

A guide to living a brave and authentic life



Courageously

VANESSA MAY

Praise for *Live Courageously*

I first met Vanessa in 2013 on a cold, grey day in Edinburgh, Scotland where we had both been recruited as coaches to support women through a leadership programme. She lit up the room with her warm infectious energy and passion for the work she was called to do. I knew from that first moment I wanted to be in her tribe! Since that day I have been privileged to work alongside this gifted coach and be witness to this woman's own journey of courageous change. If ever there was a role model for walking her talk, then you need to look no further than Vanessa.

Her continued commitment and investment to her own learning and development means in this book we benefit from her expertise and gain understanding at a deeper level the reasons for our struggle.

When we are caught in a cycle of overwhelm and "I am not enough" Vanessa shows us that there is another way and shares practical techniques that she has used with her many clients to help women reclaim their power.

To live courageously is a practice and Vanessa shows us the "how to" with a simple structure that can be easily incorporated into our daily lives. Vanessa shows us that the most important relationship we have in life is the one we have with ourselves.

Over the years Vanessa has been my own coach, teacher and friend and in reading this book she will also be yours.

— **Denise Chilton**, Executive Career and Leadership Coach and Author

This book shines a gentle yet powerful light on the experience of so many women. Vanessa beautifully captures not just her own vulnerable experience of unfolding her past insecurities into living more courageously, but also softly invites her readers to begin their own unfolding so that they can stretch out and powerfully claim the space that their true self takes up. The case studies are highly relatable, and a deep reflection of what many of us see in ourselves. This book is a must-read for any woman who senses they need to shed the skin they're in and re-emerge to own the shape that's stayed hidden within.

— **Christina Hutchinson**, Confidence and Performance Coach and Founder of Mountain High Coaching

A relatable guide and support for all of us women out there. Very readable with easily applicable tools and advice; this is a book that I will certainly go back to in the future, many, many times!

— **Alice Watson-Smith**, Managing Director, Fine & Country, French Riviera

Rediscovering yourself to be able to courageously leave behind that expected, conditioned life is the best gift you could possibly give yourself. That's what this book is all about. A gift to yourself to start living courageously.

Courage is never easy, but rest assured Vanessa won't try to sugar-coat it. Instead, she'll tell you that as hard as it is, it's worth making this choice. She'll keep reminding you that to redefine your identity on your own terms you need no one's permission. To do this most important work of your life and leadership, all you need is to break your own rules so you can become more of who you truly are.

— **Zana Goic Petricevic**, Leadership Coach and Author

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LIVE
Courageously

VANESSA MAY

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Foreword

We live at a time when the need to find ways to ground ourselves, stay focused and draw on our inner strengths has never been greater. A time when understanding how we truly feel and what we really want, have become questions that need answering. And we need a process to help us to answer them – a live courageously process.

As a coach and a woman, I know that the work we do on ourselves is more important than the work we do with or for others. Because when we become the best version of ourselves that we might imagine – happy, emotionally balanced, healthy, and purposeful, we make the greatest contribution to the people around us.

Unfortunately, daily life, with its conformist rituals and routines can easily obstruct our ability to see what it is that we need to do. We become disconnected from the internal navigation systems that help us know that we are in the wrong job, wrong marriage, wrong town, etc. Some part of us knows that we crave change, and yet we are conditioned into a patterned resistance to that, e.g. “Yes, there’s stuff I need to deal with, I’m going to get into that self-development thing soon” (but not now). Many of us have no clue as to the untapped powerhouse of emotions within us, where unmet/repressed feelings wait to be noticed, acknowledged, and processed through towards freedom. Down those dark corridors lurks the potential of

our soul's liberation and the true beauty of life, and yet instead we choose avoidance and distraction. TV, Netflix, social media, alcohol, food, online shopping – name your poison.

So, how can this book help us to cut through the fog of avoidance and distraction? Live Courageously brings together the objective and structured (the Live Courageously Process) with the subjective (the collection of emotions unique to you). This book also provides the tools to support your journey and find the courage to carve out a plan of action that puts you first. So many women find that idea such a challenge, because of the implications and personal conflicts involved. Vanessa's own journey is bound up in this process, and so is that of many women Vanessa has worked with and helped over the years, and whose voices are heard in this book too.

Courage seems to be in short supply for so many women, so what better time to find ways to unearth this precious commodity in ourselves?

With love and blessings,

Julie Starr, author of *The Coaching Manual*, *The Mentoring Manual*, and others.

An introduction to *Live Courageously*

Before you step in and claim the life you want to lead, you must learn to get out of overwhelm, navigate through fear, doubt and anxiety to use your courage to live intentionally according to your own terms.

To live courageously is a process in which you feel deeply connected to yourself and your energy systems. You are rooted to your innate worthiness and strengths, aligned to your core values and leadership, and supported as you take action towards what you want.

The opposite of living courageously is living a conditioned life. A life where you lack the internal safety to speak your truth and set your life up according to your own terms. It's a life where you know, understand and comply with the rules set by your family, education, and cultural shaping.

In the conditioned life, you use your sensitivity, empathy and intuition to sense what you need to do to fit in and belong, and shapeshift and adapt yourself accordingly. This becomes so familiar that over time you find yourself disappearing in plain sight. Life and work are safe, predictable and suffocating because you're unconsciously dancing to society's values, beat and rhythm.

But over time there's a cost to you and your relationships at work and at home because a part of you knows you are not being your full and best self.

One of the warning signals that you're living an expected, conditioned life is the feeling that something's missing. You search externally for it but nothing satisfies the itch. Another signal is overwhelm and a feeling of being emotionally flooded. You find yourself constantly pulled in a million directions and need to push hard to keep up with ever increasing to-do lists and demands.

Overwhelm is often suppressed by choosing to resort to habitual patterns of behaviour. Instead of responding to the overwhelm and slowing down, you suppress the anxious feelings and push through regardless. It drives a constant doing mentality and you're always on the go. But what you don't see is that this incessant busyness is an emotional anaesthetic. If unchecked this behaviour leads to role overload, relationship difficulties, resentment and burnout.

Paternalistic societies have conditioned women to believe that it is in our best interests to accommodate, do as we're told, please, conform, be stoic and seek acceptance. As an empath you're ready and able to read the emotional signs in others... perhaps too ready and able. You sense when they're irritated, out of sorts, hurt, isolated or on the edge of rage. You know how to soothe, support and be with them in these moments but if your boundaries are unclear and you're not grounded, you can't distinguish between what's theirs or yours and you get lost in a feeling of confusion and overwhelm.

It feels like you're a boat being blown in different directions, unable to drop your anchor and remind yourself where you are and where you're heading. At work you may find yourself being pushed and pulled by other people's emotions, caught in drama and gossip, not wanting to hurt anyone and taking on everyone else's demands. At home you may find yourself doing everything for everyone in your desire to be a good wife, mother, daughter, sister or friend. In taking on everyone else's agenda and responsibility you

cannot hear your own. You can't sense what you feel or need because you're in the noise of everyone else's.

The misguided belief is that by doing all this your needs will be met, you will be safe, belong and prosper. But these behaviours are in fact self-destructive. They create a constant hustle for worthiness and belonging and result in a lack of autonomy, agency and freedom. They make you a victim to your circumstances as opposed to being an owner.

It's unsurprising that you feel helpless to change things because conditioning has supported you to believe this is what to expect: women juggle career, family life and households because it's what they do. Your gifts of intuition, empathy and sensitivity were not taught as part of the curriculum. So, whilst they may have been valued in the playground there was no qualification to validate their importance.

