



Episode 456: Rian Doris on Harnessing Flow States for Accelerated Learning and Peak Performance

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Katie: Hello, and welcome to the "Wellness Mama" podcast. I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com and wellnesse.com. That's Wellnesse with an E on the end. It's my personal care line. This podcast is all about flow states. You know that feeling when everything just lines up and you're able to get a ton of work done or you're in intense creativity or maybe a sport or physical activity and you're just in the zone? That's what we're talking about today. And it's called flow states in a lot of research. I'm here with Rian Doris, who is the co-founder and CEO of the Flow Research Collective. They've done a lot of work on researching the neurobiology and the chemistry of what's happening in these states and then also applying that research to people in various walks of life to make people more effective at the things that they're doing, especially in a work capacity.

But we take a really fun deviation into the educational side of this and how we as parents can help nurture our kids into having a high-performance mindset and a solid foundation for life using things like flow states and how kids are naturally even better about this than we are so we can learn from them due to some really cool research about their prefrontal cortex and their ability to drop into flow states. It's a fascinating episode that takes a lot of really interesting twists and turns. So, let's join Rian. Rian, welcome to the podcast.

Rian: Thank you for having me, Katie. It's a pleasure to be here.

Katie: Well, I'm excited to go deep on the topic of flow, and especially applying this to ourselves and our families. But before we get to that, I have a research note that you ate the same thing for two years, and I have to hear this story.

Rian: That's good. That's good research. Yes, I love routines, personally. I love being very consistent. And I love automating things that I don't care that much about, me personally, at least. And one of those things is food. I'm not necessarily a foodie. So, I, for one intensive work period, over two years, just standardize exactly what I ate, and managed to stick to it for a fairly long period of time to free up headspace, and time, and energy to be able to do the things that I cared more about, and also the daily routine I had, the diet I was sticking to was delicious. So, it wasn't too hard.

Katie: What were you eating? That's fascinating.

Rian: If you really want me to give you the breakdown, I'm happy but it was...So I was on a keto diet, which makes it important to be consistent because they're crazy strict. Every day, I would eat two packets of nuts, cashews, and almonds. I would eat 500 grams of minced beef, grass-fed Irish minced beef, two avocados, six eggs, a bar of 85% dark chocolate, and a little bit of fried broccoli, and some greens. That was pretty much it daily, one meal a day for two years. So, that was the routine.

Katie: Wow, that's impressive to stick to it for that long, fascinating. So this episode is about the topic of flow, which I've touched on before with Steven Kotler, who we talked about briefly before we jumped in. I really, really love him and his work. And I know that you guys work together on the flow collective. And I'm excited to go deep on this because I think there's so many springboard from my first conversation with him, which I'll link to, if you guys haven't heard it. But to start broad, can you, kind of, just give us an overview of when we say the word flow, what we mean?

Rian: Sure. Yeah, always helpful to define it. So most people know of flow as being in the zone. When you hear someone say that, yeah, I managed to get into the zone at work today or I was out biking and, you know, I got into state, or I got into a groove, generally they're referring to getting into a flow state. And it's more technically defined as an optimal set of consciousness where we feel our best and we perform our best. And then the descriptive definition is that flow occurs when action and awareness merge, time dilates. So, often, minutes go by in what feels like a longer period of time. And then long periods of time go by in what feels like moments. So, you spend three hours in an afternoon writing, for example, and you look up, check the time, and it feels like you've only been writing for a few minutes. So that's, sort of, flow state is the state of optimal performance and total immersion in the task at hand.

Katie: Are there differences happening neurobiologically when we're talking about a flow state? I mean, certainly, I've had that experience and felt that difference in mindset, and focus, and being able to work but are there actual physiological changes happening as well?

Rian: Yeah, it's a great question. One of the questions that we get quite a lot is, what's the difference between flow and focus? Isn't focus, you know, just the same thing, what's actually the difference? And the difference is that first off, flow often occurs after a period of uninterrupted focus. So the way that I like to describe it is that attention involves directing your awareness to a specific focal point. When you hold that attention for an extended period of time, we call that focus. And often, when you persistently focus, you're able to shift state and get into what we call flow state. So it kind of goes attention, focus, flow. And there are a number of physiological shifts that are distinct between a flow state and just being focused on something without being in flow.

And those shifts occur across our neurochemistry. So there's different neurochemistry that shows up. Those shifts are measurable from a neuroelectric perspective. So there's a shift in, sort of, our brainwave state. And then those shifts are also apparent in terms of experience, in terms of what it actually qualitatively feels like versus just simply being focused. So, for example, the time dilation that I mentioned. Neurochemically, we believe at least the research is largely out, we believe that anandamide, dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, and norepinephrine are all present during flow state. And that is distinct from the normal state of focus, so to speak.

