drowning. Yet the only water to be found was in the tears welling in my eyes.

The pressure I felt — in my marrow — 'twas one busy folks often feel. It was the pressure of relentless, unwavering busyness. I was drowning in an ocean of expectations, gasping for breath facing what seemed like an endless to-do list, quickly losing sight of myself and what really mattered. I could see no sign of a horizon, much less a safe harbour.

This was a feeling of slowly increasing pressure — not unusual (I mean who hasn't felt this, right?), although this time it all came to a head on one particular afternoon.

Friday, 11 April, at 3.30 in the afternoon. To. Be. Exact.

Darren, my husband, had just returned from picking up the kids from school. Pat and Kate, twin-powered tornados of seven- and five-year-old energy had whooshed through our office on their way into the house. Maybe they said 'hi', maybe they didn't — I was so consumed in my own battle for air that I didn't notice.

The shortness of breath and tightness in my chest — both physical and metaphorical — weren't eased by the infectious joy my children typically bestow on me. So often, they provide the antidote for my grown-up world, with their laughter and 'pull-my-finger' jokes; yet this time, not even them getting home could shift my thinking.

I felt antsy and anxious, positively desperate to do something, anything... but I couldn't think of anything that could fix how I was feeling and give me what I needed — whatever it was I needed. It was Friday afternoon, after all — when others had their eyes set on the weekend, I was feeling frantic. So I defaulted; I just got busy.

I've gotta do something. What could I be doing? I thought. *The mail! I haven't checked the mail.* Yep, the checking the mail was yet another thing I hadn't gotten round to doing yet, and was exactly what needed to happen right away.

As I stepped outside with a thundercloud, monsoon and even a bloody La Niña all hovering above my head, I rounded the corner directly into Darren, who was coming in from the car now parked in the driveway. Darren took one look at me and asked me a very simple question.

'What's wrong?'

Seriously! What is it with guys and that question? If I knew what was wrong, I'd have it fixed by now! Wouldn't I?

I stood there speechless, but in just that split-second the start of a whole discourse was taking place in my head. But rather than give voice to this internal narrative, I just stood there and glowered.

I was so disconnected from my needs and emotions that when someone I love with my whole heart asked me what was wrong, the deepest truth (which is tightly connected to our deepest fears) was that I didn't even know where to start.

No idea.

What's wrong? Darren might as well have just asked me the molecular structure of plutonium, how many litres of petrol our car takes, or to name all of the Kardashians (I can't keep up with them...). So, of course, I went with the standard response. Through gritted teeth I said, 'I'm fine'...and then proceeded to burst into tears (the international sign that all is not, in fact, fine). These weren't pretty-girl tears either. These were ugly tears. Reals ugly. Well, hellooo monsoon! La Niña, take a back seat for a bit, you may be needed soon...

After I calmed a little, and through the waterfall of snot, I eventually disclosed to Daz that I wasn't coping with life. I felt like I'd lost the joy in pretty much everything I did. I distinctly remember a specific phrase I said that summed up my feelings and shocked me a little at the same time:

'I just feel like I need to opt out of life for a while.'

Now, I should be clear this wasn't a self-harm intention or statement. It was what I now refer to as a 'self-calm statement'. It was a verbal acknowledgement that things weren't right. Actually, they were very

far from being right. I was drowning in the monotony of school lunches, breakfast dishes, and my personal favourite, 'What are we having for dinner?' — all while juggling a million other balls. I was losing that part of me that makes me tick, and I just didn't know how to get it back. But instead of tackling this, I just wanted to not think about any of that for a while.

Even as this declaration was spilling from my mouth, however, the diatribe in my head was also continuing: *'What have you got to whinge about?' 'You've got healthy kids' 'Your professional career is on the up' 'You're happily married to this bloke — even if he does ask infuriating questions!'*

Darren looked me square in the eye and then said something I was not expecting at all. I was expecting him to take me in his arms. Give me a hug. Tell me everything was going to be okay. You know, do the 'man thing'. While that would have been great, today was different. He said something I couldn't have predicted, and it completely floored me.

