

# WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



## Lean into stress and rest for success with Brad Stulberg

**Jen Fisher:** Hi WorkWell listeners. I'm really excited to share that my book *Work Better Together* is officially out. Conversations with WorkWell guests and feedback from listeners like you inspired this book. It's all about how to create a more human centered workplace. And as we return to the office for many of us, this book can help you move forward into post pandemic life with strategies and tools to strengthen your relationships and focus on your well-being. It's available now from your favorite book retailer.

We all want success, but it can often come at the cost of burnout and exhaustion. The always on hustle culture pushes us to do more. But what we really need is rest, joy, and meaningful connections with others. How can we pursue our passions and our need to achieve without sacrificing our own health and well-being? This is the work well podcast series.

Hi, I'm Jen Fisher, chief well-being officer for Deloitte and I'm so pleased to be with you today to talk about all things well-being. I'm here with Brad Stulberg. Brad is the author of the best selling book, *The Practice of Groundedness* and the co-author of the books *Peak Performance* and *The Passion Paradox*. He researches rights and coaches on performance and well-being. He is also a fellow at the University of Michigan School of Public Health and a co-founder of the Growth Equation, a website that shares information, tools and practices to help you cultivate a more enduring and fulfilling kind of success. Brad, welcome to the show.

**Brad Stulberg:** Hey Jen, it's great to be joining you.

**Jen Fisher:** It's great to have you. I feel like it's a long time coming.

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, I'm really looking forward to it.

**Jen Fisher:** So how did you become so passionate about the topics of performance and well-being?

**Brad Stulberg:** Well, I've had a relatively circuitous path to the topics of performance and well-being, and it's kind of like these two lanes in my life that have converged. So one lane is growing up as an athlete and just always loving, pushing myself, pushing my body, pushing my mind, trying to figure out how to improve, how to get better, just the process of putting in work and seeing an outcome that's correlated to the work that you did or didn't do has always been a great source of fulfillment in my life. So there's that track and then the other track was intellectually and professionally. So, all the way back to undergraduate school, I was really interested in health and health care and how systems that promote health or degrade health work. And I went on to get a graduate degree in public health and in

graduate school, I realized that there were so many people focusing on health being the absent of disease, but not too many people thinking about health as vibrancy and flourishing. And my current work is really the intersection of that improvement, fulfillment, nourishment, from mastery, from craft, from improvement, overlapped with what does it also mean to make sure you're doing it in a way that is both physiologically and psychologically healthy.

**Jen Fisher:** And do you feel like, so you were one of the kind of early thought leaders or adopters of this thinking, do you feel like the systems are finally coming around to this way of thinking as well and in some way shape or form? Please say yes.

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, I think so. I think more so than they were a decade ago, that's for sure. I mean, a decade ago to think that sleep would be discussed in corporate America. You'd be crazy. Now, it's a pretty common topic, not just in like forward thinking organizations, but pretty much across the board, which is wonderful. So yeah, I do think that tide has shifted in a really good way. I think what's interesting too is that the pendulum swings and it tends to swing to the extremes. So if maybe 10-15 years ago, it was work, work, work, work, work, burn up, burn up, burn out. Now the pendulum has swung quite far to the other extreme, I think where there's so much focus on rest and recovery and all these products and services to help you rest and recover. And then the question is, what are you resting and recovering from? And my hope is that eventually just societally it finds a middle ground because just resting and recovery like that's not going to lead to fulfillment in a good, thriving, excellent life. But neither is overwork. It's about balancing the two. You know, doing meaningful work, but doing it in a responsible sustainable way.

**Jen Fisher:** Yeah, absolutely. I love that answer. I love this. Because I've heard you say and I know it's on your website that you don't share hacks. You share just what works. So tell me about why hacks don't work.

**Brad Stulberg:** Well hacks go way back, so the original fountain of youth was in like the 1500s and it was this notion right? That there was this place where there was special water and if you got to the water, it would increase your longevity, your energy, you live forever, it was like the original hack. So, I do think that we are just wired to want easy fixes to complex problems. And of course we are, like if there was a supplement that I could take that would make me feel better and perform better with no downside, I would take it in a heartbeat. So I'm not like categorically against it. I wear shoes. I don't walk around barefoot, because shoes work, shoes are a great hack. I think the problem is that a lot of these things that get peddled is the perfect insider, the magic bullet. Unfortunately they come up short. And the truth is that human performance and human well-being is really really complex. And what we know is that when you take a system that is as complex as us and you try to do any kind of reductionist intervention, it A. rarely works and B., it often has unintended consequences. So I think that the key to any kind of behavior change, whether it's a health behavior change or a performance behavior change, is to pick an approach that's not reckless. And then, once you've kind of eliminated the reckless approaches, you just have to stick with it and be consistent and get comfortable with the fact that there are going to be peaks, valleys, and very long plateaus. Any long term performer, be it in athletics or in the arts, will tell you that there are these periods where it just seems like they're not making progress. And it's so important to ride those things out and stay consistent instead of switching and looking for the next quick fix. So what I try to do in my work as well is to identify principles and practices that like I call it "True". So what I mean by this is I've got to be really, really confident that they'll work for most