In the world of work the masculine way of working is revered: set goals, create structures, make logical progress towards them and drive results. To get along and move up you have needed to become more focused on that way of working. But in doing so you have marginalised your true gifts of empathy and intuition. If you have felt or expressed emotion, you have been judged as weak. If you have admitted you didn't know or understand something you have been considered less favourably to your colleagues in a compete-and-compare performance ranking system. You have concluded that to get ahead you need to behave more like the men and so you have internalised that marginalisation of your empathy and intuition.

Yet despite the futility and learned helplessness, at the same time you have a deep frustration in this pattern of reactive behaviour of complying, fitting in and protecting yourself. That frustration is a sign that something new wants to manifest itself but your years of conditioning keep preventing you from responding to that feeling, and so you prevent yourself from breaking through.

You're reading this because you want to feel fulfilled, authentic and at peace within yourself. Regardless of your current experience, your age, or your

financial situation, you can reclaim your power and align with your authentic knowing. You can reconnect with your own resourcefulness, get beyond the drama and reaction, and take charge of your current circumstances to create more connection, align with your true nature and discover true fulfilment.

Let's break through and transform.

My courage story

I was firmly established in the on/off routine of my life. There were times when I felt strong, confident and capable and others where I doubted and felt like an imposter. There was a rhythm to my life of pushing hard, keeping going, burning out and then needing to disconnect. Sounds familiar?

Home life felt safe in its familiarity but it wasn't fulfilling and was often frustrating. After 22 years of married life, two teenage daughters and a dog, we still argued about the same small things: who had done what or had forgotten to do it or done it wrong. The washing, the in-laws and the lack of money were hot topics in our house. We bickered. We complained. We fought. We made up. We got along. Things felt better and then the fall-outs would all start up again.

Round and around I went. Same cycle, different players. There was a constant underlying feeling of being stuck and longing for change. Life felt beige with moments of colour. Lots of trying hard to improve things. Trying to improve me – to be better. Trying to improve us. Trying to change work. Trying to influence. Trying to persuade. Trying to demonstrate or inspire possibility. Lots of wasted effort. A repetitive cycle of hoping and believing in the possibility of change but observing those hopes being dashed. The pull of equilibrium stronger than the push for change.

I would think, "But it's not that bad is it?" There were lots of things to be grateful for. I was lucky; I could pay my bills and I did have work. We were healthy and happyish. I loved my running and I had friends. Surely I should

count my blessings? But somehow this thinking felt like I was tricking myself because a part of me knew I was not built for the merely OK.

Pressure. Confusion. Analysis paralysis. Stuck. Familiarity. Frustration. Growing resentment. Increased self-loathing and sabotaging. It felt like everything was on my shoulders and I felt like it was all my fault. I was taking all the responsibility and yes, it felt deeply personal.

None of my efforts made significant change happen. I tried hard to change me, my husband (so he could help more with the financial pressure, the disciplinarian role, family work and responsibilities), and my work. I was just about keeping it all together, but the cracks were there.

Every fire begins with a spark. Mine was the most shattering of sparks.

“I’ve been having an affair, is that what you want to hear?” Those were the words that blew everything up. They shook my world view and completely flipped it. Whether it was only an emotional affair or not, it meant that my husband felt closer to someone else. It meant there was secrecy, and it explained all the feelings of disconnection, uninterest, and avoidance. It meant that he was no longer in our marriage and that’s why I had those feelings of it all being on my shoulders because it was. Those words hit my body like a punch to the stomach.

That was the real spark and where the transformation began. The ultimate moment of choice, to consider and decide what to do with the state of our marriage. Shit had happened, a core value had been breached, trust had gone, and I was finally awake to it. I had to figure out what to do about it. Who did I need to be – for me, for the family, for the relationship?

I couldn’t just go round again in the same way. I couldn’t not know what I knew. But there were voices in my head about expectations and what people would think. Whilst the shame and embarrassment that our relationship had broken down had a stranglehold on me, something was different. I couldn’t paper over the cracks this time. I couldn’t pretend it was all fine when it wasn’t. I didn’t want to feel like a victim to my circumstances.

I didn't want to act out and gain sympathy for the unfairness of it all. I knew differently. I knew this had happened for a reason and that every relationship has its own intelligence within it and that ours was signalling a big need for change.

I had to choose consciously and with clear intention because it wasn't just me that would be impacted. The impact would ripple. The girls would be hugely affected – hell, even the dog. And I wasn't getting any younger. If I wanted to make a difference it was clear my time was running out.

I tell you this story because I know I am not alone. Through my work I meet women, just like me, who are frustrated, overwhelmed, and stuck. They're intelligent, capable, empathic, intuitive women pulled in a million directions. They juggle work and life, trying to hold on to perfected images of everything being rosy and them having their shit together. They secretly harbour thoughts that somehow what's happening is not fair, it should be different and, deep down, it's not working.

Whilst there is all too often a resigned acceptance to these situations, frustration periodically rears up. So many women feel stressed, anxious, and exhausted keeping up the facades, trying to meet ludicrous expectations and hiding their true emotions. They're fed up being told they're disruptive, difficult, oversensitive or irrational. They're tired of being required to evidence everything before ideas at work can be explored. They're done with staying silent when they hear senior male leaders talk about other women as difficult, emotional, or hormonal. They no longer want to be consigned to being the one taking the notes in every meeting and a thousand other signifiers of being made to feel of less worth.

They want to know if their male counterparts were also told to catch up their hours when they had to home-school and work during the pandemic. They don't want to jump to apologise if something's wrong or not working. They don't want to keep saying the same thing over and over until someone listens and considers their ideas. They don't want to be like the men to get ahead and navigate a man's world.

Despite longing for change they're stuck. This keeping up appearances, pretending that they're superwomen, has taken its toll. Just when they decide to speak up, they get a lump in their throat. A voice in their head directs them to keep quiet and settle. They secretly doubt and think they'll be found out as an imposter, that they don't have their shit together or they can't keep up.

They doubt why they've been given the job – are they the token woman at the table? They wonder if they're too much, not enough, too old, too loud, too quiet... too something. They feel like they've lost some of their confidence and that makes them question if they really do know their own mind and want what they say they want.

These women have one thing in common. They are at an edge of change, wanting something to be different but scared they can't have it. The way they've been shaped by their environment and upbringing is preventing them from creating the shift they long for.

Their culture and conditioning have taught them to be nice, to stay within their box, to know their place, to work hard, to strive to be good, to avoid conflict and settle for less. They've been advised that if something isn't working, don't abandon ship but dig in and try to fix it. This conditioning causes them to sidestep their courage and leaves them at the edge of what they want, doubting and frustrated.

It was the catalyst of my marriage breakdown that helped me to finally take charge and cross the edge of my comfort zone into the dark wood of what was to unfold. It was that choice that led me here to writing this book despite the 15 years of wanting, trying, and failing to write it previously.

The difference is that in writing this, I am honouring a commitment to myself and to all the overwhelmed women, struggling to keep everything in place, hoping for change whilst clinging to safety and conditioning. And, as well as telling you about my experiences, this book is full of many other voices. Women, with their own doubts and struggles, encountering their own moments of change and courage. There are inspiring case studies in

every chapter from women from all walks of life, so that, if my specific circumstances and journey don't chime with your own inner struggles, I am sure some of those voices will.

There is another way.

Whatever your spark, whether it's a marriage breakdown, a decision not to be silenced, a feeling of burnout, a fear of regret, a glass ceiling, or a yearning to rise, you can navigate through the turbulence and discover your courageous and authentic self.

Sometimes you need permission to change. My permission came in that moment when my husband said those words. I had this breathtaking moment of calm and the only voice in my head was Maya Angelou's: "Love liberates".¹

It was time to liberate both of us from this dysfunctional situation. But who the hell was I? I finally accepted that I couldn't change the person I'd spent 32 years of my life with and that it wasn't my job to do that either. He was fine just the way he was, and I was too, but the question of our compatibility was (and always had been) the real issue.