Katie: And I know you guys have done a lot of research on some of these parts of understanding what's happening in a flow state and also in the practical application of how this affects our lives. And I think that's a really important point to delve into because I would guess most people listening have had the experience of that timeless flow state where everything is just clicking into place and you totally lose track of time. I've had it happen with writing. I've had it happen with art and creative pursuits and also with, like, really fun, physical activities. But it also seems like I think a lot of us would maybe say we've had that experience but it's kind of elusive. It's not something we can just kind of find or turn on at will. And I think you guys have done some interesting research around this area as well. Is that right?

Rian: Yes, not necessarily research but I would say our primary focus as a company, as an organization, at least from a training perspective, is in helping people take this elusive, sporadic state that has immense benefits to it that we all know of and have experienced and want more of and turn it into something that is accessible with consistency and on-demand and in a way that we can actually or predict at least as much as possible so that the goal is to take flow from being this elusive thing that sometimes shows up to making it a consistent thing that we can drive ourselves into so that we can get sustained peak performance. And so, the optimal performance and flow is not a matter of luck or chance, but rather a matter of circumstance. And one of the things that's important to clarify is that accessing flow like this is not mechanistic. It's probabilistic. So, people often ask, what's the push-button thing I need to do to drop into flow right now or be able to drop into flow all

the time? And it's not, unfortunately, quite as simple as that. Rather, it's probabilistic, there are stacks of things you can do that are gonna greatly improve your likelihood of accessing flow, but it's never going to be 100% consistent.

Katie: That makes sense. And an important distinction, although it does seem in conversations I've had with really elite performers, whether that be high-level athletes or elite performers in other realms, they do seem to have developed the ability to do that more often or somewhat more reliably, I guess it makes sense not completely at will. But what are some of the factors that come into play there?

Rian: Well, that's just a really important point in and of itself. And that's the fundamental paradigm shift, which is that getting into a flow state is, in and of itself, a skill set that you can get better at. People often think of skills and it's very apparent that you can get better at a certain skill. People know that if they practice learning a language, they'll get better, or if they practice surfing, they'll get better, or X, Y, or Z. But often, we don't realize that the actual state that sits underneath these skills is also something that we can actually get better at manufacturing for ourselves. We actually were interviewing, myself and Steven, we're interviewing Laird Hamilton, the big wave surfer last week. And he was talking about the fact that over his career, his ability to drive himself into the zone with consistency has constantly improved. And he can get himself into that state very, very rapidly now. So there's definitely the ability, I think, to improve one's own skill at driving themselves into a state of optimal performance. And there's a number of different factors to that.

The first is understanding what triggers exist for flow, in general, for all people. And we can talk about those a little bit. And then the second thing is gonna be individualistic. We often talk about running n to 1 experiments, or running experiments where, you know, you are the only one where that may apply to. And that's a really important piece of it as well is knowing your own individual quirks, the things that you need to have in place as an individual to be able to get into the zone. So it's both understanding what works for everyone and then understanding what works for you and finding a nice balance between those.

Katie: That makes a lot of sense. And I see it a lot in relation to the more physical aspects of nutrition and health too is everything is a guideline because we're so individualized that at the end of the day, I think that the n equals 1 experiments get discounted. But for each of us individually, those are the most important ones because it doesn't actually matter what the collective research says if something does or doesn't work for you. And so I'm a big proponent of personalization in every area of health and makes complete sense that that would apply very directly here as well.

You mentioned triggers. Let's delve into some of those because I would guess maybe, for instance, like Steven wrote about, I believe it was "The Rise of Superman," about extreme athletes being able to do this more reliably. So I would wonder if there's maybe an adrenaline component or something going on there. But I would guess that most people on a daily basis aren't gonna wanna use adrenaline and extreme sports as their triggers. So let's talk about triggers and how we can start to identify those.

Rian: Sure. Yeah. So the first thing to note is that flow states do have triggers, which are preconditions, that are going to increase the likelihood that we'll be able to get into a flow state. And there are a number of different categories of triggers. There are environmental triggers. There are psychological triggers. There's group triggers that show up when we're interacting with others. Now, what's interesting about extreme athletes and certain sports, you mentioned, for example, that you get into flow when engaged in creative activities, often. What's interesting about certain activities is that they naturally or inherently have lots of flow triggers baked into them, which means that getting into flow, doing those activities alone is much more likely. And an example of that is surfing. Just to take an example of an extreme sport. So, within surfing, there is complexity. There's unpredictability. There's risk. There's challenge. There's feedback because you're either, you know, surfing the wave or you're not, you know how well you're doing at any given point.