people in most situations if I'm going to include them in any of my books. I use the metaphor of a three-legged stool. So the first leg is modern science. So what does empirical research say? And ideally, not just a single study with ten people but large sample size, big studies, even better meta-analysis like studies of studies. The second leg is what does ancient wisdom and history say? So what patterns and themes have been true across time and in different parts of the world?. And then the third leg is daily practice. So it can't just be in the history books and it can't just work in a lab or in a study with a bunch of undergraduate freshmen, it actually has to go workout in the real world. And if something has all three of those legs, then the stool is really sturdy, you're confident that it can hold you. So I am a big fan of interventions and practices and frameworks that those three legs of the stool are there.

**Jen Fisher:** Yeah, so you kind of mentioned, you know these principles right? That you talk about often and I'm going to go through all three of your books. So in Peak Performance, you talk about, there's just a few common principles that drive performance regardless of the field with the task at hand, I think that's a direct quote. So can you take us through those common principles, or at least some of those common principles if you can't get through all of them, and you know the next 30 to 40 minutes.

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, so let's start with what I call the growth equation. So this is a universal equation for sustainable improvement in growth. And it's really simple, but simple doesn't mean easy, at least not easy to stick to. So the growth equation says that stress plus rest equals growth. So if you want a system, whether it's you as an individual, a family or relationship, even an entire organization to grow, you have to stress that system, you have to challenge it with some kind of stimulus and then you have to follow that with a period of rest, recovery, and reflection. And only then you get growth. Too much stress, too much stimulus, non-stop, no time for recovery, rest and reflection, you get injury, illness, burnout or you get the company that grows way too fast and basically grows itself into the ground. The flip side, is not enough stress, too much rest, you get complacency and stagnation, you get blockbuster video. And it's really simple again to understand the framework, it's hard to strike the right balance between challenge, stimulus, stress on the one hand and then rest, recovery, reflection on the other.

**Jen Fisher:** And so I think a really key point which when I learned this maybe wasn't as mind-blowing to you, but we obviously still do this in society and certainly in the workplace today. But we tend to demonize stress, right? Everybody's walking around, so stressed out and talking about how stressed we are and we all need a certain amount of stress that stress is not bad unless it is chronic, ongoing, over stimulating, words that you've been using. So can you talk a little bit about that? Because I think it's such an important distinction and for me changing my mindset around intentionally seeking out stress, balancing that with recovery was a really powerful mindset shift for me.

**Brad Stulberg:** I'm really glad to hear that, so this isn't permission to work yourself into the ground. Like you said, you know, way too extreme of a stress or chronic stress is very rarely if ever helpful. But it is helpful to have what I like to think about is just manageable challenge. So things that are ever so slightly outside of your comfort zone. So maybe 10 out of 10 stress is like extreme. You don't want that. That's not really growth promoting, and 0 out of 10 as you're going through the motions. It's generally good to have projects that are between 6 and 8 out of 10. So psychologists call this arousal, so it's right before anxiety, so you have to pay attention. It forces you to concentrate and to be present. There's a genuine chance that you might fail, but overtime, if you work at it, you'll probably succeed. And the research pretty unequivocally shows that that is the type of stress that we grow from. There's a really great study that I cite in the book 'Peak Performance' that was titled 'Skills Come from Struggle'. And what the

researchers found is that we tend to learn best when we kind of like have to get to that point where it's at our threshold. So you think about doing a math problem. You want to kind of scrunch your face a little bit. Now you don't want to have a panic attack that's 10 out of 10, but you want it to be really hard, you want it to be challenging. Now it's also key to make sure, as you said that you rest and recover because just constantly doing 7-8 out of 10 stressors, well that becomes like very exhausting if you do that without any rest and recovery. So that's the balance that I think try to strike in all elements of our life, and I think that we can get really concrete chant saying, "here's a specific area of my life, maybe it's my intimate relationship with my partner. Maybe it is how I parent. Maybe it's me as a marathon runner. Maybe it's me as an individual contributor. Maybe it's me as a manager. Maybe it's me as an executive," right? You pick an area of your life and you basically say here's where I am right now. Here's where I want to be. What's the next logical step? What's the right growth promoting challenge to take on? And then give yourself permission to take on that challenge, making sure that you build in time for rest, recovery and reflection.

