

THE AWESOME

Break Free from Daily Burnout,

HUMAN

Struggle Less, and Thrive More

PROJECT

in Work and Life

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CHAPTER 1

My Story

Hi, I'm Nataly, and for most of my life, struggle was my religion.

Yes, you read that right. I'm proud to be introduced at conferences as one of the leading experts on emotional fitness. I've successfully taught the skills in this book to tens of thousands of people, teams, and leaders. Yet I used to completely ignore my mental health and emotional fitness. I believed that doing anything meaningful in life had to involve struggle.

Got something done at work? My brain would tell me how I should have done it faster and better and, oh, how I didn't get nearly enough done.

Played with my daughter? My brain was ready with how I wasn't focused on her enough or spending enough time with her and how guilty I should feel for not balancing work and family.

The hotel gave us the wrong room? My brain had me spinning into a full-on stress cyclone in seconds: *This always happens to me; no one knows how to do their jobs well; this whole vacation is ruined! Wait, can I blame my husband for this?*

It was exhausting to live this way, but my only response was to work harder, do more, and try to achieve my way out of the

struggle somehow. It was what I knew. Coming to the United States with my parents as refugees from Russia when I was thirteen years old taught me that anything worthwhile was on the other side of struggle—achievement, fulfillment, happiness, success, becoming a US citizen, being a good human being.

I was a teenager who didn't speak English and didn't have a clue about how to navigate school. My parents couldn't offer any guidance. I felt lost, and I hung on to the only thing I knew how to do: work really, really hard. And working really hard helped! I learned to speak English without an accent, graduated with every conceivable honor from Wesleyan University, had a series of high-level, impressive jobs at companies like McKinsey and Microsoft, and became a managing director in a venture capital firm at the age of twenty-six (an industry with less than 6 percent women). I also started and was part of the senior team at five startups, some more successful than others.

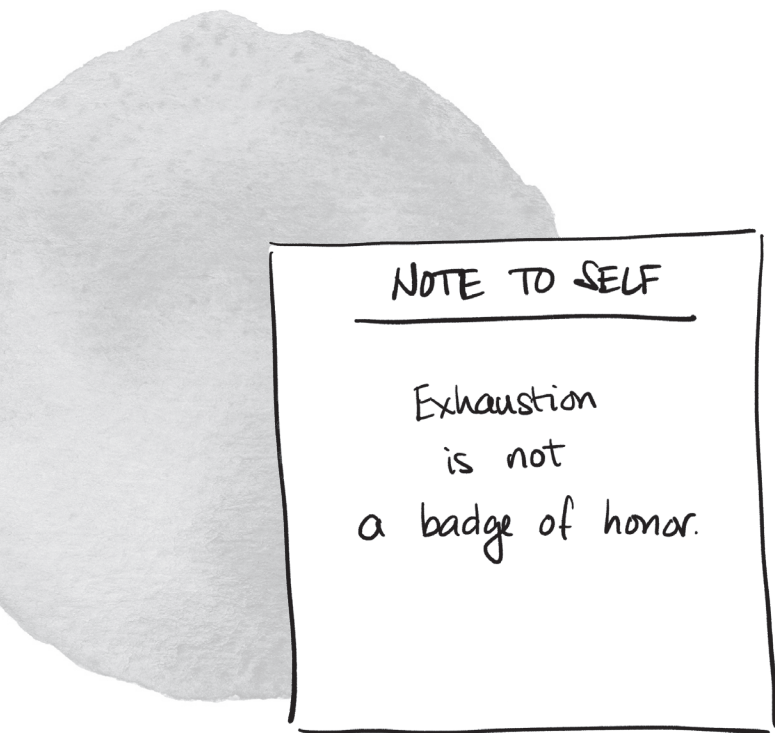
I did all of this by the time I was thirty-five years old.

Somewhere in there I also married Avi, my college sweetheart, and we had a beautiful daughter, Mia. I loved being able to take care of my family in all ways, including financially, because I was the majority breadwinner for many years.

But all of this success and chronic overachievement came at a huge cost and always with struggle.

I was overwhelmed and exhausted all the time, denying myself most emotional and physical nourishment, like sleep or even rest. My mind kept a running list of all the mistakes I was making as a leader, mom, daughter, wife, friend—and I berated myself nonstop. My inner critic was in constant overdrive. Many days I had a heavy sense of dread—an ominous feeling that I was on the edge of burnout—but I didn't know how to change. Although there were many wonderful moments, comforts, and people in my life, I was so disconnected from my daily experience and *my own feelings* that I wasn't actually enjoying very many of them.

Somehow, the idea of investing time or energy in my own well-being felt indulgent, weak, and frankly like a waste of time. Phrases like *self-care* made me cringe! I wore my exhaustion and stress like badges of honor.



