



7 WAYS TO HOLD IT TOGETHER **WHEN YOU'RE FALLING APART**

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You're Not Thriving

Though you are competent and capable, you don't feel confident, and many days you are just surviving rather than thriving in your life and leadership. There's got to be a better way.

There is indeed a better way, and it's not as difficult as it may seem. This guide is designed to deliver you some much needed clarity, sanity, and balance. It's simple and straight-forward, leaving you with no question as to the specific steps to take in order to hold yourself together.

Leadership is not for the faint of heart and clearly you have the ability to lead well or you wouldn't have made it this far. This guide can be the first step in honing your leadership survival skills so you can do more than just survive and strive. You can thrive in both life and leadership, and you don't need to compromise one for the other. I promise you it's totally doable even if you feel like you're falling apart!

1- SIMPLIFY

When stressed, even the simplest decisions become challenging for taxed brains so it's really essential to simplify everything you can.

- » **Simplify your schedule, activities, relationships & decision making** as much as possible in order to give your brain and your body an opportunity to recover from the chaos that has been reigning supreme.
- » **Avoid rigid expectations** that may be anxiety-inducing and yet have a consistent and flexible schedule, which calms a stressed mind. Predictability is an antidote to stress.

2- SUPPORT

First used by ships at sea, SOS is the internationally recognized signal for distress and is a survival skill used to call for help. You may believe that as a leader you shouldn't need support, or that you should be able to do it on your own, but the reality is that you were never meant to lead alone. All leaders need support and you are no exception. Having the wisdom to reach out for support can make all the difference to barely surviving versus thriving in your role.

- » **Relinquish & Delegate.** Relinquish control in three areas—Self, Others, Tasks. First, relinquish the need to be seen as always in control because it will prevent you from receiving the support you need to successfully lead.

Second, relinquish the need to control others as it prevents them from learning to lead effectively. Micromanagement breeds resentment while undermining the development of those you lead.



The mark of an effective leader includes the willingness to delegate. Delegation is an act of trust, accountability, and leadership development, so don't deprive your team of these opportunities. Failure to delegate is a failure of leadership. Use delegation as a tool to assess the growth of team members, their opportunities for more challenging tasks, and tasks, and their need for more support.

Finally, consider relinquishing control of certain tasks either at work or home to others who can do them capably. Outsourcing is a beautiful thing.

- » **Assess & Advocate.** A clear-eyed needs-assessment can help you determine what you need in terms of specific needs. Whether at work or at home, it's important to consider the kind of support needed: practical, physical, emotional, or all three. Self-reflect about your needs and then communicate these needs clearly to those in your corner so they can indeed show up for you effectively. Once you've clearly identified your needs, be willing to advocate for yourself and your team. Recognize that setting boundaries and identifying what you can't or won't do is just as essential as asking for what you need.
- » **Reconnect & Prioritize.** Take time to identify how you can stay connected to those who matter most, both at work and at home. What can you do to cultivate ongoing connection, ensure clear communication, and maintain interactions that keep these relationships strong? Set lunch meetings and/or date nights to prioritize these connections so that your most important relationships are not lost in the shuffle of your busy schedule.

3- SELF CARE

Self-care is foundational to thriving in life and leadership, but it's a squirrely term that can be challenging to pin down. Let's break it down since self-care done well can greatly improve your functioning and your happiness.

- » **Nutrition.** Balanced nutrition may seem elusive when you are racing through your days, but attention to fueling well will energize your work, keep you healthy, and help you feel your best.

Resist extreme measures including the diet mentality. Any approach to nutrition is best viewed through the lens of sustainability, not as a quick fix, a detox, a cleanse, or a diet.

Respond to hunger-fullness cues rather than rejecting hunger cues or eating past fullness.

Prioritize eating whole foods, fresh fruits and vegetables, and keeping your intake of water and fiber up.

Balance your intake of macronutrients (fat, protein, & carbs) at meals and snacks as there is a synergistic effect that results in better satiety and more steady blood sugar, and resist cutting out any food group entirely. Remember, balance and moderation are key.



- » **Exercise.** Moderate exercise that includes both cardiovascular exercise and strength training is best for health and fitness. Small changes, like opting for the stairs instead of the elevator, taking an evening stroll with a loved one, and playing with your kiddos can add up to more happiness, fewer health concerns, more positive relationships, and a greater sense of purpose.
- » **Distress Tolerance Skills.** Life can be stressful, so having an arsenal of distress tolerance skills for coping effectively is essential.

Paced breathing is one of the most basic, but also one of the most effective distress tolerance skills for lowering anxiety, slowing physiological arousal and dropping the stress response so you can think clearly and respond wisely to challenging situations.

There are many options available, but the key is finding one that works well for you that you will actually use. Try this box breathing technique to get started.

Box Breathing:

Picture a box. You'll take one step of the breathing process along each length of the box.

Step 1: Slowly inhale for 4 seconds

Step 2: Hold your breath for 4 seconds

Step 3: Slowly exhale for 4 seconds

Step 4: Hold your breath for 4 seconds



4- STORIES

We all move through the world telling ourselves stories. They are stories of hard luck, hardship, and pity. They are stories of how we'll never get ahead, how nobody loves us, and how we'll never be good enough. We would all be better off if we stopped telling and listening to these stories.

The fourth skill to help you thrive in life and leadership is to examine your stories. Brené Brown challenges you to ask yourself *"what is the story I'm telling myself"* and I think this is an excellent intervention to get you out of your head and into reality. I've decided that the only real mistake most of us have ever really made is to believe our own stories.