And similarly, with creative activities, you see a lot of those sorts of variables show up within the activity itself, which makes those activities inherently very conducive to the flow. But what we can also do is identify the triggers that show up in those activities and then take them out of those activities and put them into activities that tend to be less naturally conducive to flow, which for a lot of people is the case with their work. So it's one of the things we help people do is take those triggers out of certain activities and embed them in activities that they don't naturally show up in. And one example that's a big trigger for flow is the challenge skills balance, which you may have heard of before, which is the idea that flow shows up at the sweet spot between challenge and skill within an activity.

So, we wanna be engaged in an activity that is causing us to stretch, but not snap. And if the activity is too difficult relative to our skill level, we'll get propelled into a state of over-arousal and anxiety. If the activity is not difficult enough relative to our skill level, we'll drop down into a state of under-stimulation and boredom. And flow sits right at the sweet spot between challenge and skill level where the challenge level just slightly outstrips your existing skill level. So that's one example of a trigger flow that we can actually use within any activity, really. You can gauge and tune the challenge skill balance within any activity.

One of the ways that we have our clients do that within their work is by using time. If you allot yourself more time to a certain task, that task within the context of which you're completing it becomes easier because you've got more resources with which to complete that task. You've got more time to do it. On the contrary, if you've got a really boring, mundane activity, giving yourself an artificial sense of urgency and reducing the time allotment that you're giving yourself to do that thing, it's gonna increase the challenge level, which can be helpful for getting to flow if the activity you're doing is boring, like doing your taxes or something like that.

Katie: Got it. So that would apply to any activity, not just physical activities. You could apply this in, for instance, maybe school settings for kids, work settings for adults. And it really sounds like any task that you would complete.

Rian: Yeah, interestingly, in school settings, I mean, I think one of the challenges with education and one of the reasons that a low student-to-teacher ratio is always the goal and is always appealing is so that the teacher can tune the challenge skill level to have it be optimal because if you've got 1 teacher and 40 students, and they all have differing skill or ability levels, with respect to a certain task or topic, a lot of them are going to be finding the material that they're covering either too hard or too easy and they're not gonna be in that sweet spot for flow whereas when you've got as close to possible as a 1-to-1 teacher-to-student ratio, the teacher can play the role of helping the student get that optimal challenge skills balance by going at a certain pace, for example, that is good for the student to be able to keep up with, and thus more conducive to flow.

Katie: So, there's a lot of homeschooling families that listen to this podcast as well. I homeschool my kids, and I'm intensively working right now on something called Unstitute, which is essentially an uncurriculum.

Rian: Nice.

Katie: ...but focus very much on the mindset and the practical application and minimizing the bookwork as much as possible. And so, I'm really curious, like are there special ways when we have that much control over the educational environment? Both the physical environment that we're educating in and the time constraints related to it, what are some of the ways that we could best set up education to really help maximize that for our kids?

Rian: Yeah, it's a great question. I was actually listening to an interview with Elon Musk, earlier this week, and he was saying, "Why is education, why is learning not more entertaining for kids than a video game?" And I think it's a great question. You know, why is doing calculus not more fun than playing "Fortnite?" And it should be because it matters more to those kids' lives than playing "Fortnite," but we just haven't got there yet with education. The reason of playing "Fortnite" or whatever video game it is, is more fun generally, is because it is creating a flow state. It's creating flow states that is inherently pleasurable, and engaging, and meaningful, and is an end in and of itself, whereas doing calculus often is very far from that. But in terms of what can help drive flow within education, one of the big things is autonomy. So, we pay attention to those things that we care about and that we choose to pay attention to. And if we don't have the autonomy to choose what we're learning about or looking at, then our ability to pay attention declines.

Another important thing is having, and this is related to autonomy, but it's going macro to micro. So often when you start a topic with a macro perspective, a big broad perspective, like, let's say, the context is trying to build a business related to something, you know, you're immensely passionate about. Then from within that macro context dropping down to more micro-specific things like learning about, you know, how to do accounting, all of a sudden, that gets infused with meaning, and with purpose, and with significance because of the fact that it is a means to a greater end. And that's an important thing, just in education, in general, I think it's creating these macro contexts, whether it's using stories or projects or challenges, and then having

the more dull things be a means to that end, rather than an end in itself. And the conventional education system, I think, in many ways, at least, when I was in school just did a horrendous job of that. They throw trigonometry at you, rather than telling you to build a bridge project, for example. And then you have to learn trigonometry as part of that fun overarching project. So I think that's another important piece.