**Jen Fisher:** Yeah, I love that and I was going to say that when, even if I kind of, you know, stack back-to-back or on top of each other, projects or things that are just outside my comfort zone and that 6 to 8 range if I don't balance that with recovery, ultimately, over time, the things that used to be in that 6 to 8 range are now in the 10 right? So things that used to only be a little bit over time, once you're saturated if you will, you have a much harder time actually succeeding at the things that kind of used to be just outside your comfort zone. I guess that's leading to burnout, right?

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, and that's a great insight. And I think that that's a really good, like internal alarm bell that it's probably time to shut things down for a little and rest and recover. Athletes know this really well. A lot of good athletes use a system called training by RPE or rate of perceived exertion. In when what normally feels like a 6 or a 7 starts feeling like an 8 or a 9. That means that your body is a little bit overworked and you have to back off.

**Jen Fisher:** Yeah, yeah, so what's another principle? Take us through one or two more.

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, so I'm going to kind of hop around books. Another principle that I think is really important comes from my most recent book, *The Practice of Groundedness*. And this is around this notion that we think that we need to feel really motivated and inspired to get going. But often it's the opposite that's true. We need to get going to give ourselves a chance to feel motivated and inspired. So in the literature, this is called behavioral activation, the shorthand that I like to use is mood follows action. And this can be absolutely transformative, because particularly coming out of a period like the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic, so many people are finding themselves in a little bit of a rut. And they've rested. It's not that they need more rest and recovery, but yet still, there's this lethargy, this apathy, this kind of lack of energetic spark. And I think the mistake that a lot of people make, myself included before I really came across this work in this research is that we try to like, "will ourselves to feel motivated." Or we think that we have to be to get going and to do something good and meaningful. When in fact doing something good and meaningful, even if we don't feel like it, gives us the best chance at turning our feelings around. And this isn't just like inspirational, you know, "rah rah, go get them, be disciplined" nonsense. There are hundreds of studies in psychology that show that these types of behavioral activating therapies work really well for individuals that are even suffering from clinical depression or anxiety. "Is it a panacea cure all?" Of course not. But it's really important to not over index

on how you feel at any given moment, and to realize that action can create motivation just as much as the other way around.

**Jen Fisher:** Yeah, that's really, it's kind of like just start, right? Just start from where you are and the motivation will come.

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, and it's really nuanced too Jen because it relates so much to what we were just talking about with stress and rest. I would like to separate fatigue into what I've come to call real fatigue and fake fatigue. And these are perfect names, right? Like if you're feeling tired, you're feeling tired, it's what it is, it's fatigue. But real fatigue is physiological, biological, you're overworked, you legitimately, like need to shut things down, you need to go on a light walk in nature, you need to sleep, you need to read a novel, listen to music, whatever it is that allows you to recover. Fake fatigue or what I call fake fatigue is when you've done all that and your resting heart rate is good, you're sleeping well at night, you're not in a period of overworked, but you still kind of feel like "blah and stuck" and that's where behavioral activation can really help. What makes this even more nuanced is often we do need a lot of rest. We have real fatigue, but then rest in itself takes on an inertia. So it's almost like a one two punch for a lot of people. "Oh my gosh, I'm overworked or Oh my gosh, the stress of the pandemic and having kids at home and family members who were ill and all the anxiety that came with that really truly worn me down. So I do. I need a period of rest. After that period of rest, I still kind of feel blah." Well at that point, more rest might actually not help, and you might kind of need to like nudge yourself into action. And again, we can look at sport and see a really profound example of this which is before athletes have a big competition and they've trained a lot, they do what's called a taper and a taper is when they really like minimize their training. So they shut their training way down. But what's fascinating is during most tapers, especially towards the end of the taper, athletes include these short, very intense bursts of exercise, and the reason they do that is to wake their system up, because it's almost like once you've rested for a prolonged period of time, the system just kind of shuts down and you run the risk of having it get stuck in that state. So you kind of have to break that inertia. So in sport, we do it with these short intense workouts. In life, it can be "alright! I've rested, but I still feel blah, I'm kind of apathetic. I don't have motivation. That's OK, I don't need motivation to get going. I just need to give myself a chance."

**Jen Fisher:** I feel like you were probably inside my, I mean, all of us right, but inside my world just a few months. Just few months ago, if had more clarity on that practice, I might have come out of it a little bit better or perhaps less clunky than I did, but in a better place now, so I guess it's all good.