- » **Identify your themes.** Take some time and identify the themes of your favorite stories, and then make a commitment to be on guard for when they show up in your life.
- » **Journal.** Consider self-reflective journaling about these stories.
- » **Release your story, release your pain.** We often tell ourselves stories as a way of managing our painful experiences, but instead of helping us cope with the pain of loss, hurt, or betrayal, our stories actually keep us stuck in resentment, anger, and shame. Freeing yourself of your stories is actually the path to healing these wounds.
- » **Seek feedback.** Ask for feedback from someone you can trust to help you identify your stories and when you are leading yourself astray.



5- SLOW DOWN

Learning to slow down can sound like bad advice, especially when as a leader you've probably gotten ahead by pushing harder, doing more, and speeding up. But this approach often comes at a high cost and cannot be sustained long-term.

It's also not the most effective way to be successful and it's definitely not the path to thriving in your leadership or your life. You may not believe me now, but I promise you—and the research backs me up here—that slowing down will actually make you a better and a happier leader.

- » **Respond vs React.** The ability to slow yourself down and respond rather than react to life's stressors can help you keep your head in the game and be the one others look to for direction.

Mindfulness includes the ability to have perspective about life and to carry a sense of purpose about the challenges of life. With mindfulness, you don't take yourself or your challenges too seriously.

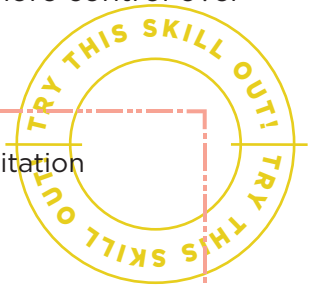
- » **Meditation.** Meditation is a specific mindfulness skill that many find helpful. It is a practice that is recommended for daily use in which you learn to quiet your mind and notice the thoughts and feelings you may be having about your life and the situations you are facing.

Some of the benefits of meditation include: lower stress, increased happiness, more self-awareness, improved memory, increased attention span, and more control over anxiety.

In as little as 10 minutes a day, you can reap the many benefits of a meditation practice.

Here are the basics to get you started:

- Sit quietly or lie down somewhere relatively free of distractions
- Close your eyes or take a soft gaze with your eyes
- Consider using guided meditation options. There are several excellent apps available, and many have free versions
- During meditation, follow the breath. Track the rhythmic inhalation and exhalation of the breath
- During meditation you will notice the chatter of thoughts and emotional responses to thought. The goal is not to have an absence of thoughts—as though that were possible—but to simply redirect yourself back to the breath without judgment



6- SLEEP

Adults need—on average—7-9 hours of sleep to function optimally. If you cheat sleep, you will undermine performance, memory, cognition, health, weight optimization, and the list goes on and on.

- » **Sleep Consistency.** Aim to go to sleep and wake up at the same time each day. You will notice that your body begins to adapt and there is less of a battle with the alarm clock in the morning, leaving you to leverage motivation for other challenges throughout your day.
- » **Caffeine.** Watch your caffeine intake, especially if you have difficulty falling asleep, and cut off caffeine after 2 pm—earlier if needed.
- » **Naps.** Don't be afraid of naps. Naps have been shown to improve creativity, productivity, and energy if used appropriately. An early afternoon cat nap of 30 minutes or less conveys many benefits without negatively impacting nighttime sleep.
- » **Sleep Hygiene.** Adopt sleep hygiene habits that support healthy sleep, including preparing for sleep 30-60 minutes before bedtime by turning down the lights, putting on pj's, washing your face, putting devices away, and reading something relaxing. These habits signal the body that it's time to gear down for sleep.
- » **Decrease Stimulation.** Avoid reading material related to work, responding to work emails or texts, or watching tv before bedtime as these activities all stimulate the mind and make it difficult to nod off to sleep. What's more likely is that you will ruminate and have difficulty falling asleep.

7- SPIRITUALITY

Examinations of those who have experienced the most challenging life events reveal key differences between those who just survive and those who thrive, and it is important to note that it is indeed possible to thrive in the face of life's greatest tests. So, what is this key difference? Resilience based on spirituality.

Resilience is the ability to overcome challenges. Spirituality brings perspective that you are not alone and that while your challenges may feel insurmountable, you have access to love, support, and compassion.

- » **Identify ways to connect spiritually.** Find ways to connect with spirituality, whether it be time in nature, prayer, spiritual readings, formal church worship, listening to inspiring music, or embracing awe-inspiring experiences.
- » **Look for purpose-driven connection.** Look for opportunities that expand your perspective and connect you to a larger purpose and meaning in life. Not only will these experiences strengthen resilience, but they will connect you to others in joy and communion.



It's Time to Thrive

You can lead, there's no question about that. But instead of simply surviving and striving, it's time to thrive! Follow these leadership survival skills consistently to hold it together when you feel like you're falling apart, and then let me know how you're doing. I'm social, so connect with me on Instagram or Facebook! There's so much more where these skills are concerned, and I would love to help you with your next steps of thriving in life and leadership.

Check out my weekly podcast, Pursue What Matters, where I share all the goods on what it takes to thrive in love and work. Every month I review a top book in self-help, leadership development, or business so you don't have to because I'm a geek like that. I'd love your suggestions of books to review as my top priority is ensuring you thrive in life and leadership.

Here are some next steps to get you going on your journey from surviving and striving to thriving:

- » To get started on my podcast, here are two episodes that focus specifically on the skills I mention in this survival guide:
- » Episode 15: Benefits of Sleep
www.drmelissasmith.com/episode-15
- » Episode 16: Mindfulness with Dr. Jared Warren
www.drmelissasmith.com/episode-16
- » Headspace or Calm apps for guided meditation
- » Instagram: @dr.melissasmith
- » Facebook: Dr. Melissa Smith