Katie: Yeah, and I wonder if...have you guys found any information about if kids are naturally a little bit better at triggering these states if given these tools? Because it seems like kids do have a unique ability, especially when I watch my really younger ones, to drop into that kind of time dilation idea and, like, immerse in a project. And it seems like they can stay in that balance state for a lot longer when they're given enough tools and stimulation to get into that fun part of it. Are kids...because of their maybe higher theta and developing brain chemistry, are they able to do this more easily?

Rian: Yeah, it's a great question. So, interestingly, one of the things we believe happens in a flow state is called transient hypofrontality, which essentially refers to the slight deactivation or down-regulation of the prefrontal cortex. And that's what creates the reduction in sense of self where, you know, you lose yourself in the activity and also the time dilation that you mentioned. And kids, by default of sheer, you know, development of their biology have less developed prefrontal cortexes. And so, they are actually closer at a baseline level to a flow state all the time, which is one of the reasons I think that kids engage in play. And play is very, very much related to flow.

One of the interesting things about play...the definition of play is really interesting. And one of the key things about the definition of play is that it is not goal-oriented. And flow, one of the cool things about flow is that it is reporting the research to be worthwhile as an end in itself. The state itself feels good enough to be its own reward. We don't need to get into flow just to produce some other result. We wanna get into flow just because, and it's similar with play. Play is fun just because, it's not necessarily just about achieving some, you know, end result goal.

Katie: In that sense, are there elements of play that...? Because I think that's a thing that kids are naturally given more space and freedom and encouraged to do and that's the thing that's often lost as we get older. And you were saying I wonder is play a useful trigger and is that also an element of why these sports make it potentially easier to fall into a flow state?

Rian: I think so. Yeah, I think so for sure. And yeah, one of the interesting things about play, and about kids in general, is that inherently within play there is not that much self-judgment and the level of self-criticism declines. And that's one of the reasons we believe that creativity increases flow because when you're in a flow state, that sense of self, the nagging, defeatist inner dialogue, that's telling you not good enough and comparing you to others, that quiets down and goes offline because of transient hypofrontality. And so we're less critical of ourselves, which is assumed to open up creative possibility because we judge less and do more or play more. So, I think for sure, that's one of the drivers of flow and creativity within flow.

Katie: Is incorporating more play a thing that you actively encourage adults to do until, like, reinvigorate as well? And if so, what would be some, kind of, springboards for getting back to that, for those of us who have, kind of, thought of ourselves as grown out of that?

Rian: Yeah, it is actually one of the things we encourage people to do, believe it or not. So, the way we describe it is that you wanna have a primary and a secondary flow activity outside of your work generally. And this actually goes back to the point of getting into flow as a skill in and of itself that you can develop and get better at. And as Laird Hamilton was mentioning, over the years, he's gotten better and better at getting into flow. And so under that principle, the more flow you get, the more flow you're likely to get. If you're able to get into flow doing X, you're gonna be more able to get into flow doing Y because you're developing the overall skill of getting yourself into that state.

So what we have people generally do is identify a primary and a secondary flow activity. And that activity is essentially play of whatever one, you know, decides their play to be. It might be snowboarding. It might be surfing. It might be painting. It might be playing a musical instrument. It might be improv rap. It might be, you know, comedy. It might be any number of things, but it's usually gonna be some sort of play-like activity that's very conducive to flow. And what we find anecdotally is that when people reboot their ability to get into flow through those sorts of activities, it transfers to their professional life and they're more easily able to access these states in a professional capacity.

Steven has this great story about speaking with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who is sort of the godfather of flow and the original researcher on the topic who actually coined the term flow. And he was telling Steven to diversify his primary and secondary flow activities. Steven was talking to him about the fact that he gets into flow mainly while skiing, and that that's Steven's biggest flow activity. And that transfers it was writing, which is his professional role. And Mihaly was telling him to make sure now, before he gets too old, to take up another form of play or another flow activity that does not require physical exertion because there's gonna come a time where Steven is potentially, you know, too old to be able to ski or at least be able to ski as frequently as he does now. And if he does not develop another activity or another gateway into flow, there's risk of being locked out of flow at that point and not being able to access the state less frequently.

So, it's really important to have multiple forms of play, and multiple avenues into a flow state so that you're not solely dependent on one. And interestingly, we get a lot of clients who are ex-athletes and who are ex-military. And this is one of the biggest challenges they have is that they were professional athletes and their whole life was centered around flow, whether it was playing football or basketball, or whatever it may be, and then their career ends or they get injured, or whatever the case may be, and there's just a gaping hole in their experience of life. And they then realize, "Oh, wait a second, I was spending X number of hours a week in flow and now I'm spending, you know, zero hours a week in flow." And so, one of the things we have them do is reboot their ability to access flow by getting another activity like that on board. And it's the same often for military folks, as well, even other service providers like firefighters get very, very high levels of flow. And then

when that career ends, it goes away, there's this lack of it. So, rebuilding it in through play intentionally is a really important piece of being able to access and more consistently within your professional life and just getting the general benefits that come with flow as well.