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, and it's this toxic myth right? that like, you need to think positive and be positive and be motivated and inspired and everyone posts on social media how much they're crushing it. And the truth is that for a lot of people, especially, you know you've got kids, you've got family members, you've got employees, like sometimes you wake up and you don't feel any of those things, and that's OK too and you don't have to judge yourself. But it also it shouldn't be like, "The hell with it. Throw the baby out with the bathwater." It could be like, "hey, you know today I might require a little bit more activation energy," and that's OK. The example that I used was during the pandemic. It was tough for me. I'm like a really social person. I normally write at coffee shops, but we have a very young kid. So even after I was vaccinated, he wasn't yet vaccinated. We probably erred more on the conservative side. So it was hard for me to write. And if I would have waited to be motivated, I wouldn't have written a damn thing, but what I found is that when I felt stuck when I felt down, the best thing I could do was not judge myself for feeling those things but just give myself permission to start writing even when I felt like

crap and to see what happens. And it's not like every day was magic, but I'd say 60-70% of the time, I was able to write some good work and then at the end of that 2-3 hour session, I felt really good, like the motivation came back. So it's a really practical tool. What's that?

**Jen Fisher:** Did your writing change at all?

**Jen Fisher:** Sorry, I said. Did your writing change at all?

**Brad Stulberg:** I don't know, that's a tough question. I mean, I think that writing is probably always changing. You would know better than me. I'd ask my readers.

**Jen Fisher:** Yeah, yeah, that's true. So let's talk a little bit about your book, "Passion Paradox" and because I found this so fascinating. But can you tell us more about what the paradox is? And I guess we've kind of been talking about some of these paradoxes embedded within the principles, but let's specifically talk about the Passion Paradox.

**Brad Stulberg:** Oh, this is great. We're going to hit all three books. Love it!

**Jen Fisher:** Yes we are.

**Brad Stulberg:** So the passion paradox basically says that being really passionate about something can be both a gift and a curse at the same time. So the reason it's a gift is because having endeavors, I was going to say work, but it's beyond work, so having endeavors and pursuits in your life that you care deeply about and that really do fire you up and give your life meaning and texture that is a huge part of what brings on nourishment and fulfillment, and really what makes life worth living, so that's the gift. The curse is that when we find these things, it's really easy to become super obsessive about them. And to throw everything else about our life on the back burner. Now, I don't believe in "balance". This is probably like a sin to say, "we're going to be healthy with podcast".

**Jen Fisher:** No, I don't believe in balance either, so I'm right there with you.

**Brad Stulberg:** So I'm on the same page, so I don't think the answer is to say, "hey we shouldn't be passionate. We shouldn't throw ourselves into these pursuits that we care deeply about." But I also don't think the answer is to say, "crush it bro. Go all in, build that company to hell with your family." I think the answer is to try to really cultivate a self-awareness of what matters to us, what our values are, and then call a spade a spade, say, "hey, these are the trade-offs that we're making. Or that I'm making that you're making and then constantly reevaluate them and take a more seasonal approach to life." So instead of trying to be everything for everyone always, there might be seasons of your life where you're really in family mode. There might be other seasons of your life where you're really in work mode. There might be a season of your life where you really want to run a marathon and you're in athlete mode. And as a result, when you're in athlete mode, hanging out with your friends might suffer a bit, but as long as you can name the trade-offs that you're making, so you don't get blindly swept into them, A, you won't have regrets and B, you can come back and reanalyze those trade-offs as you change throughout your life.

**Jen Fisher:** Yeah, I love that and I'm right there I don't like the word balance because I'm a very literal person and I'm also recovering perfectionist. So when you tell me I need to balance, I'm truly trying to find that 50-50 split or whatever it is that makes everything perfectly balanced. And that's just not, you

know, you can't ever get there. It's a myth. So you can absolutely say that as many times as you want on this podcast.

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, I mean, you're either a superhero or you're just like a bland person that truly has everything balanced. So I'm a big fan of trade-offs over balance, and I think boundaries are important and there's some nuance here, right? So to me, like you, I'm literal, balance means, like everything in equal proportion always, like you're literally balancing the scale of all the things in your life. Boundaries means that, "hey, the scale might be really weighted towards like getting my next book finished right now and there's a boundary which is at 7:00 PM. I got to shut it down and be with my family whether I want to or not." That's still not balanced necessarily.

**Jen Fisher:** Right, so let's continue to talk about the Passion Paradox, because I feel like the words passion, also the word purpose when we're talking about being literal right? Talk to me a little bit about passion and purpose and if you don't know what it is already, like, how do you know what your passion is?, right? how do you know, I mean, there's probably potentially some simple answers like your family or a hobby or time and community, but I have so many people that come to me and they're like "well, what if I don't know what my passion is? Or what if I don't know what my purpose is like? How do you coach people to go about discovering that?."