The fact was, I had no role models for what success without this level of self-sacrifice looked like. I wasn't reading in the press about leaders taking breaks at work or practicing self-care and self-compassion. Instead, I was reading about Tesla CEO Elon Musk, who slept four hours a night and ran five companies while sending emails from his kids' soccer games, and Marissa Mayer, then CEO of Yahoo, who put a nursery next to her office so she could work longer hours without having to go home to see her daughter.

It always felt like I was expected to change into my work identity and check all that touchy-feely emotional stuff at the door. I did it gladly because I had no idea how to deal with my emotions anyway.

Yet I felt terrible. I remember one morning feeling like my body weighed a thousand pounds, and I could hardly move. I felt that way for a week, still trying to stick to my normal routine of work, taking care of my daughter, and going to the gym, until one day I literally couldn't lift a two-pound weight. My friend, a physician, encouraged me to make an appointment with a functional medicine doctor. I had no idea what that meant, but I did it, reluctantly.

The doctor I went to see asked me a bunch of questions, mostly about my lifestyle, my work habits, how much I slept, and what I did to refuel myself. I'd hoped he would just take some blood samples and tell me I had a weird infection easily cured with antibiotics. He didn't. After about twenty minutes, he paused and told me that he knew what was wrong with me. He said that he had many patients like me: people who work nonstop, treat themselves like a machine they expect to operate 24/7, and achieve a lot of success doing that for a time. But then they find that their ability to get work done begins to deteriorate, their deals aren't going the way they want, and they start having problems at work and at home. Around forty years old, if they don't change their lifestyle and make their emotional and mental health a priority, they burn out. He was convinced this was the path I was on unless I was willing to make some changes in my lifestyle.

I was thirty-four at the time. As the doctor talked, I remember thinking I would never be one of *those* people, whose work suffered or who burned out. They were weak! I was a force of nature.

Oh, how great our minds can be at creating an alternate reality! By this point, I already had a hard time making clear decisions at work and remember being surprised at

how often I would get completely stuck in a spin cycle of conflicting thoughts. I'd started to lack confidence during presentations—to investors, partners, my team—which felt disheartening because I've always been comfortable with public speaking. I had fewer and fewer days when I felt anywhere near on top of things or that I was doing a good job.

My capacity to work was suffering in every way, as was my ability to function at home. I was going through the motions as best I could but feeling more and more disconnected from my husband and daughter. I hated waking up in the morning to face another day. Yet I refused to pause long enough to be honest with myself. **I didn't have the courage to look within myself or to even consider that there could be another way to live and work.**

So, I dismissed the doctor's words, even though he did a bunch of tests and found that I had severe adrenal deficiency caused by chronic stress. Because I was so exhausted, I had no choice but to get more sleep than my usual four to five hours a night for the next few weeks, which helped the worst symptoms subside. I was in the clear, I proudly thought. The doom-and-gloom scenario the doctor had talked about was for people who clearly weren't as tough as I was. The doctor was wrong about me.

And I was right: He was wrong about me. My burnout came at thirty-eight, not forty. I overachieved in that, too.

It took being at risk of losing everything meaningful to me—including my company, my team, my marriage, and my family—to hear the wake-up call.

As painful as it was to admit this to myself, it turned out that the very things I'd always rejected as having nothing to do with my ability to be a great leader, entrepreneur, mom, wife, and human were essential to it: things like learning how to rest before I became exhausted, reacting to mistakes with self-compassion rather than harshness, embracing

challenging emotions rather than stuffing them down, and recognizing that sometimes things were outside my control and I could choose not to waste my energy flipping out about how they “should be.” (For the record: this is all still a work in progress and part of my Awesome Human Project, just as it will be part of yours.)

But it’s not like I realized all this overnight. No way! Even as I was losing my grip on everything in my life, I was resisting making any changes. **I’d gotten used to living with a high degree of emotional pain and convinced myself that I could just keep going the way I was.**

There’s a parallel between chronic emotional pain and chronic physical pain. About ten years ago, I started to feel a sharp, shooting pain in both of my heels. It would come and go, and it wasn’t terrible, so I just ignored it.

The sharp, shooting pain got worse and worse, especially because I take a five-mile walk every day. There were mornings when I got out of bed and shrieked and thought I would faint. I’d diagnosed myself with plantar fasciitis (thanks, Google!), but I figured somehow it would just go away.

And then one day, the pain was so bad that I cried. I couldn’t walk, and it wouldn’t go away even when I didn’t put any pressure on my feet. I couldn’t play with my daughter, go to work, or stand in the kitchen to make dinner. My husband finally convinced me to go to a doctor, who was surprised when I told him that I’d had severe pain for years.

I remember what I said: “I’m used to pain, so I just got used to it. Also, I’m really busy, so I just didn’t have the time.”