Katie: Can you share some examples of maybe non-physical sport-related activities? Because there are a lot of people listening, especially moms, especially if they're pregnant or in certain phases, those are discouraged, or for people, like you mentioned, maybe are in a phase of life where they can't do that or they're injured, what would be some ways of...or maybe, like, a roadmap for starting to find those flow activities?

Rian: Yeah, it's a great question. So, interestingly, there was some research done, it was in the late '90s, early 2000s, that actually found that the highest flow activity was graffiti, which is really interesting. One of the reasons for that, I believe, is the risk involved. There's inherent risk when doing graffiti because of the fact that it's illegal and then there's all the other creative triggers within graffiti, obviously, because it's a creative act. The point being, though, that physical paths into flow are absolutely not the only ones. You can get into flow socially. You can get into flow creatively. You can get into flow cognitively. And you can get into flow physically. So socially, one of the examples I mentioned there was, you know, improv rap. Another example is public speaking. Another example is stand-up comedy.

But also, other examples that are just more common are getting into flow within conversation with a close friend, getting into flow, brainstorming with the group at work, getting into flow, you know, building a start-up with a team that you're close with and onboard with, and we can talk through some of the group flow triggers as well that drives flow within these contacts if you'd like. And then with respect to creativity, there's a whole host of different activities there as well, everything from singing to painting to dancing, which obviously is on the verge of, kind of, physical and creative, through to, you know, making pottery, through to all sorts of different creative activities. The list is long. And again, the end to one piece applies here, if you find that you get into flow very well doing a certain thing, you know, that's totally fine and great. And then you can also get in the flow cognitively. People find that they get into flow reading or thinking about philosophy, for example, or coding is a big one or solving challenges and doing sudoku.

And then, obviously, there's a whole host of physical activities that can drive oneself into flow as well. But I think the point there is that there are different categories of activities that you can get into flow within. And it's important to find those that are just most suitable to where you're at right now and also most conducive to flow for you. For some people, they find their deepest flow states socially. For some people, they find their deepest flow states cognitively, depends on you as an individual as well. So it's worth just experimenting with that.

Katie: I definitely have noticed, for me, the cognitive ones seem to be easier. And so, I'm constantly looking for mind puzzles or chess, like hard challenging tests, things like that. But I also have been talking about, from the physical and mental health perspective, the importance of community for a really long time on this podcast and how, like, truly that is one of the best things we can do for our health. I think it's one of the main reasons

why blue zones are blue zones, it's not the diet. It's because they have very, very strong community. And I've talked about how, you know, it's more important to have strong community and relationships than it is even to exercise or quit smoking when you look at it on a biological level. So I'd love to delve into some of those group flow triggers because that's, I think, a really cool way if you can nurture community and also get into a state of flow, you get that double benefit there.

Rian: Right. Right. Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. And yeah, it's interesting on the community front, belonging specifically, is extremely important. You use the word community, which signifies that but what we find sometimes within our clients is that they'll try and get that need met by just increasing social time or social contact but that's distinct from belonging. If you are in contact with lots of different people all day long but there's no overarching sense of belonging to a community because those individual people you're in contact with don't know each other, for example, that does not necessarily get your belonging needs met. So, community specifically, is actually a really, really important piece of that versus just simply the sheer quantity of social contact.

So the group flow triggers are really interesting. And a lot of them come out of work done by Keith Sawyer, who's a University of North Carolina psychologist, who wrote a great book called "Group Genius." And I'll run through some of their group flow triggers. So the first one is shared goals. So having shared goals, which is fairly straightforward, is extremely important to be able to get in the flow. And you can think about with respect to sports teams. You can think of that with respect to the military. You know, there's a group going out on a mission that they're all aligned on. You can think of that both in terms of what blocks flow and what drives flow within organizations and startups. If there's misalignment on what the goal is and what the actual objective at hand is within a team in a professional context, the likelihood of flow occurring is significantly lower. And it's one of the reasons that a lot of business gurus and things like that emphasize getting in sync, that's such an important thing because if you're not in sync, and you're not all aligned on what the goal is, you're, you know, not gonna be able to get into flow together as a group.