It's fair to say that despite 20-plus years in personal development and coaching I was at a point where I didn't recognise myself. I had shapeshifted myself to adapt to my relationships. It sounds crazy but it's true. Physician, heal thyself! You see, when you want to be liked and loved you will do things unconsciously to create that outcome. Now I had to rediscover myself all over again.

But where should I begin? Surely I was someone that should know better, be better and do better? I had access to all this knowledge through my work but as we all know, wisdom is only gained through its application.

So, as I stood on the edge of an ending, full of overwhelming emotions, surrounded by people who were labouring on in their marriages and careers, I trusted my instinct and took the plunge into the unknown.

I thought to myself that had I predicted this sudden life-changing event I probably wouldn't have made the decision to quit my corporate job at the start of that year and build my coaching business. I would have established a savings and pensions plan. I would have been prepared.

The funny thing was, in retrospect I was prepared. My training had prepared me. I knew how to lead myself. I knew how to take a stance for something. I knew how to navigate through difficult emotions. I had just never had to apply it in quite such a personal and painful way.

My goals were clear:

- 1.** A good divorce where we remain amicable
- 2.** For myself, our girls, the dog and my ex-husband to be OK
- 3.** A fair and reasonable split
- 4.** A prospering coaching business that makes a difference and contributes to women claiming their power and authority

Sounds simple, doesn't it, but I had to upgrade my internal operating system, stop waiting for someone to rescue me and step into growing up again. I had to use my empathy and intuition to navigate through the dark wood instead of adapting to make everyone else happy. I had to empower myself to be courageous, to stop thinking I was unkind for speaking my truth and standing up for my needs and let go of worrying about what would happen to the girls and my husband on the other side of this change... I had to create clear boundaries. I trusted that they were resourceful, creative and whole and that with transparency and clarity we would create a new normal. I leant into the knowing that clarity is kindness.

At 51 I was discovering my adulthood and redefining my identity.

In the next 12 months, I chose to do the following:

- End my marriage
- Accept that I had lost trust in my own feelings, emotions, and needs
- Learn to advocate for myself, to connect to myself

- Claim my feminine and masculine power, take charge, and stand by myself
- Liberate my nature, authenticity and spirit, and discover my true leadership

It wasn't that I felt invincible. I didn't. I felt terrified, every single step of the way. I still do. There are many days and nights when I ask myself what I have done and question if I did the right thing. But I recognise all this for what it is: nostalgia for life before the disruptive spark.

I realised that I had to stop caring about what people thought and letting the unconscious goal of fitting in and being liked rule me. I chose to release the internal pressure to be good, to push, to strive as if I was still in school pushing for some kind of invisible unattainable A grade: the good mother, great wife, great contributor and overall nice, decent human being award.

I chose to redesign my life on my own terms. I hired a worthiness coach, a book mentor, and a counsellor, to support me. I ignored the stories that I had about how I couldn't afford it and I chose to invest in myself. I peeled away layers of my inner conditioning, I questioned, I cried, I laughed, and I worked hard to challenge myself. I leant into conflict instead of away from it and I used my values to navigate me through.

Ultimately, I had to find a new version of myself. A more honest, truer, soulful Vanessa. I had to learn to advocate for myself, particularly as my health and financial challenges kicked in.

I have learnt that living courageously requires you to deeply know and accept yourself. You cannot do it without honouring and loving your true self. You must take all the parts of you, your mind, body, spirit and emotions, and communicate with all of them and not let one part dominate.

You must learn the skills to master these different aspects of you and create a practice that brings you into wholeness. Courage and sovereignty go together with self-acceptance and love, not for the who you should become but for

the who you naturally are. This deep acceptance and acknowledgement empower you to set your life up by design.

Being a sensitive, intuitive empath in a world of logic and results is challenging. I was not taught how to manage my gifts. Firstly, I can lose myself in other people. I feel their pain deeply. It unconsciously attracts my desire to help and heal, but in doing so, I can abandon myself in favour of someone else. This makes it hard to remember and prioritise myself because my life becomes 'other' focused.

Secondly, I see the potential in others. I see a bigger picture than is presented to me and fall in love with possibility. I champion and encourage that possibility to be realised in the other person but lose sight of the fact that the other person's agenda may not be to fulfil the potential I see. As a result, I lose my energy and self in others.

My journey has involved learning the skills and practices that I wasn't taught. I have amazing parents who are kind, generous and deeply caring. But they, like me, cannot teach what they don't have.

There was no clear path to embracing my gifts of being an intuitive thinker and sensitive feeler. I had to accept the self-inflicted pain of self-judgement and the isolation that creates. Most importantly, I had to learn how to rule my world whilst embracing the diversity and differences of others.

I had lost myself in my marriage and work, and in the limiting beliefs that I held unconsciously within me. The effort to find myself has taken me down many paths but realising that the wisdom was inside me was key. I had to dig deep and discover my sovereignty, set my life up by design, and unleash my gifts to fully support my newly discovered self.

What have been the key discoveries I've made for myself and for women at a similar moment of change?

- I CAN choose when and where to take up space in the world, and how much

- Advocating for yourself requires knowing what you feel and what it is that you need
- Be an observer of yourself, not a reactor, so that you can create time and space to act out of choice
- Be careful what you track evidence for (don't worry, you'll find it!)
- People who care about you know who you are
- Feeling valued and treasured starts within you
- We are all worthy of being comforted and supported
- It IS possible, at any age, to build a new tribe of emotionally available and intuitively responsive friends
- Determine who gives you a feeling of safety... like melted butter!
- Your inner authority should always win versus your inner apology
- Know that you are worthy of attention
- We are all free to be messy and imperfect
- If someone is uncomfortable it doesn't have to be you
- There is no need to be a barometer for other people's moods
- Allow yourself to be with people who have the capacity to be with you without trying to change or fix you
- Give yourself permission to play and be at ease

It's not just you

Every client I have ever worked with has got caught at the edge of change, waiting for permission, courage, or some sign to tell them that it is the right move. They want to know they will be safe and hunger for predictability and security.

No one externally can tell you if it's the right move, but you can be aware of the choice points and learn to listen to yourself. You can learn to trust yourself and discern what intuitively feels aligned. You can rediscover your sovereignty at any stage of your life – even at 51! You can find the courage to set your work and life up on your own terms.

In 2017 I was working as an executive coach and was gathering video testimonials for a leadership development programme I had designed and run. Well, I call it a leadership development programme but actually it was helping senior leaders in the tech industry to build relationships and enhance their people management skills.

They wanted to have real conversations, build connection, and manage their emotions so that they could perform at their best. I covered topics like courageous conversations, creating your own luck, building resilience, and influencing.

One of the participants said the following, “We are not taught these skills at university. They’re life skills. I don’t understand why. Everyone should know this.” I noted this information and unconsciously pushed it to the back of my mind.

I’d been aware for a while that there was a problem, but I couldn’t clearly define it. Since going through my own personal experience in 2019, there has been a shift in the clients that I am working with. I have found myself working with women who want to lead. The more women I meet and whose stories I hear, the more I realise that the question I had asked myself, “Is it just me?”, is a universal question.

I had never anticipated working primarily with women, because my early experience of girls was not pleasant. There was a hustling and competitiveness at school that I didn’t enjoy. I saw this repeated in the workplace, where women were striving to get ahead and hustling for success. They had no qualms at throwing each under the bus to get ahead. Some were far more subtle in their behaviours and used control, needing to be at every meeting or fake niceness and then gossip to manipulate and curry favour. It was as if only one person could win at climbing the ladder. You were either a bitch or a doormat.