'Babe, just have a day or two off. Do what you need to do.'

Of course, after shock, my next reaction was *Why?? Why does he want to get rid of me?*

Mentally I started checking through the likely reasons:

Did he have a speeding fine he didn't want me to know about?

Was there a boys' trip coming up he wanted brownie points for?

What time were the Eels (his favourite footy team) playing this weekend? Did he want me out of the house when they were on??

I didn't ask but looked at him quizzically and, perhaps sensing what he'd said just wasn't registering in my head, Darren repeated his sentiment. 'Do whatever you need to do. Just get away for a bit. Why don't you have the day to yourself tomorrow to do whatever you want? We'll be okay.'

Then, God love him, he did give me a hug and a kiss, and walked into the house where the kids were no doubt already causing untold carnage. (They had to be — we hadn't heard a peep from them, which any parent knows is a sure-fire sign of impending disaster.)

For what seemed like an eternity, I stood rooted to the same place in the driveway, Daz's words echoing in my head.

Just get away. Have a day to yourself. Do whatever you want.

I knew there was only one place I wanted to go: Byron Bay. Byron is a stunning coastal town in north-east New South Wales, about 40 minutes' drive from where we lived. For as long as I can remember, it has always held a strong place in my heart. It was where we used to go as kids and, as I grew older, my mum and I used to go for walks along the beach there — long walks; even longer talks. Using Mum's favourite word, those beaches, that place; it's... special.

For me, the calming presence that was Byron had been a part of my upbringing. Only in later years would I come to realise the area carries a deeper mystery — and not just the hippie/boho business it is often associated with these days, but also something more ancient and spiritual. The traditional custodians of the Byron area, the Indigenous Arakwal people, have known for thousands of years that Byron was a place of healing. At that moment on my driveway, I needed healing, and not just for a cut or scratch, but for something deeper and more visceral than that.

While the decision about where to go was easy, however, the decision to actually go was harder.

When Darren said, 'Why don't you have the day to yourself?' half of me was going, 'Yeah, baby! See...you...later!' and the other half was screaming, 'Are you serious? I can't just up and go, that kinda thing's gotta be planned, I've got things to do, I don't deserve it, just suck it up princess!'

It's safe to say my pillow endured a lot of tossing and turning that night as I wrest the decision from one point to the next. Despite all my angst about going, I got up early the following morning (before I could talk myself out of it), packed my bag and drove down the Pacific Highway from our home on the Gold Coast to the golden beaches of Australia's eastern-most point.

About fifteen minutes into the drive, along a stretch of the Pacific Highway that cuts through the sugar cane fields with the majestic Mount Warning on the horizon, a tunnel comes up just after the small township of Chinderah. Now you might be thinking, *How does she recall a goddamn tunnel? Who is this chick, a female version of 'Rain Man'?* Trust me, when you have two little kids, and there are very few tunnels around, you know exactly where they are.

As I was driving through that tunnel, I paid attention to just how noisy my head had been for the entire trip. Here's just a taste of what was running through my head:

Who do you think you are?!

You don't have enough money for this.

You still have to lose that last 5 kilograms before you go.

Why did you leave the house in a mess like that?

The kids need a haircut. You can't even sort out your family when you're home, what use are you being away?

Who do you think you are??!!

It was horrible. Not the house or the family — they were fine — but, rather, the way I was treating myself. That was the only awful thing going on. Here I was, beating myself up for even going. I was experiencing every flavour of guilt, including the worst flavour — parental guilt. I mean, seriously — who just gets up one morning and leaves their young kids to go off and do their own thing? This was the kind of self-deprecating angst I was putting myself through.

Thankfully, as I drove out of that tunnel I thought, *This is ridiculous* and I gave myself a pep talk that even Tony Robbins would have been proud of. And yep, I did it out loud, in the car, on my own:

Alison, you're doing it. There's no point debating whether it's a good idea. You're in the car driving... just be okay with that.