Another one is equal participation. So that's an important piece of getting into flow as a group, which is all having kind of a related level of contribution to whatever the task at hand is. If some people are engaged and some people are disengaged or less engaged, that's gonna throw off your ability to get into flow as a group. Another interesting one is shared skill level. And if you've ever been on a team with someone who is either, you know, infinitely more competent than you are and speaking at, you know, five times the rate that you can comprehend, or someone who can't keep up, you can feel the tension that emerges when skill levels are distinct and lacking.

And that's one of the other reasons that it's so important within teams to bring on talent that is, you know, as good or better than the current team because if there's different skill levels, you're gonna block the team from getting into flow together. And one of the biggest frustrations and drivers of attrition within teams is that the team was not, you know, "at the level" that that individual who left the company felt they were at, and it can be an immense source of frustration for people within teams when other people on the team are just not able

to keep up or just not able to operate and move at the same level that someone else is. So that's another big one.

Katie: Yeah, writing down notes, that's helpful as a business owner and also as a parent in nurturing the kind of the family as a team. And also to use myself, I'm happy to be the guinea pig here, but on a personal level, I remember in the early phases of growing Wellness Mama, that it was fun because it was probably surfing that edge of challenge and skill, and I was constantly challenged. And then as things have grown, and I've created systems for everything, it was much harder to get in that flow state, and it felt much more kind of like a job versus a fun challenge and activity.

Rian: Interesting.

Katie: And so I've kind of instinctively tried to figure out ways to reactivate that. And I had done things like voice lessons or I'm right now playing calculus just for fun or doing stand-up comedy to, kind of, reinvigorate the creativity side of that. But I'm curious if you have any tips. I'd love to make that were intentional of being able to kind of find my flow triggers and then transfer that into business and parenting as well.

Rian: Yeah, one of the reasons that, in the early stages, startups are so conducive to flow is risk, risk level is higher. There's the social risk that's being taken with respect to the startup itself. Someone's venturing out into the unknown and putting their name behind something that's not yet determined to be successful. And then there's often financial risk. And risk is a driver for flow. So when that risk goes away and a company is consolidated, often flow decreases as well. So, bringing that risk in, in certain ways, by continuing to push the edge or continuing to push for growth and improvement can be a driver of flow. And that also relates to job skills balance. Often, at an earlier stage, the individuals in a company are pushing into their edge and leaning into the edge of their comfort zone, which often correlates with having the sweet spot between challenges and skill that drives flow. And then they hit a certain threshold where the company is consolidated or built on either they pull back and are no longer in the sweet spot for flow with respect to the challenge level of what they're engaged in, or they're doing the same thing but they are more skilled because of being more experienced. And so, to compensate for that, you gotta push harder and set bigger, larger goals.

Another important piece is feedback. And feedback is a massive trigger for flow. It's often baked into video games. And you know, so you can think of the example I was using earlier was "Fortnight." When you do something in "Fortnight," you get all sorts of feedback and you get it immediately. The faster you get the feedback from having taken an action, the more conducive that feedback is to flow. So within a video game, you take an action like shooting a bad guy and your remote controller vibrates, you hear noises on the screen, points go up and, you know, something flashes across the screen or whatever the case may be. And that feedback is very conducive to flow.

Similarly, at an early stage often for startups, the quantity of feedback they're getting is enormous. They're talking to users or customers, they are seeing whether the direction they're going with respect to their product suite is working or not. They're starting to, you know, hit certain KPIs, which is a form of feedback from their actions. And the quantity of that feedback is large and the speed at which they're getting it is large as well. And then often, over time, as we build a team and become bigger, we become more removed from that feedback, whether it's clients or whether it's, you know, doing the work yourself and then seeing how that work gets received within the business that often declines. So adding feedback mechanisms back in for yourself as an owner can be just really helpful, important way of doing that, that I think, yeah, is important.

Katie: Those are all amazing tips. I was over here taking notes while you were talking. I also from one of the questions I love to ask, in the research phases, if you could give a TED talk, what would it be on? And you mentioned the idea of thinking big, which I think also, like, is very much a dovetail piece of the idea of flow states and what you just mentioned about setting big goals. It's also something that's very top of mind for me, both in business and also now that my kids are getting older. And basically, how do I nurture this in them and help them develop a high-performance mindset? So I would love any specific advice you have related to that because I think this is also universally applicable.

Rian: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I think just understanding, very simply, that the reason belief is so important is because belief is a predicate for actions that you will take. So, often people poo-poo "The Secret" or the law of attraction, or all these different things that emphasize belief, and you gotta believe, And, you know, if you believe...you can achieve whatever you believe and there's that whole self-help world dedicated to belief that often gets discarded. And one of the reasons it gets discarded is because people emphasize that belief alone is not enough, which is absolutely true. However, the valuable thing in that world is that belief is a predicate for action. If you don't believe that it's possible to create a "New York Times" best-selling book, you are blocking yourself from the actions that would potentially make it possible to create a "New York Times" best-selling book, if you don't believe that you can build a \$100 million company, you're gonna block yourself from the actions that would potentially make it possible to build a \$100 million company.