Women were showing up to coaching and sharing their frustrations, their sadness, their hopes for a different way of working and living but also their fears that it wasn’t possible. These women were lost in the middle of that

process, either on the edge of burnout feeling overwhelmed because it wasn't possible to deliver on work and life expectations or lost in the myth that they had held for how they thought it was all going to end up. But the biggest loss they were facing was of their true nature. Many women described feeling like an imposter.

These women had shared anxieties about being not enough, too much, too late, too young, too old. They all had some internal clock that ticked along, creating both a sense of urgency and of frustration. They all made comparisons to other women that they didn't necessarily know but assumed were doing better or were further ahead than they were. They connected to their worth with external achievements and the validation that arose from that. As a consequence, they were pushing hard but never really feeling that sense of freedom and congruence that comes from knowing and accepting who you are and what you're here to do.

I realised that my purpose was to connect women back to their essence and courage and share stories that helped them to choose consciously and live well according to their terms.

My research

To validate my thoughts, I conducted a survey in January 2022 as part of the research for this book. I reached out to women juggling the work and life balance.

I wanted to know what was going on with them, what their struggles were and what they longed for. Having coached career women in various leadership roles, I was already aware of this constant pressure and challenge in navigating work and life and the patriarchy that is still ever present in our working worlds. I wanted to know how I could really serve these women to become more of their courageous selves and sharpen my own focus in my work to better serve them.

The headline results as to how these women were spending their time were that:

- 72% of working women reported they are plate-spinning all the time
- 60% said they felt it was easier and better to do the job themselves than get help from others and
- 52% described themselves as the go-to person for everything.

Interestingly, over half of these plate-spinning, capable women described feeling that they were not doing well at any one thing, compared themselves frequently to others and had a desire to be liked. There was a strong sense of frustration running through these results.

When you live and work in a society that has you feeling like you're failing if you can't do and be all that you think you should, you compare yourself to others who are hiding behind their own defences of perceived perfectionism but you have no idea if the person you are comparing yourself to really has it all together or not.

So, despite the plethora of self-help books advising how you should treat yourself differently, women are still resorting to comparison. Clearly, advising women to be kinder, more loving, and self-compassionate isn't working.

How do I know? In my research 93% of these women described themselves as being self-critical. These are smart, intelligent women juggling their careers and lives. They are plate-spinning all the time and giving themselves an incredibly hard time in the process. It's hard to make progress when you're beating yourself up constantly. It's like putting your foot on the accelerator whilst also having the handbrake on. Yet they continue in this fashion, that is until they wake up to the whole cycle and explore what's underneath the constant busyness and striving.

What is courage?

I'm not going to sugar-coat this because it won't serve you. Courage is hard. Taking courageous action is never easy until you're on the other side of it.

It takes courage for women to stand in a new way of being and doing when they've been conditioned to be good, do the right thing and strive to discover their happy-ever-after. It's hard to be yourself when you've been manipulated to think that you're too much, not enough and should constantly push to do and be better than you naturally already are.

Courage means knowing and accepting yourself as you are and finding a way to take consistent action towards what deeply matters to you. You need to stop suppressing your emotions and avoiding telling people what's really going on and ask for what you need. You must tune out the noise, other people's opinion, your desire to be liked and loved, and get completely behind yourself.

You must find psychological safety within yourself and not make it conditional on others' wellbeing or love and acceptance. It means accepting and embracing your thoughts and feelings and finding a way for them to work in harmony together instead of derailing you in paralysis analysis or overwhelm.

Let's think about some of the everyday ways courage shows up for working women:

- Navigating the constant voice in your head that doesn't shut up and leaves you doubting, guilty and overthinking
- Saying no in its many guises, including to being the notetaker in meetings because "you're so good at it"
- Dealing with the aftermath when you speak your truth and others disagree or retaliate
- Declining the next project because not doing it might be career limiting even though you can prove it's not achievable anyway
- Getting a divorce or ending a relationship when it's easier not to

- Asking to be paid on equal terms when you know you deserve it
- Refusing to play toxic games with those around you and stepping out of the drama
- Using your guilt to put in healthy boundaries instead of putting yourself down
- Refusing to be run by a presenteeism culture that keeps you overworked and dissatisfied
- Working with colleagues in the workplace who go out of their way to try and put you down despite the quality and quantity of your work
- Refusing to people-please and choosing to assert your needs
- Being at the pinnacle of your career knowing your hormones are wreaking havoc and being able to talk about it, own it and not allow it to undermine your confidence or authority

Underneath courage is a commitment to being yourself, backing yourself and your leadership. But women can direct their efforts to be perfect rather than show up as they are. I consciously chose to use ‘hard’ to describe courage because in life today we are impatient for immediate results and can have an expectation that it should come easily. Just as it takes time and careful pruning to cultivate and grow a bonsai tree, it takes time to make deep and sustainable changes. If you’ve had a lifetime of subjugating yourself or putting others first, it will take time, practice and reinforcement to change this.

My clients describe feeling torn and pulled in a million directions in so many ways. Typical ones include:

- Living someone else’s dreams/values/life
- Trying to get it right, but it’s someone else’s blueprint
- Unable to end what’s unhealthy for them
- Trying to attain perfection and achieve balance
- Making other opinions matter more than their own
- Unable to let go of control and empower others
- Sweating the small stuff
- Overwhelmed by emotion

- Confused by different voices / parts of their self saying different things
- In transition and not knowing what's next
- Unable to act towards goals
- Forgotten who they are and what they want

Rarely do women stop to pause and ask, is what I want really what I need? What do I want? Rarely do we ask, is the way I'm working correct for me?

Courage demands you know what you want and empower yourself. It therefore requires you to live consciously and make choices according to your own definitions and measures of success. So, for me courage and conscious living go hand in hand.

Let's explore what these women said they really wanted.

63% wanted to feel confident in telling someone when a line has been crossed.

56% wanted to feel more confident and to experience less doubt.

51% wanted to be able to ask for help without feeling weak.

What they didn't say was that they wanted a bigger house, a better car, a different wardrobe, or even more holidays. Yet this is often part of the myth that you're caught up in. Your pain points are constantly marketed to, highlighting the need for you to be and do better. This is what sells lifestyles and products.

Having worked with hundreds of coaching clients over the years, these reports of chasing and hustling are all too familiar. Whilst you may have been conditioned to think the answer lies outside of you, it doesn't. It lies deep within because if you're doing this behaviour in reaction to something then you must also have the solution inside you.

"I don't ever put myself first"

"I often say yes to things which I later get upset about"

“I have no energy left for me”

“I don’t charge what I’m worth; perhaps others don’t value me”

“I am afraid to let others down”

“I can’t seem to back myself without needing external validation”

“I feel like I have nothing to offer and can’t get things right”

This is just a sample of what women have been telling me.

There is another way

I wrote this book because I want you to know that there is another way.

Wisdom is earned, intellect is studied. If you are seeking knowledge and information outside of you but not applying it, you are in a pattern of constant seeking but never finding. You think if you just learn more and keep going you will get to the other side. But the thing is, you won’t, and if there was a school report at the end of your life that read *tries hard but*, you’d probably feel deeply disappointed.

The feeling of overwhelm and self-doubt can be changed. If you feel lost, you are still there waiting to be found. You do not have to stay in this repeating cycle.

This book won’t help you to find a miracle way to be even more productive. It will help you to give yourself a different kind of award and acknowledgement. Instead of trying to achieve an ‘A’ in everything you do, you are going to accept where you are, audit your work and life set-up, and choose a different kind of adventure and courageous action.

It’s through this process that you will rediscover your aliveness and authenticity and choose if you’re willing to take a stance for yourself. This will be as a result of accepting that you have unique gifts and expression, and that these deserve to be seen and heard.