Then I did what all good-intended, guilt-ridden, busy people do. I started negotiating with myself:

Right, well; it's 8 am now. I'll be in Byron by 8.30 am. I'll do a perfect parallel park outside the local bookstore before I grab an insightful book, a journal and the perfect pen. Then I'll stroll past the shops down to the beach where I'll sit reflectively in lotus pose and contemplate. My big epiphany and 'A-ha!' moment will happen precisely at 11.15 am and what I need to do to get sorted will be clear. Then I'll drive home to tell Darren how successful I've been in pulling myself together, getting back in time to bring in the washing and make the kids dinner.

Seriously!! I couldn't even have a day off to relax without planning it with military precision! Arrggghhh. Enough.

Walking out the door of my house wasn't easy, but what faced me right then was something monumentally harder. On that drive to Byron Bay — in that moment — I hadn't realised that I was going to discover the true reason for my dispirited, downtrodden soul. It wasn't my life. It wasn't the kids, work or even the friggin Kardashians.

It was me.

Bam. Ouch.

I was my biggest barrier. I'd been worried about the kids, the house, the business, if my cycle was aligned with the moon's ... but I'd never thought about whether I could be the problem. So I made a decision right there. No more blame placed on everything else. This was just me here. The kids were okay and Darren was okay; it was just me. And if I wanted better, it started with treating myself better.

I made a pact with myself. I would do whatever I wanted when I got to Byron. No plans, no lists, no mental progress chart. I'd lie on the beach if I wanted to. I'd get a massage if I wanted to. Hell, I'd eat as much over-priced organic food as I wanted to.

And that's what I did. I walked on the beach. I swam. I listened to music but, mostly, I just listened to me. While the letting go was hard, the recuperation was bliss. And you know what else I did? I rang Darren in the afternoon and told him I wanted to stay and that I'd booked a motel for the night.

His reply? 'No worries.'

For a split-second I got anxious again. His response was far too nonchalant for my liking. But I realised that was just the fear part of my brain. Of course, it'd be okay. And so I stayed the night. Slept. Ate. Walked. Swam. Repeat.

And this food for my soul was divine — and it was over in a blink.

Truthfully, when I arrived home after this time away — this brief opt-out — I was wondering what I'd be walking back into. Will I see my kids drowning in piles of washing similar to when they are in the ball pit at Ikea? Will every single dish we own be piled dangerously high in the sink? Will my husband be curled up in a corner gently sobbing??

I pulled up in the driveway (the scene of my meltdown only 48 hours earlier), opened the door to the house, and ... Nothing. Everything

was completely fine! And not 'fine' like 'woman fine', like actually fine. The kids were happy, hubby gave me a kiss, and I even found a clean cup for an organic sleepy-time tea (which a sleepy looking hippy in Byron talked me into buying). Everything was — well, like, totally fine.

And there lay more clarity for me. The world genuinely didn't care what I thought, said or did. It just kept on keeping on. It never asked for permission. My choice on how I interacted with my world is my choice.

So there it was. I'd had to confront two blinding realities in the space of two days. First, I was my own biggest hurdle to happiness (ouch) and, second, I — and no-one else — held the keys to finding my own health, calm and love. This second reality was tremendously empowering. And downright farrrrking scary.

You see, what I'd had a reminder of is that when we fully own ourselves — and every last bit of ourselves, not just the good bits but also the messy bits — we have the foundation to live a Stand Out life.

To be honest, I already knew this stuff. After working as a counsellor and psychologist for more than fifteen years, I knew rationally how this stuff worked. I'm a professional head-mechanic and I'm good at what I do — I'd given some damn good advice over the years. But we all know that theory and practice can be separate entities, and here presented the most difficult client I'd faced: me.

So I became my own patient, and I worked on me. I journalled, did yoga, had acupuncture, saw a therapist, got angry, cried, shouted and went quiet. But above all, I stayed patient and compassionate. Along the way, I noticed more and more people feeling how I had felt on that Friday afternoon. I became obsessed with how we can live extraordinary and outrageously fulfilled lives, even among the busyness of our world.