**Brad Stulberg:** Well, this is a good question. So I want to answer them a little bit separately. So we'll do passion first and then purpose. Because I think there's different answers here.

**Jen Fisher:** OK.

**Brad Stulberg:** So another like, really bad misunderstanding about passion is that it's something that you find. And you don't, you develop passion. And this is fascinating to me, right? Because I'm a nerd. I like the research, so this is true whether we're talking about romantic passion or passion in terms of deep caring about a craft. So 73% of people and I know this stat even though this book came out a couple of years ago, because man did it stick with me, 73% of people believe in a soul mate model of love, which says that there's one person out there in the universe that's the perfect person for you and you should find them and that will complete you. Guess? who is much less likely to be in a meaningful long term relationship. People who believe in a soul mate version of love. Now why is that? Because if your bar is perfect, then the minute something goes wrong or the minute something feels like it's just kind of going through the motions, you're going to say, "oh, I guess this person's not for me, I better try to find my one" And the same thing happens at work.

**Jen Fisher:** Anybody that's been in a relationship knows it doesn't work that way.

**Brad Stulberg:** Right, and the same thing happens at work though, so researchers have also looked at how this plays out and work. And they call it a fit theory mindset of work and then a development theory mindset. In a fit theory mindset, it says that "hey, there's a perfect job out there that are going to match my skills and I just need to try to find it." Whereas the development theory mindset says that "actually, the right fit between me and a job, it's going to come over time and I hope that I'm passionate about my job, not on day one, but on year 10" Now, this doesn't mean that if your skills don't align, or if you don't like the people that you should stay the same place for 10 years. Of course not, but what it does mean is that we shouldn't jump ship the minute something's not perfect or the minute everything is not clicking. Because no one can know what their passion is until we explore. So it's like a two-step

thing, right?. The first is go out, explore, be curious. And in those initial stages, don't be scared to switch things up frequently, but once you've found something that feels pretty good, then it's pretty important to be patient and dig in for long enough to develop the kind of passion that we crave from the get go. Does that make sense?.

**Jen Fisher:** Absolutely makes sense.

**Brad Stulberg:** OK, good.

**Jen Fisher:** Resonates with me. I love that you don't find your passion, you develop it, I might steal that.

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, and then another term because I know, well, I don't know, but my hunch is that this audience has probably read some of these books because they're really wonderful books in the business world, so the book 'Grit' by Angela Duckworth and then the book 'Range' by Dave Epstein. And when you put those two books together and I write about this in the practice of groundedness, oftentimes people think these books are like kind of arguing against each other. But I actually think that they work together and I've had the good fortune to talk to both Angela and Dave and they agree.

**Brad Stulberg:** So it's not that we should strive for what Dave calls fit, which means we should try a bunch of things and quit them until we find the thing that fits. That's kind of like trying to find your passion. It's a fool's errand. But it's also not to say that we should just put our head down and grit whatever we do, whether or not it's a good fit or not. But when you put the two together, what you get is first you want to focus on fit and then you want to focus on grit. So there's like a period where you're sampling and you're curious and you're trying different things and you're seeing what works and then you get a little bit deeper into one, and at that point it does make sense to switch to grit, or at least be gritty enough to see if the passion can come over time.

**Jen Fisher:** I love that, I love pairing the two of those together.

**Brad Stulberg:** You asked if my writings changed and I don't know if like the actual, like the tone and diction has changed, but this is the one idea that I've changed my mind about probably most in the last decade. So my first book Peak Performance purpose is a huge part of that. There's a whole section in the book called Purpose. And currently if you ask me, I think that I would have rewritten that section pretty much completely.

**Jen Fisher:** Interesting.

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, I don't think that we need to have a purpose.

**Jen Fisher:** OK, tell me more.

**Brad Stulberg:** Purpose comes and goes. So there are some days when I feel like I have a really strong purpose and everything is kind of falling into place and I know exactly what I'm here to do. And there are other days when it's just like you know "I just like want to get by today, like I want to make the coffee and drink it and get by". And that's OK too. And if you kind of think like, "oh, I need this purpose all the time," well, then what happens is you end up judging yourself when it's not there. So it's kind of like this too high bar, so the way that I think about it now is when you are feeling in alignment with your purpose, that's great, you should ride those waves. It feels really good, but when you're not, you shouldn't freak out or beat yourself up, or think that like, life is meaningless or you're a bad person. You

should just be like “hey, part of being a human is having these days, these weeks, maybe even these months or years, where I feel like I'm kind of wandering” and that's OK, that's totally normal. There's a reason that all the poems and all the poets, they kind of all go like from the Dante Alighieri tree, which is like I was lost in a dark wood. And that basically means, like I turned 40 and I didn't really know what my purpose was. And it's a universal thing that people experience. So I think that instead of needing to always have a purpose, it's better to just realize, “hey, you're a human, these things come and go.”