This book is a sharing of stories of working women: mine and others. I wrote this book because I want you to recognise those difficult places, so you no longer hide in the shadows, thinking you're the only one trying relentlessly to keep up appearances.

The first intention behind the book is to lift the veil of secrecy that many of us hide behind so that we can have real conversations about what it means to be a woman in the workplace, have healthy striving and lead a life well-lived.

The second intention is to give you a process that you can work through, so that you can reflect on your journey and find the courage to take charge of what you really want but right now are scared to have.

At the heart of being courageous is living consciously.

I believe that you really are innately worthy as a human being, just as you are, born now with a unique purpose and incredible strengths. No one else can express your strengths the way you can. Ignore them and the world loses them.

This book will help you understand the deeper reason behind your feelings of doubt and burnout. It will wake you up to the choice you face, to stand and advocate for your true nature and let go of the hustle to belong and be worthy.

It will offer you a framework to help you remember who you are and what makes you unique. Whether like me you're transitioning from divorce, you want to take yourself seriously and to the next level, or you simply want to feel better, this practical process will help you unlock your own wisdom and develop practices to drop the hustle, redefine success and live according to your terms.

If you want to take the push and strain out of it all and you know that you're working too hard but it's taking you further away from your true self, you can choose to empower yourself.

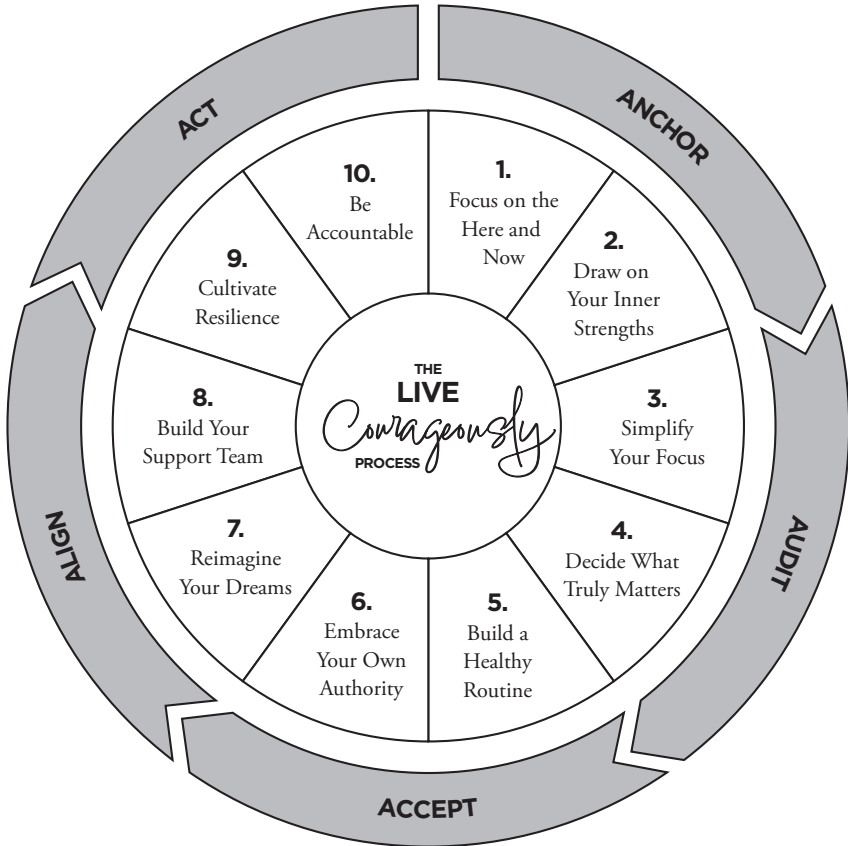
There are 3 simple underlying principles to this book:

1. It is your life – you choose how you do and be in it. You decide to bring your gifts to it.
2. You define the terms of what it means to live well and create success on your own terms.
3. You are responsible for staying in your own state of ease.

What I have learnt is true in mine and in my clients' journeys is that you must go through a messy, unknown part to break through and discover something new on the other side of the learning journey. You don't come out the same. And it's that decision to end a chapter, be in the messy middle of the unknown and begin a new beginning, that changes who you know yourself to be.

It starts with awareness, accepting reality and making a conscious decision to shift. You don't just need to change your mindset or emotions; you must also decide to take up space for yourself and commit to doing something different.

This is about returning to your wholeness and navigating this crazy world with grace and confidence. In this book I will take you through a simple, memorable process to give you agency and achieve balance, fulfilment, and ease. I call this the Live Courageously Process and it follows 5 stages:



Anchor

1. Focus on the here and now

When you feel overwhelmed, anxiety drives overthinking, avoidance, and procrastination. You get caught worrying about the future or being lost ruminating in the past. So, I explore a **Slow Down, Pause and Breathe** courage practice to help you ground that negative spiralling ‘what if’ energy. You will learn a simple method to break your own self-limiting pattern, get out of your head and reset. With practice you will learn to recover your grounding and sense of inner calm and ease.

2. Draw on your inner strengths

When life is stuffed with unrealistically high expectations and constant doing, you can lose sight of your strengths and resourcefulness in the drive to meet them. I share with you a **Build Core Strength** courage practice to reconnect to your knowledge, skills, experience and self-belief, to guide you in the moment.

Audit

3. Simplify your focus

When your head is full you can't focus clearly. Completing a **Be Intentional** courage audit will help you discern what's driving you and what to prioritise to create meaningful change. Choosing consciously where to put the focus of your attention is the essence of this courage practice.

4. Decide what truly matters

Our world is noisy, with constant subliminal messaging that pushes our behaviour towards consumerism and markets to our insecurities. The courage practice **Live Your Values** will support you to reclarify and prioritise what matters to you.

Accept

5. Build a healthy routine

The myth that women make better multi-taskers is just that, a myth, as there is no clear evidence for it. It is one that has been conveniently set up by the world to set you up for unhealthy striving, trying to do and have it all. Learning to define your own routine will support you in your journey towards living your authentic life. The courage practice **Set Your Own Rhythm** will support you to take back control and know what fulfilment is for you.

6. Embrace your own authority

You are not an apology – you are an authority in yourself, what you like, how you want to set your work and life up to support you and your relationships. The courage practice to **Rule Your World** will give you agency and permission to approve of yourself and rise in your own life and work.

Align

7. Reimagine your dreams

When you've lost faith, your heart feels broken and the vulnerability of knowing that you might never realise your dreams feels too great, and so you can lose yourself to your disappointments. The courage practice **Dare to Dream** will support you in rediscovering your own dreaming again.

8. Build your support team

Everyone at some point in their life needs lifting. As women we have been conditioned to be stoic, strong, independent and capable but the truth is, together is better. So, to help you lean into the right people without losing yourself or your resourcefulness, I've created the **Define Your Support Team** courage practice.

Act

9. Cultivate resilience

Cultivating resilience involves the ability to manage your energy to withstand drains and renew it in a way that supports you. It therefore requires you to know that you are innately worthy so that you can create the healthy boundaries needed to enable you to establish limits so that you can focus and conserve your precious energy and attention. Resilience enables you to keep going and see setbacks as temporary whilst continuing the pursuit of your desired vision. So, the **Build Personal Resilience** courage practice will help you, compassionately and resourcefully, to move through any setbacks.

10. Be accountable

Critical to the impetus to act is accountability, and so being accountable is the final element in the courage process. You are much more likely to do what you say if you are accountable, to yourself and to others. In turn, accountability bolsters the power of your support team, as they should be accountable too, along with all the other key players in your professional and personal realms. None of this is about blame – it's about taking responsibility and being clear on where the boundaries lie of what you can influence in any given situation. Accountability and authenticity are linked – each reinforces the other, as the courage practice **Be Accountable and Authentic** demonstrates.