So that the belief is a predicate and a filter for the actions that you would potentially take and the actions that you would take are the things that are gonna ultimately create that, you know, end result, that thing that you actually want. So, if you don't think big enough and if you don't actually believe something's possible, you make it less possible by simply shrinking down the quantity or the scope of actions that you would, you know, go forward to take that would end up producing that end result. So I think that's what that's one of the reasons why thinking big is just so important because how big you think is directly proportional to how many possible actions or routes forward you are willing to take, which then goes on to, you know, lead you toward whatever result you end up producing.

Katie: That makes complete sense. Yeah.

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I think kids also come out of the box naturally thinking big and with a lot of imagination and without the limits that we, kind of, train into them over time. So I'm thinking as a parent or anybody in education, a big part of that is simply not training them to limit their beliefs and not training them to be cynical about what they can accomplish and just nurturing that natural inherent idea of imagination and belief that we all had as kids that seems to go away a little bit over time unless we're conscious of it.

Rian: It does with every year for a lot of folks with every year that goes by their possibility space for themselves and their life and their business shrinks and gets narrower and narrower and narrower. You know, when you're a kid, you think you can be an astronaut flying across the galaxies. By the time you're often...At least for a lot of people, by the time you're in your 30s, the amount of things that you feel are possible for yourself and your life has shrunk down significantly. And it shrinks again, by the time you're 40 and 50 and so on. But it doesn't need to shrink. That's just simply, you know, a function of what you will allow yourself to believe is possible.

Katie: And anytime we're talking about something, I think it's always important to also consider the flip side and to ask the question, are there is there a dark side of flow to be aware of? Are there any risk associated with the idea of getting into flow more that we need to be cognizant of?

Rian: Yeah, it's a great question. So one of my favorite chapters, actually, in Steven's book "The Rise of Superman" was called "The Dark Side of Flow." And definitely, there's a number of risks that need to be associated with it. One is that flow is, as I said, autotelic, which means it's a means in and of itself. It is inherently intrinsically rewarding. And as a result of that, it can be very addictive. So we want more of it. We wanna get into that state, and we wanna maintain that state, and we wanna heighten the intensity of that state. And one of the ways that people often do that is by pushing the challenge level because as I mentioned, you know, you have to have that sweet spot between challenge and skill. But if you get better at something, then you have to increase the challenge to be able to hit the sweet spot for flow.

And so one of the ways that shows up in action-adventure sport athletes is that they keep taking on bigger and bigger and bigger challenges to be able to get into flow, which, unfortunately, as Steven outlines and "The Rise of Superman," very often results in death. And again, to use Laird Hamilton as an example, he was telling us last week that he can only get into flow now hydrofoiling. He pretty much can't get into flow surfing unless the waves are massive because his skill level is so high that if the challenge is not also very high, there's gonna be a mismatch between the challenge skills level and an inability to get in the flow. And that applies to companies and to professional life as well. I always mention there that one of the ways to get increased access to flow at a later stage when building a business to increase the challenge level. But there's downsides to that also constantly pushing for more, constantly taking on more risk, constantly striving and pushing, and getting trapped in the hedonic treadmill is not necessarily a good thing.

Another thing that is something that needs to be watched with flow is mania or hypomania. Hypomania is a mild form of mania. It's like, yeah, essentially just a less extreme form of mania but it can still result in issues from a mental health standpoint. And there are definitely just corollaries between the, sort of, state flow results in and hypomania that are really important to be aware of. One of the things people often say is that you shouldn't make any lifelong decisions within the two or three weeks of getting back from Burning Man, for example. And that's because often people are in this kind of hypomanic state. It's like an altered state. And that can be the same for flow, getting into an extremely heightened state that is slightly manic within flow and then deciding that you're gonna go and you know, do XYZ or pull out a huge bank loan or whatever it is, when in that heightened state can cause real issues for one's life.

And then I think the other thing is needing...this relates to the challenge skills balance thing, but what can often happen is that we just need excessive levels of stimulation or want excessive levels of stimulation to drive ourselves into that peak state all the time. We get uncomfortable not being in a peak optimal state. And that's really important to be aware of because, and I'm sure Steven mentioned this, but flow happens as one part of a four-stage cycle starting with the struggle phase going into the release phase and the flow state itself, and then the recovery phase. And often the high of flow, that feeling is so compelling that we wanna just stay in the flow state itself. But the recovery phase the come down, so to speak, from a flow state is an incredibly important piece, and resisting that and wanting to just, you know, only be in a flow state can cause challenges as well and be a little bit of a dark side, I think.