**Jen Fisher:** I can get on board with that and I was thinking where you were going with the poets is not all who wander or lost.

**Brad Stulberg:** Oh, that's it. See another good one.

**Jen Fisher:** Sometimes you just need to wander right?

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, but then there's such a fine line here because, it's another one of these non dual things. Like all truth is in paradox, right? So on the one hand, you could say, “yeah, that sounds really good” because man like “if you are kind of experiencing what I'd call like burnout or mild depression, you can sometimes feel like you don't really have much of a purpose.

**Brad Stulberg:** Well, you know, what will turn that burnout or mild depression into severe burnout or severe depression is judging yourself for not having a purpose.

**Jen Fisher:** And that's why I think what you said really resonates with me, because I think there's a lot of these things right? I mean, you talked about kind of the toxic positivity, right? There's a lot of things that we're being told we should do or should know or should be able to find and therefore, if we can't, there must be something wrong with us, right? Or if in that moment we aren't feeling it, we're not jiving. We're just like you said, we're human, right? And not every day, not every month, not every week is going to be a great one, and that's OK, because that's part of being human.

**Brad Stulberg:** Yes, and you drop the weight of needing to have everything figured out and clicking always. So by no means, am I saying like purpose is bad, Simon Sinek is wrong. I'm just saying that purpose comes and goes. And if we have the expectation that it's going to come and go, we'll be a lot less hard on ourselves during the rough periods and the fact that we're less hard on ourselves, we'll make those rough periods probably pass more swiftly.

**Jen Fisher:** Absolutely, yeah. It's just these standards that we feel like. I mean, and perhaps some of it is due to social media and our comparisons to everybody else is curated life, right?

**Brad Stulberg:** Yes

**Jen Fisher:** All right? So we're going to move to your third book now, “The Practice of Groundedness” and I will say it's my favorite. I hope that's OK to say.

**Brad Stulberg:** It is my favorite too. I think it's probably my best yet.

**Jen Fisher:** Yeah, so the third time is a charm. Is there a fourth in the works? in the plans? you don't know yet?

**Brad Stulberg:** No, there is, that's why I had to add, yeah, I don't want my publisher to get mad at me.

**Jen Fisher:** OK, there you go. Alright.

**Brad Stulberg:** But it's a good book. I don't know if I'll write that one.

**Jen Fisher:** It's a great.

**Brad Stulberg:** I'm pretty content and proud with that one. I never thought I'd say it. But yeah.

**Jen Fisher:** I have a dog eared and highlighted, so I would agree with that. Can you explain to us what groundedness is and why it's important?

**Brad Stulberg:** Groundedness works on two levels, so the first level is, if you imagine a big beautiful mountain and most people when they think of a big beautiful mountain, they think of its peak, soaring way above the clouds. And then perhaps if the mountain is really steep, they'll envision it's slope, really prominent. But very few people when you ask them to think about or even look at a real mountain out in the world, admire its base, or its foundation. Yet without a really solid foundation, that big beautiful peak wouldn't exist, neither would the slope. Anytime there'd be rough weather, the mountain would crumble. So there's this paradox that we spend so much time glancing up at that peak of the mountain, or admiring the slope, but we don't spend a lot of time admiring or thinking about the foundation. And we're very much the same in our own lives. So we love the bright and shiny objects and we love to talk about them and think about them and chase them. But oftentimes, doing so, we forget about our foundational attributes. But it's those foundational attributes that are most important in that any kind of success is going to emerge from. So one way to think about groundedness is prioritizing those foundational attributes, and never leaving them behind. The other way to think about groundedness is being very present in the process of whatever you are pursuing. So we'll use a metaphor of a mountain again, and this time, we'll throw in some climbers. So imagine that big beautiful steep mountain and you've got two climbers and they both really want to get to the top. And one of the climbers is constantly thinking about how when she just gets to the top, she'll be validated. She'll have self-work. She's got her selfie stick. She's going to publish the picture to Instagram. All of her friends and family are going to think highly of her because she made it to the top of the mountain, she'll have finally arrived. The other climber, she equally wants to get to the top, but she's really focused on being present for the journey. She's taking these small steps. She's enjoying the view from the side, and she's probably climbing with the team. So she's not thinking about "Oh, if I just arrive at the top, then I'll be content." She's like, "holy crap, this is awesome! I'm climbing a mountain, like maybe I'll make it, maybe I won't, but it's great that I'm climbing." And that second climber is much more grounded. So it's both about taking care of these foundational attributes and then being present in the process of striving for goals instead of obsessing about the outcomes of those goals.