It's your choice

Ultimately this book will encourage you to move out of the repetitive cycle of being stuck, and help you to choose. It's been said that when you don't decide, you decide. It sounds crazy but there's truth in it. When you decide not to decide that is a decision to stay in your current circumstances.

The Live Courageously Process will repeatedly invite you to get conscious and choose. Your history and conditioning may have dictated your life so far, but it doesn't have to be your legacy. The family you were born into, the culture you grew up in, the role you played in the family, that doesn't disappear when you hit adulthood. It is carried with you unconsciously until you slow down and decide to consciously explore it.

Being conscious requires you to slow down your automatic, habitual shortcuts and question. A shortcut is an automatic response that you make without thinking. For example someone asks you to do something, and you automatically say yes. This decision to undertake reflection and analysis is courageous. It's uncomfortable to recognise where you're operating unconsciously merely from habit. But with awareness the choice to liberate arrives. It gives you the opportunity to see and audit your life and behaviours

and see whether they support the vision you hold for yourself or are only serving someone else's dream.

Part of being conscious is a commitment to living in the present moment, but human nature and the emotions you feel can pull you back to the past or forward to the future. By auditing where you are now and accepting both your dreams and your reality, you get the choice to align and take courageous action so that you move forward with intention.

This book is designed to be simple, clear and pragmatic. I know you're already experiencing overwhelm so the last thing you need are more 'to do's' to add onto your already long list. Imagine if you were drowning; it wouldn't help to have someone explain what was going on and why it was happening. You would want someone to throw you a lifeline or tell you what to do to save yourself.

Stop saying sorry

You are not an apology. Are you someone that says sorry all the time? Someone bumps into you or crosses your path and the first thing out of your mouth is "Sorry". The meeting at work is heated and you want to share a different perspective, so you say, "Sorry to interrupt" or "Sorry to throw a curveball here." Someone gives you unsolicited feedback and you say, "Sorry you feel that way, it wasn't my intention."

If sorry is a phrase that crosses your lips without awareness, it's time to notice how frequently you say it. When do you apologise and for what? It's hard to hear and accept that you show up with apology. You think you're being polite, respectful and considerate but it's a lie.

The truth is you have opinions and clear points of view. The truth is you're scared that others will think you're stupid, that the tribe will make you an outcast and you will be ridiculed, embarrassed and ostracised. But being apologetic means you are not claiming your place in the world. Your

apology is a weapon against yourself and your own life. Nature makes no apology. It blossoms and blooms and stands tall because that is what it does naturally in a conducive environment. It can't not be itself.

You deserve a happy, fulfilled life

This doesn't mean that there won't be hard times when you struggle. It does mean that you get to be you and do you – the best way you know how. You don't have to push to be in someone else's lane or version of happiness.

You are not meant to shrink for the sake of safety. You are neither too much nor not enough, but you are likely to have a habit of thinking these thoughts. It is your birthright to take up space, be yourself and live your life and purpose your way.

Recognise that it's now your turn.

This book will invite you to stand fully in your innate worthiness and power. It will help you to define success on your own terms and make it your job to hold yourself accountable to your own standards and actions.

It's time to break your own rules

I will show you why and how to do that.

The women I surveyed were not new to personal growth work. 56% had read self-books, 55% had received coaching and 43% had received therapy.

You create change by becoming more of who you are. And that's what we're going to do together through the practices in this book.

By reading and applying the strategies in this book, you will:

- Make a conscious choice and commitment to change (if you choose)
- Discern exactly what needs to change and choose your priorities
- Develop new strategies to feel good inside and take actions that are aligned with your true vision
- Practise, review, learn and build resilience

How to read this book

So, first things first. I want to make it clear, you are not broken, and this book is not here to save you. You are a capable, whole, and creative human being and I respect that in you. You may have thoughts that you're failing, you can't keep up and that somehow, you've got it all wrong, but these thoughts can be changed because you are the one creating them. You may have feelings of sadness, frustration and overwhelm but those feelings do not have to run you; you can learn to ride them like waves.

The book is divided into the five stages of the Live Courageously Process, with each stage covered over two chapters.

- 1. Anchor** – focus on the here and now, draw on your inner strengths
- 2. Audit** – simplify your focus, decide what truly matters
- 3. Accept** – build a healthy routine, embrace your inner authority
- 4. Align** – reimagine your dreams, build your support team
- 5. Act** – cultivate resilience, be accountable

Each chapter follows a simple format. A few concepts, a story, a simple courage practice and ways to make this work. Each story, laid out as a case study, explores a different form of push or pull. They are stories that have been developed and created from real life but adapted, and names have been changed to maintain confidentiality. With some of the case studies, to illustrate issues and solutions as clearly as possible, some situations are an amalgam of more than one client's experiences. This device, as I hope you will understand, allows me to protect the anonymity of my clients' experiences and the confidences shared during the coaching process.

However, and this is important, this does not detract from the veracity of the experiences I am sharing in these pages. All the issues raised, and ways in which I have worked with my clients to help them, have all taken place, just not maybe in the way that the case studies portray them.

Often my clients have a very different starting point depending on their catalyst. I highlight the parts that are most relevant to each stage in the process so that it is easy to relate each story to the relevant courage practice. There are a variety of tools that I draw on and my intention is to show how they work in practice through the stories. Most clients have gone through the whole process that I share in the book.

The book is designed to guide your thinking. A significant element to the book is that it is designed to be interactive, to become your courage practice diary. There are self-assessment tools for you to fill in, both at the point when you first read it, and importantly, an opportunity to revisit and re-evaluate in, say, one year's time. Don't be afraid to write in this book! It's now your book not mine! Perhaps growing up you, like me, had to cover your schoolbooks to protect them and that created an unconscious psychological barrier to writing inside them. Give yourself permission to use this book as you would a journal. It is designed to support you to write down your inner thoughts, so overcome any resistance to write in it and please use it as intended.

What I ask is that you commit to the practices not as if they are dogma that you must follow, but a bit like a smorgasbord. Try things out and see what works. Take what works and practise it regularly because in fact we're always practising something, and the key is to be conscious about choosing what we practise. If you practise self-criticism, you're going to become masterful at it. The same is true for self-validation and compassion.

You are doing the best you can right now with the tools you have. I'm going to give you a new toolkit and fresh practices that you can try. But the key is the medicine inside you. The tools will help you access your own medicine and learn to become more of your beautiful, brilliant self.

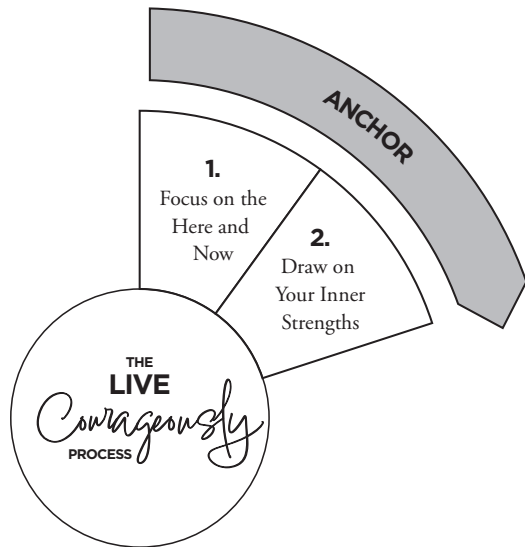
I am a firm believer in intuition, and I want you to trust yours in how you read this book. Sometimes you can pick up a book and it opens at a page that seems to offer you exactly what you are looking for. Why not try that serendipity now and flick open some pages further on in this book?

The main principle that I want you to adopt is that there is no trying without doing. You are reading this because you want a change. I invite you to be willing to have a new experience, reflect on it, try it out and then learn from it.