If you want to call me nuts for saying I was too busy to do something about such intense pain, go ahead, but sadly, I’m not unique. I had been experiencing daily burnout for years, and even though I felt the emotional strain of it, I refused to do anything about it until one day the pain became so unbearable, I was forced to confront it.

There's a reason courage is one of the five Awesome Human Qualities you'll be developing: making the choice to look within myself and change my relationship with my thoughts and my emotions was one of the hardest things I've ever done.

I had to drop the story I'd made up about who I was: a hard-working force of nature, an overachiever who was meant to always struggle and could tolerate the emotional pain a meaningful life required. Our stories become our shields, so putting them down requires courage.

It was also hard because I had no idea what to do next. Making the choice to reduce struggle and improve your emotional fitness is a huge step, but it doesn't show you the path. So I read books and research from every discipline you can imagine—including psychology, neuroscience, spirituality, and behavioral economics—and created exercises to put what I learned into practice. I began to work with a woman who became my spiritual teacher, even though just a few months earlier I'd rejected spirituality as "that thing people who can't hack it in real life resort to."

It took time, courage, and more supportive self-talk than I'd ever heard from myself in my entire life, but slowly, I was climbing out of the darkness. The process was messy, sometimes painful, sometimes joyful, and often sideways before I felt I was moving forward. But the more I practiced, the more courage I felt to keep going, to embrace my inner Awesome Human fully and with care.

I used the method I'm going to teach you, the Happier Method™, to climb out of the darkest, most hopeless place I've ever been onto a path where I experience less struggle in my daily experience. Also, my capacity to positively impact other people has expanded in ways I could never have imagined.

I always thought that to focus on my emotional well-being, I'd have to trade off achievement, success, getting stuff done, and taking care of other people. I couldn't have been

NOTE TO SELF

You don't need
to choose between
emotional well-being
and success.

more wrong. Improving my emotional fitness has made me better in every way—as a creator, author, entrepreneur, speaker, leader, mom, wife, friend, daughter, and human. I can't tell you how amazing it feels to be a light in the lives of others rather than heavy energy, which is what I used to bring so often to the people I loved the most.

I wrote this book to help you reduce struggle and emotional pain *before* they become unbearable and you burn out. I want to catch you before you fall and teach you the mindset shifts, skills, and practices to strengthen your emotional fitness so you can struggle less and live with more meaning, ease, and joy. I want to help you use these skills to embrace your inner Awesome Human. And if you are in that dark place or stuck in a cycle of daily burnout, I promise you that doing this project can help you find your way out of it.

This is my commitment to you.

CHAPTER 2

The (Updated!) Happier Method™

Now that you know a bit about me and why I am so passionate about sharing with you what I've learned, I want to give you a super-quick overview of the Happier Method™, which is at the foundation of your Awesome Human Project. I created this method to help myself heal from my burnout, although at the time, I had no idea I was creating a method, much less that I would eventually teach it to tens of thousands of people. But I'm so grateful that what I learned from my own challenges—and a lot of research—can help so many others, including you!

The Happier Method™ is based on three core principles:

1. Challenge is constant. Struggle is optional.

Big or small, challenges are an inevitable part of life. Although you can't control what or when challenges come your way, you can learn to struggle less through them. And when you struggle less, you have more energy, clarity, and capacity to work through them, help other people, and not just survive but thrive. Yep, even when times are really difficult!

How do you struggle less? By creating a more supportive relationship with yourself, your thoughts and emotions, and other people (a.k.a. strengthening your emotional fitness), which brings me to the second principle of the Happier Method™.

2. Emotional fitness is a SKILL you can improve through practice.

Emotional fitness is not something lucky people have and unlucky ones don't. It's not a quality bestowed on us by our genes or life circumstances.

It's a skill you can develop, cultivate, and improve.

Just as you can develop your physical fitness, you can develop your emotional fitness. But instead of your body, you're training your brain—to help you navigate the roller coaster of life instead of causing you to struggle with all kinds of unhelpful thoughts.

And just so we're clear from the start: Improving your emotional fitness is not about becoming tough or never having difficult feelings! Trying to “always be positive” only increases stress and anxiety. A key emotional fitness skill you'll be mastering during your Awesome Human Project is learning how to embrace the full range of human emotions, including the difficult and uncomfortable ones, and support yourself to work through them with less struggle.

3. Small changes = big impact.

You don't need to make dramatic life changes to struggle less and thrive more. You don't need to put that kind of pressure on yourself because overcommitting only sets you up for failure. When we're tired or stressed, our brain simply can't give us the discipline to make huge changes.

Small shifts in mindset and in how you respond to your brain's thoughts and emotions—including during your interactions with other people—can make a huge difference.