Among the quagmire of emotions, inner monologues, trials and tribulations, I was able to identify — based on a platform of science — the patterns that derail our success, and the twin pathways that can supercharge your magnificence. As I examined my own experiences against a mountain of books, journals and research papers, a foundation started to emerge; and as I correlated the commonalities faced by my clients, further patterns emerged and

Stand Out

announced themselves. And these patterns made perfect sense in a sometimes senseless world.

Our pursuit together, as you read this book, is to Stand Out. You'll find that space where you can turn up as the best version of you. To really Stand Out. And, yep, I'm quite aware how intoxicating that sounds — and how terrifying it can make you feel at the same time.

This is a call to arms to fight for something better.

To play big instead of playing small. For reals.

To love harder — so damn hard it scares you.

To become the boss of busy, embrace self-expression and stop bowing to the pressure of urgency.

And we'll do it through the twin powers of progress and purpose.

This is your time, so let's get cracking, eh?

Love

Ali x



INTRODUCTION

Life sure is messy. And, honourably, the messier it gets, the more we try to organise it, control it and make it manageable — which itself is busy work. When we're in this frame of mind, we wake up in the morning, world rushing at us, throw a coffee over our worries and rip in — continually driven by a belief that life wouldn't be this messy if we were more organised, fitter, smarter; if we just had it all together.

So we pile up our to-do list higher than a teenage boy's dinner plate at an all-you-can-eat buffet. Paradoxically, this puts us under even more pressure, and feeling more overwhelmed with all the things we have to do. The pressure of trying to keep it together while we stem the tide of messy becomes too much. But don't you dare drop any of those balls you're juggling!

Get busier. Try harder. That's the answer. Or is it?

Let's take a little sneaky peek at the results: we're overloaded, tired, stressed, tired, busy, tired, exhausted... did I say tired? And the impact of this is being felt across the board. In her book *The Sleep Revolution*, Arianna Huffington (co-founder and editor-in-chief of *The Huffington Post*) highlights that *#tired* has been used over 27 million times on Instagram, and if you type 'why am I so...' into a Google search, the most common end to this sentence is 'tired'. Globally, we're all desperate to find a way out of weary.

We need to face facts: we are stuffing up our lives by trying to work harder at working hard. This intent, seemingly noble on the surface, is a sure-fire way of losing your health, happiness and sanity. We need a different approach — one that doesn't cost us these essential components of our lives, and something that's more than just working harder.

OPEN 24/7

We live in a time where 'open 24/7' has been sold to us as a convenience. And in a lot of ways it is. We now are able to go to the gym and pump weights at 2 am if we want to, bop down the aisles of the local supermarket to Richard Marx's greatest hits long after those pesky school kids have gone to bed, and scream into the pharmacy for an urgent order of fungal cream whenever we want (okay that last one is actually quite convenient). When we find ourselves on the couch, we can watch whatever we want, whenever we want, rather than viewing times being dictated to us by the networks. And who doesn't love a good binge-watch? Yep, you can watch zombies in varying states of decay on *The Walking Dead* to your heart's content — with no ad breaks — and scare the bejesus out of yourself for 10 hours straight if you so well please. Our world is like a giant remote control.

Play. Rewind. Fast forward. Play again. But the pause button? She's-a-broken.

This ease of convenience has crossed over into our connectivity and communications. The flexibility in how we interact, when we interact and who we interact with around the globe has fundamentally changed the way that we connect with each other, including random strangers who can be granted our time and attention at the expense of those in front of us. (C'mon, you've surely whiled away a couple of hours of your precious time in some sort of Facey-post 'serve-volley-return', haven't you?)