**Jen Fisher:** And we've talked a little bit about that already. Is everybody's foundational attributes the same? Or are they different?

**Brad Stulberg:** I think that there are some that are probably pretty similar across the population, or I shouldn't say I think the research bears out that there are, and then there's also some variability. So we know that there are three psychological attributes and these are covered in the book that are super important. The first is the sense of mastery, so making progress at something where you can trace that progress back to yourself. In mastery, requires presence and patience. So you can't get by without presence and patience. The second is autonomy or self-efficacy, self-confidence, having some sense of control over how you spend your time and energy. That's also super important. The third is community. So what we know is that going at it alone is not as enjoyable as doing something as part of a team or a

community. And it's not as sustainable because we all have rough times and we all succeed and community helps us in both of those situations, because when we succeed, community provides gravity so that our heads don't get too big. And when we fail, community provides a cushion to help us bounce back.

**Jen Fisher:** I think you touched on one of the principles already from the practice of groundedness and we talked about some of the principles from your other books as well. Are there and I don't know if we get, maybe we covered three of them, but are there, they're six that you talked about specifically in the practice of groundedness. I don't know if we have time to cover all of them. But do you have a top two.

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, I'll go through them in quick succession. So the first is acceptance. So accept where you are to get where you want to go. And this is all about being able to see your situation clearly, and it doesn't mean you have to like it. It also doesn't mean that you need to resign to it, but you need to see it clearly, you need to see it for what it is. Because, if you can't see your situation clearly, well, then whatever you're working on isn't the real problem, and you probably won't make much lasting progress. The second principle is to be present to own your energy and attention, so this is about really being on the side of the mountain climbing, when you're on the side of the mountain climbing, not thinking ahead or thinking behind. The third principle is patience, which is about giving things the time and space they need to unfold. The fourth principle is vulnerability, so this is about being real with yourself and with other people. Brene Brown has written so beautifully about the benefits of vulnerability for building relationships, and she's done so much great research on this. What I try to add to her great work and groundedness is also the benefits of building vulnerability to trust yourself. So it's not just about building trust with other people, but if you can be vulnerable with yourself, well, then you know all of yourself. And when you know all of yourself, you can come to trust all of yourself. So it's this paradox that by being vulnerable and by being willing to explore our so-called weaknesses, we actually get stronger. The 5th principle is deep community, which I touched on and I define deep community is both in real life connection and then also a feeling of belonging to something that is meaningful and that is beyond yourself. And the 6th principle is 'move your body to ground your mind' and you can probably sense that, "hey, these first five are like really foundational, psychological, cognitive, even spiritual qualities" and then you're like, "move your body" and this was a conversation that I had with my editor, but it would be intellectually dishonest not to include it, because the benefits of movement are so widespread across all those other principles that it just has to be in there.

**Jen Fisher:** Yeah, I completely agree with that and I suspect that many or boast if not all listening today are probably nodding their head at all of those principles, but and there's always a but right? It's one thing to acknowledge and agree with those principles, but how do we actually cultivate a daily practice of groundedness around these principles so that we can establish firm ground?.

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, well, it's a good question because it's like you said there's a difference between intellectually knowing something and then like actually doing it day-to-day. The first thing is, it's a practice. There's a reason that the book is called the 'Practice of Groundedness' not get grounded. So if I shoot 60% on these things, it's a good week. How to actually practice it? Well, I don't want to sound too salesy and I'm happy to go through as many of these practices as you want, but in the book there are like very concrete practices. So for instance, we'll talk about acceptance. So the seeing the world clearly, one of the practices there is around this notion of self-distancing. So when we get caught up in a really charged emotional situation, it's so easy to fuse with it, so we become the situation. It's like the

difference between watching a horror movie and being in a horror movie. And when you're watching a horror movie, you've got a little bit of separation between yourself and what's happening. And in that space you can make wise, thoughtful decisions. So how do we create that in our own lives? Self-distancing says that you literally create some distance between yourself and your experience. And two ways to do this that I talk about in the book are to pretend and visualize that a close friend is in the same situation that you're in, and then give advice to that friend. The other way is to envision yourself 10, 20 maybe even 30 years down the road. So a wiser, more compassionate, smarter version of yourself looking back on current you, what would that older version of yourself to your current self to do? And both of these are just little psychology genie tricks that help you create a little bit of distance between your experience and your awareness of it so that you can see it clearly.