If you choose to continue with this book, you will at best helicopter above your overwhelm, observe your role in creating it, gain insight into what is driving that and develop new ways to be with yourself so that you can have more calm, balance and fulfilment.

At worst you will read it, put it down and move on to the next book or training course. But I'm guessing you've had enough of that, and in turning to the next chapter you are making a commitment to yourself that you matter and it's time to do you, your work and life a little differently.

Anchor



One

Focus on the here and now

FIND PRESENCE IN OVERWHELM

*When you feel overwhelmed, anxiety drives overthinking, avoidance and procrastination. You get caught worrying about the future or being lost ruminating in the past. So, I explore a **Slow Down, Pause and Breathe** courage practice to help you ground that negative spiralling ‘What if’ energy. You will learn a simple method to break your own self-limiting pattern, get out of your head and reset. With practice you will learn to recover your grounding and sense of inner calm and ease.*

The Live Courageously Process begins with anchoring in the here and now to enable you to stop reacting, but instead connect to yourself so that you can identify what capacity you have and what you need. This will help you break the cycle of running on empty and saying yes as an automatic, unconscious reaction.

Burnout – the myths that feed it

1. “If I push through it will be fine”

Burnout happens when your capacity to handle things is destroyed. The challenge with stressors is that it's the small unnoticed ones that have a cumulative effect. You think you can handle each individual stressor because it seems insignificant on its own but as the incidents increase your capacity reduces.

A commonly held misguided belief that drives overwhelm is that if you just push through, you'll be fine. You fear that if you stop or slow down it will be perceived as a failure to cope. But pushing through is not an effective strategy when you're overwhelmed. Grit is wonderful when you have a clear goal and want to focus your energy and attention, but if you're already running on empty, reacting to everyone else's needs will drain your already limited energy and your efforts will be inefficient and unproductive.

2. “I'm supposed to be good at multi-tasking because I'm a woman”

Multi-tasking involves doing more than one thing at a time. It requires switching attention between tasks and increases cognitive demand. Multi-tasking has traditionally been perceived as a woman's domain, where she juggles career, running a household and family life.

Studies show that women's brains are no more efficient than men's at switching tasks and juggling multiple tasks at the same time.

This myth sets you up to fail, adds fuel to the fire and feeds the belief that you must somehow be falling short if you can't juggle and keep up. Because you've been told you're supposed to be good at multi-tasking, you're open to manipulation to take on more than you have capacity for. Whilst you may

have a strength in optimising and organising your time, you do not have a biological advantage in being able to multi-task.

3. “Everyone else is doing better than me”

When you're in a tight spot it's common to look at others and compare yourself less favourably. The challenge with this behaviour is that it's isolating. It drives disconnection and has you lacking empathy towards yourself.

Unchecked comparisons will feed fear and envy, and drive conflict within yourself and with others. It is not about everyone else. It's about you, your capacity, your desires, your true nature and what it wants to express.

4. “I should be further ahead than where I am”

This myth drives the notion that there is a set place and time where you should be in your work and life. Women are still raised with traditional narratives about expectations on how their life should ideally unfold.

In a world full of push notifications, perfected images and idealised visions, you can think that you're behind everyone else and this creates a false sense of urgency and rush. It creates an undertone of anxiety and drives busyness, over-thinking and can also create procrastination through a desire to get it right. But according to whose version of right?

Start where you are

When you're in overwhelm it feels counterintuitive to stop, pause and reconnect to your breath. Who will do everything if you don't? Your overwhelm may feel such a familiar feeling that you've got used to it and convinced yourself that you can just push through to the other side. But

there's a cost to your relationship to yourself and others and eventually the build-up will lead to burnout, resentment, and a need to completely disconnect.

Overwhelm is not fertile ground for effective, clear thinking. It creates constant anxiety, a feeling of being emotionally flooded and a desire to check out. To manage overwhelm and avoid burnout requires you to know and define your own capacity. When your head is full of things to do and worries to think about, it's all too tempting to ignore the need for rest and renewal. You need to connect with yourself and increase your self-awareness.

One way in which you can check in with yourself and create awareness of your current situation is to decide what best describes you right now from the list below.

1. **BURNT OUT** – exhausted, energy depleted
2. **OVERWHELMED** – unhealthy striving/pushing, being cynical, helplessness
3. **SATISFIED** – healthy striving/flow, balance, fulfillment
4. **UNDERWHELMED** – unfulfilled, bored, apathetic

You cannot change what you cannot see or feel

Humans are masters of self-deception. When you disconnect from your emotions and senses you become preoccupied with your thoughts and find yourself living from the shoulders up. It's vulnerable to choose to connect with the tender parts of you. You may fear that you will be perceived as weak, not coping or somehow less capable than others.

You may use a mask of stoicism or perfection to hide your struggle. You push uncomfortable feelings down and pretend everything is fine, telling yourself that you will do some self-care once you've conquered the to-do list. But lists have a sneaky way of constantly growing and this creates a feeling of constant pressure and chasing to keep up.

Pay attention to the sensations in your body over your thoughts

The mind will lie to you. It will tell you that if you just complete the ten things on your list everything will be better, but this is a recipe for over-functioning, constant busyness and a lack of fulfilment.

On the other hand, your body will not lie. Tension in your shoulders and jaw, teeth grinding, headaches, hot flushes, redness in your face and shortness of breath are all signals that your body is experiencing stress.

Conscious breathing is an opportunity to find presence in the moment, check in with yourself and notice how you're doing. You focus on your breathing and notice the thoughts that come into your head without letting them hook your attention. It takes practice and for those that are addicted to doing, the temptation will be to go and grab a notebook or act on all that thinking but the art is to stay present and focused on the breath.

Connect to your courage to take charge and simply breathe

Breathing is an automatic function controlled through the autonomic nervous system. It is not necessary to think consciously about it, it just happens. But are you aware if you have a poor breathing pattern and the impact of this on your performance and choices?

Your breath continuously rises and falls, but under pressure, when life is challenging, you may unconsciously stop its natural flow. Breathing high up in your chest tightens your muscles and reduces the length of your exhale. It arouses your sympathetic nervous system which is the network of nerves that prepares you for fight or flight.

Slowing down your breath anchors you to the present moment. It grounds your energy. It activates your parasympathetic nervous system (also known as rest and digest) which decreases your heart rate and signals to your body that everything is calm and ok. It's from this place that you will be able to focus, think clearly and do your best performance work.

Become aware of your emotional journey

Overwhelm can simultaneously feel like you're living under a huge rock whilst also being in a cloud of constant confusion. There's high stress, emotions, and a need to think clearly but you just can't. It's often accompanied by this huge sense of pressure, rush, and a feeling that you just can't keep abreast or catch up.

In this place it's hard to understand your emotions. You feel them deeply but don't understand them. Once you calm your nervous system and get present, you are in a better place to explore what's really going on with your emotions and gain insight from them.

Labelling your emotions requires emotional literacy. It's an assumption that adults have this literacy and ability to name their emotions accurately. When you've spent a lifetime fulfilling other people's needs, knowing your own can be deeply challenging.

At the simplest level you have four needs to feel safe within yourself: physical needs, security needs, belonging needs and fulfilment needs. When you operate on automatic pilot, focusing on everyone else, you don't slow down enough to check in with yourself and consider your own needs. However, your energy and emotions will guide you to what you need. They contain packets of information that hold wisdom within them but if you push through or repress them and instead listen to all the 'shoulds' in your head, you will miss the signals to connect to your own authentic needs.

The emotional zones overleaf can help you pinpoint and connect to your feelings and reflect on your needs. From this place you can map your daily, weekly and monthly emotional journey and start to make connections between what you feel and what you need.

| feel... | need...