Katie: Yeah, I'll make sure to link to that podcast as well as we walk through the four stages. And I wonder, are there any other ways to counteract the potential for those things. Like, I'm thinking, I wonder if maybe like fasting, meditation things that are on the other extreme and the calming side, does that help balance it out or just leaving in space for recovery without intentionally trying to do these things?

Rian: Definitely. The recovery is an incredibly important part of the whole picture. The harder and more intensively you recover, the more able you are to drive yourself into flow and achieve your optimal states of performance. And in fact, the extent to which you recover is largely the extent to which you can reach a flow state. And most people are in this, sort of, no man's land where they're not really getting into peak performance and they're not really recovering properly. You wanna be extreme about recovery so that you can get extreme results on the flow side of the equation. And an important distinction as well for people is that recovery is distinct from relaxation. Often activities that are relaxing are not very conducive to recovery and often activities that are extremely conducive to recovery are not relaxing at all.

So what is distinct about recovery is that it's gonna give you a neurophysiological shift. It's gonna often create a parasympathetic response within the nervous system and down-regulate your nervous system, which then also gives you generally a mental shift or a psychological shift in how you're actually feeling. So an example there is an ice bath. You know, an ice bath is the furthest thing from relaxing, yet, it's incredibly powerful in terms of physiological and psychological recovery. Sauna is a similar example. Foam rolling. If you're trying to recover from cognitive exertion, then intense exercise, intense physical exercise is a very, very effective way of recovering but often that's not relaxing at all. On the contrary, you know, sitting down on the couch and flicking through 5 or 10 minutes of different Netflix shows is potentially relaxing, but it's actually not gonna recover you very effectively. You're not gonna be able to wake up the next morning fresher than you were when you finished work the day before.

So yeah, recovery is super important and being willing to push yourself within recovery, which is sort of a paradox, is also really important. People often think that, you know, the pushing or the work ethic is applicable within the work side of the equation only, but actually the work ethic and the discipline is just as applicable within the recovery side. At the end of an extremely hard workday, the most tempting thing to do often is gonna be to veg out and, you know, scroll social media and flick on the TV. But in reality, the most effective thing to do when factoring in your overall level of output, including the following day is gonna be something like jumping in a sauna or taking the time to do some yoga, whatever it is, which requires more discipline and just more exertion. So, yeah, definitely an important piece of it all.

Katie: Wonderful. And I wanna make sure I respect your hard stop at the end of the interview. But last question I love to ask is if there's a book or a number of books that have had a profound impact on your life, and if so what they are and why?

Rian: Oh, God, it's a good question. I read so many books that I find it hard to even remember what ones were useful in what way. It's a little bit...I always say now that because of Spotify and the release radar and, sort of,

the automated recommendation system it has, I don't even know who I listened to or what music I like anymore because it's just auto-generated for me. And I feel slightly similar with books. I've got the Kindle and Audible and just constantly absorbing all these books. I lose track of what one was what. But I'll give you...yeah, I'll mention one book that I found extremely impactful.

It was probably the first self-development book I read and it was called "Blink" by Matthew Syed. He also wrote "Black Box Thinking." I read it years and years ago when I was a teenager. But it was one of those books, there's about three or four of these books that attempt to myth-bust the idea of talent. It was one of those books that call talent a myth and said that everything comes from practice and time spent intentionally improving something. And whether or not that's true, I found that argument to be incredibly, incredibly, incredibly inspiring and motivating. And I remember reading that and intentionally picking arguments with friends at the time to try and convince them that there's no such thing as talent. And the only reason they were greater rugby was because they had, whether they were aware of it or not, accumulated all these skills and sub-skills that resulted in their abilities. But I just found that mindset shift to be incredibly inspiring. It gave me this sense of agency that ability is nothing more than the sum total of the work put in or the practice that one has done on a certain thing. So that's one.

Katie: Perfect place to wrap up and a new recommendation, I'll put a link to that in the show notes as well. I know you have a deadline to stop. And I'm really grateful for your time and for all of this fascinating information today.

Rian: Thanks, Katie, I appreciate it. And yeah, thanks so much for having me on. I appreciate it.

Katie: And thanks to all of you guys, as always for listening, and for sharing your most valuable resources, your time, and your energy with us. Were both so grateful that you did, and I hope that you'll join me again on the next episode of the "Wellness Mama" podcast.

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