**Jen Fisher:** Yeah, I love that and those are great tricks. I definitely use them especially, 'what would you tell a friend?.'

**Brad Stulberg:** And then the vulnerability one I'll give here too, because there's such a wonderful story in this chapter from one of my coaching clients, so I think it's a really important topic now because we are bringing more and more of our whole selves to work. And while on balance, I think that's great. I think we run the risk of work becoming like group therapy, which it's not supposed to be. And a lot of managers don't have the skills to facilitate group therapy. They're not clinical psychologists, they're managers, probably MBAs, those are different skill sets. But it is good to be able to show up to work authentically. So in a work context, the question I often get, especially from leaders is, "well, how do I be vulnerable if what I want to say, I can't say". And the example I give is I was once working with a client who was just promoted to the C-Suite of an enormous fortune 100 company, like over 45,000 people, offices across the world and she had really bad impostor syndrome. She called herself the accidental executive, like she didn't want to be an executive. She had worked at this company since she was 22 and she just kept on performing well and getting promoted, and suddenly she's in the C-Suite. Now, added to that, she was the only woman on the executive floor and the only person of color. So she called herself endearingly, 'The Double Only,' not my nickname for her, of course, but that's what she called herself. So she had all these nicknames. She's the 'Double Only, she's an accidental executive and she's in a job where her main role is to go on the roadshow and socialize the new company strategy across the globe. And she came to me saying that I would get on those stages and I would be so nervous and I'd feel such bad impostor syndrome. And I said, "well, if you could say what you really wanted to say, what would you say? And I'm going to call her Debbie. That's what I call her in the book. That's not her real name. So Debbie told me what I'd actually say, Brad is holy crap. What am I doing here? I am so in over my head and overwhelmed. And I said 'well, you're a publicly traded company. You probably shouldn't say that. But let's play with this. What could you say that's close to that? And we workshopped this for a bit and what we came out is something close to, "Hey, I am so thrilled to be with you all, and I'd be lying if I said that I had all this figured out. This is an enormous role that I was just promoted into, and of course it feels overwhelming at times, but I'm going to give it my best shot and that's why I need all of you to engage in these core values and to engage in this strategy because we've got to build this together. What she told me is just by saying that she was overwhelmed, immediately, her shoulders straight and she became more comfortable on the stage. Now, what's fascinating is in the survey feedback from these big talks, ever since she started opening her talks with this vulnerability, more people rated the talks as more engaging and at the end of the year, this company did a whole big

feedback, like a formal feedback, they hired consultants to do feedback on their executives. She was rated by far the most likable and relatable of all the executives.

**Jen Fisher:** Because she humanized herself.

**Brad Stulberg:** Because she humanized herself and she did it in an authentic way, right? She didn't say like what would Brene Brown tell me to say. She was honest. She's like "I'm freaking overwhelmed." But if I say that, her share price is going to drop. So it's like, well, how do we get as close to saying that as possible that doesn't put the business at risk. And I can tell you that none of these dudes in their suits with their red ties were saying the same thing. Yet it was her, that people liked and her that people came to.

**Jen Fisher:** Yeah, and a great note to end on because that's a I think a really powerful story and something that many of us can learn from myself included. Although I try to be vulnerable and authentic at the same time.

**Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, and it's such a simple cue, because I wanted be, you ask for practice. I want to be really concrete for listeners. It's just when you cut yourself feeling like you're performing or like you're not saying what you actually want to say, just pause and say what do I really want to say? And how can I say something as close to that as possible?

**Jen Fisher:**

I love it. All right Brad. Well, as I expected such a great conversation, so full of wisdom and great things for our listeners to think about. There were no hacks, just what works. I love that, so thanks for being on the show. It was a great time talking to you today.

**Brad Stulberg:** Thanks so much for having me Jen. I'm a big fan of yours as well, so the feelings are mutual.

**Jen Fisher:** I'm so grateful, Brad could be with us today to talk about performance and well-being. Thank you to our producers Rivet 360 and our listeners. You can find the WorkWell podcast series on [deloitte.com](https://deloitte.com) or you can visit various podcatchers using the keyword 'WorkWell' all one word to hear more. And if you like the show, don't forget to subscribe, so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you'd like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series, or maybe a story you would like to share, please reach out to me on LinkedIn. My profile is under the name Jen Fisher or on Twitter at Jen Fish 23. We're always open to your recommendations and feedback. And of course, if you like what you hear, please share, post and like this podcast. Thank you and be well.

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