OVERWHELM
PANIC
FRUSTRATION
ANXIOUS
ANNOYED
IRRITATED
BETRAYED

Space to pause, take a breath, get present
Expression to say what I feel,
get clear on what matters
Autonomy to choose my path,
make my own decisions

SAD
BORED
DISAPPOINTED
DEPRESSED
ASHAMED
LONELY
TIRED

Validation, self worth, acceptance,
acknowledgement
Fulfilment to reconnect to my values
and authenticity
Connection, reassurance and compassion
– this too shall pass

EXCITED
HAPPY
CONFIDENT
BRAVE
EMPOWERED
PASSIONATE
LOVING

Celebrate and acknowledge
what's working
Appreciate what I love
Validate myself and choices

CALM
PEACEFUL
CONTENT
FULFILLED
EASE
FOCUSED
OPTIMISTIC

Presence to be here
Savour and appreciate this moment

As an adult you are responsible for fulfilling your own needs but if you don't recognise what you feel, it's hard to connect the dots with what you need. You can get stuck in everyone else's agenda for you or in pursuing things you think will satisfy you but don't because they're outside in instead of inside out.

Moving out of overwhelm and discovering balance is dynamic; it is always evolving. As your priorities shift and change and your life ebbs and flows you want to be able to feel the changing tides and decide what to prioritise to restore a sense of balance and flow for you.

When you feel that pull, it's an opportunity to stop and release the pressure. From this place you can notice the pulls and discern what's important.

Case Study

Focus on the here and now

Julia, 40s, married

Full-time, Head of HR.

Self-imposed limitation: “Push through and keep going”

Courage practice needed: Slow Down, Pause and Breathe

The core issue

“I don’t know what to do. I just feel overwhelmed, I can’t focus on anything. I am constantly rushing and not where I want to be in my career or life ...”

Julia came to coaching because she was stuck, overwhelmed, and wanted to feel better. She described physical symptoms of chronic tension: headaches, back and neck ache and tight jaw.

Relationships were strained. At home, she was in a debilitating cycle of bickering with her partner over seemingly insignificant things like the chores. They lost time and care arguing over the inequity of roles, competing over whose job was more demanding. Julia felt increasingly resentful about all the unappreciated things she did on top of her day job to make their home function.

At work she felt pulled in different directions, caught between stakeholders, debating the numbers, and playing a political, unfulfilling role. She wanted to focus on bringing more humanity to work but the organisation prioritised task, outcomes and profit over people and relationships. This deeply

frustrated her, and she felt unable to fully utilise her skills or contribute effectively.

Julia felt the pressure of everything building up, needing to figure out what to do and where to focus next. She was stuck, overwhelmed, unable to think clearly or access her own insight and wisdom.

She dealt with this by dismissal and suppression, trying to put her best foot forward. But she had a constant internal conflict. Her strategy of bottling things up and acting as if it was all fine clashed with this feeling that it could be different. But her body experienced that suppression as pressure and tightened, her breath was high in her chest and she frequently held it, her jaw locked, and her shoulders and neck tensed up.

We began with the anchoring phase of the process and explored ways to help her get present, allow the pressure to be there and give it some space. She tried various breath and grounding practices. Julia noticed that she had been holding her breath all the time, even when she put the washing out!

As she practised regularly changing her breathing habits, she started to experience feelings of calm. She identified that she felt safest with people that acknowledged her feelings and validated her needs. She felt that didn't happen currently in her marriage or in her work.

The key was for her to learn to create that feeling of safety inside herself, so that she could tune in and discern how to fulfil her own needs. From this place she could then access the insight and wisdom from her emotional experience.

What Julia learnt

As she shifted her emotional experience, she was able to gain more clarity and insight. Ultimately, she identified the co-dependency in her relationship and discussed with her partner the opportunity for couples therapy.

Addressing the reality of her situation helped her to release the reaction to how things were at work and gradually begin to dream of a new possibility. She saw the toxicity of the culture she was working in and recognised that she didn't have the mandate to make significant change. Her efforts to harmonise and maintain good relationships were futile. This empowered Julia to dream about the type of organisation she would thrive in and then take proactive steps to manifest this change.

Julia recognised the need to establish a practice of grounding herself in her senses when she felt the overwhelm creeping up. This helped her to navigate and ride her emotional waves and navigate her own fearful thinking that previously kept her in the overwhelm.

She accepted the culture she was operating in and realised that she wanted to work in a different culture that supported diversity, psychological safety and relationships alongside profitability. This resulted in Julia getting a new job in a start-up that was beginning to scale up. She was able to shape the culture to support the founders' ambitions and whilst she didn't increase her financial package significantly, her fulfilment radically increased.

Courage Practice:

Slow Down, Pause and Breathe

Human beings are reactive much of the time. It is in the slowing down and getting present that you can see clearly. In a 24/7, permanently-on world it's easy to lose your own grounding and pace. When you're passionate, care deeply and are purpose driven, you can overextend yourself and get lost in the external needs that you see.

You may currently identify yourself as a multi-tasker or plate spinner. You may even have some of your self-worth tied up in your ability to achieve. To move from overwhelm will require a shift in this identity. Instead of being a woman who focuses on everything else and everyone else first, you can choose to put yourself first.

The challenge you may face is that you feel selfish and you claiming back space for yourself will impact those around you. Expect kickback. It is true that you can teach people how to treat you, and if up until now you haven't prioritised yourself or your need for space, quality time and focused action, people around you may be surprised at you changing the agenda.

To come out of overwhelm requires you to see the self-imposed limitation you have created for yourself and consciously change it. You need to know what your energy is and its limitations and discern what you want to give it to.

Slow down, pause and breathe

Create a habit of regularly slowing down, pausing, and consciously breathing.

Creating a habit like this will help you to tune in, anchor and connect to yourself. Without grounding you will be blown around by everyone else's

agenda and needs, unable to access your own. It makes it hard to use your emotions as signals or packets of wisdom to guide you in discerning what you need. This in turn will make it challenging to speak your truth or hold clear boundaries.

Anchoring in your breath sets you up for success. It puts your body in the right frame to support you to do and be your best self. You can think clearly and focus on what is important.

An excellent way to develop consciously breathing is to use the Heartmath breathing technique. There is an audio session using this for you to follow, and it is on the Resources page on my website: <https://courageunfolding.com/resources/>

Ways to make this work:

Focus on the here and now

- The challenge is to create a new habit. You can do this by stacking a habit onto another one. For example, each time you have a drink, breathe.
- Another option is to set a regular reminder on your phone that simply says 'Breathe'.
- Notice where you're feeling overwhelmed or losing energy and decide to drop an anchor into you and get present within your body. From this place you can explore what you authentically need and in turn what to prioritise.



Live Courageously is for sensitive, intuitive women who are stuck at a crossroads in work or in life.

Feeling stuck is something that takes a different shape in each of our lives. It might appear as self-doubt, imposter syndrome, people pleasing, second guessing, procrastination, emotional overwhelm or burnout. You question if you're on the right path and struggle to find your own answers.

Getting unstuck is a process of unfolding and emerging, of becoming who you really are. It involves coming to the edge of your fears, reconnecting to your truth and discovering the potential already within you.

Drawing on her own experiences and those of women she has coached, Vanessa shows you how to get unstuck, become present, simplify, find clarity, listen to your desires, make empowered decisions, and take the necessary action to create the life you really want. Using interactive self-assessments and a series of step-by-step courage processes, you will claim your space, rediscover your confidence and step into your own authority.

VANESSA MAY



Vanessa believes that living an authentic and fulfilling life involves unfolding your courage, one step at a time.

She is a Certified Professional Co-Active™ coach, Co-Active leadership graduate, Organisational and Relationship Systems Certified coach, and Certified Heartmath™ coach. She holds an MSc in Organisational Behaviour, MA in Managing Human Resources and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development.

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