So while this connectivity has brought us many bonuses, it has also come with a few downsides, and perhaps the most obvious downside is the intrusion on our time. While we have more demands within our day, the parameters haven't changed. We still have only 24 hours in a day, and 7 days in a week. You can't do anything that will give you bonus hours. If you waste a day, you don't have hours striped from you. You've got 24 hours, in 60-minute lots. That's your quota. Something has to take a hit and wear the cost of stretching this time too far. The collateral damage is a collective feeling of overwhelm in our society that means we are constantly running in a million different directions. The fight for your attention is real: the project, the mother-in-law, the chocolate cake sitting in the communal fridge at work. Couple this feeling with the relentless

change environment that we are now facing, particularly in our places of work, and the result is higher exhaustion levels and shorter fuses. Within the corporate world, organisations no longer speak about five year plans — because they don't know what the lay of the land is going to be in five months' time, let alone five years. Change is absolutely relentless and individuals are merely holding on.

Phew! Have I cheered you up? #sorrynotsorry

Among this busyness we find that we snap quicker than we should, we disconnect from the people we love the most, and we get caught up doing what we think we should be doing, leaving what we want to be doing at the bottom of the pile — gathering dust because we keep adding to the pile. As a result, we end up consumed by fear, worry and guilt about postponing the things that really matter to us — and then trying to numb the despair we feel. Busy is the boss and we're its faithful servants, turning up full pelt whenever it snaps its fingers. Losing sleep, losing our mind, and losing connection to what we truly love. This, ultimately, has an impact on our health, our happiness and our sanity.

Is any of this resonating with you? If you're nodding your head like one of those dashboard bobble-head things, it's okay. You're not alone — and it doesn't have to stay like this.

BECOMING THE BOSS OF BUSY

As a psychologist I connect with people every day who are drowning in expectations. Before going into this any further, though, I first want you to check the mental picture you have going on in your head of a psych with a client. You might be thinking leather couches, inkblot butterflies or people incoherently babbling while being surrounded by empty Doritos packets. Well, nope. The people I work with are achieving amazing things. They're nailing projects, leading teams and workplaces into the future, and running families like ninja warriors — from the outside, there's not a straightjacket in sight. Their lives look normal; successful, complete, even. But inside it looks decidedly different — because on the inside, they're screaming for it all to stop. For someone to notice their desperation.

They are hoping that their time to jump off the treadmill, even for a moment, comes soon. These are the people sitting next to you on

the train; one could be the person in the cubicle next to yours or the neighbour you pass as you put out the bins. This is me, you, him and her. We recognise the screams and cries for help because we've added to the choir. We've drunk (gorged ourselves, actually) at the fountain of too much, and then felt the ache for relief. But it hasn't arrived and what's left ain't pretty.

Even when we are being pulled in a million different directions, we can feel calm in the chaos. We can move from martyr to centred, and from being 'over it' to 'I'm all over it'.

Rather than continue the horror story that plays out in your mirror, I can assure you this: through science-based research I've identified a different path towards a fulfilled life we can walk on; actually, we can bloody well stride on it with the stride of a warrior — confident and purposeful with power. We can take big leaping bounds, not driven through fear, pressure or haste. Even when we are being pulled in a million different directions, we can feel calm in the chaos. We can move from martyr to centred, and go from being 'over it' to 'I'm all over it'. We can put busy in its place, telling it to take a back seat for a while.

Yep, that's right — we can become the boss of busy rather than the other way round. Truth.

What would it be like for you if you had these moments of clarity even among the busyness? What if, even when life was rushing at you (sometimes in the form of a toddler with a spoonful of porridge aimed directly at your freshly ironed work shirt moments before you step out the door on your way to a major presentation), you could re-centre, reconnect and come back to what's really important? What would it feel like to rise above the noise and turn up feeling calm, focused and clear on what's important to your day? Huh?

Imagine having clarity about what really mattered to you at any given moment, and being able to make decisions based on that, rather than what's urgent (or at least someone else's urgent).

Imagine being excited about the progress you were making towards those things that truly matter. Even in the moments when it feels like the goal-posts have shifted, significantly — not just to another postcode but to another country — imagine being able to straighten