

Overcome

Overload

Flight Fight

Alert

Calm

Depressed

WHY THINGS FEEL

F*CKED

We're running ancient hardware in our bodies in a very digital world, and it's burning us out. Here's why the "man up" rulebook is broken, and how to finally get your head, and your life, back in the zone...

By ANDREW SLOAN

That subtle but gnawing feeling of powerlessness you feel day-to-day isn't just you; I feel it too. We are not broken, problematic or failing. But we have stumbled into a set-up that flexes fear over safety, control over freedom, disconnection over connection. The world is a messy and complex place. And sometimes we find ourselves ill-equipped to live and thrive in an imperfect world, in our complicated bodies, while being told happiness and success are simple. The truth is, they're not. We have been marinating in systems of disconnection for thousands of years and are seeing the telltale signs of the lack of safe human connections. In the palm of our hands, we have instant connection to everything that is happening throughout the world, yet we as people have never felt more disconnected. We have abundant access to everything that "should" be making us happy, but most of us are still feeling stressed, sad and lonely. In short, we feel stuck. And we have no idea why.

THE RULEBOOK THAT BROKE US

To understand why we feel this way, we have to look at the rulebook we've been handed. We are often given subtle and not-so-subtle cues from the people around us when we break visible and invisible rules. For many of us, this starts early. Take Lee, for example. Lee has always felt the pressure to man up and be strong. This message was sent to him from a really young age. His dad was always clear: real men don't cry, and "when things get tough, we get tougher". This worked well on the football field and during the first few years of his corporate career. His fiancée adored this inner strength, calmness and his ability to make fast decisions. The challenge was that the tougher Lee got, the more brittle he became.

The cracks started to appear around the time Lee's father died. Lee lost his hero, the author of the rulebook he lived by. Suddenly, Dad's first rule – to not cry – had to be broken. Lee cried for days as he was flooded with the immensity of his grief. Lee then felt embarrassed, exposed, self-critical and felt like he was losing his mind. It turned out that Lee wasn't prepared for big emotions. The shame he felt because he couldn't pull it together kept him locked down, paralysed and unable to ask his wife for help. Every time she looked at him, he saw her expectation of the strong man she fell in love with. Lee was stuck holding a rulebook he had just broken, feeling fractured and more distant than ever from the man he thought he should be.

When we live in a world that says, "Real men don't cry" and "Women are too emotional", we have a problem. We are all being discouraged from expressing the full spectrum of authentic human emotions. Whatever the rulebook looks like for you, whether it's about earning more,

showing less emotion, or crushing the competition when we can't measure up to these expectations, we feel shame. When shame is activated, we keep it a secret.

The fear of shame itself becomes a significant threat to our safety. To cope, we often recruit a harsh inner voice – an internal bully that judges and criticises us to try and protect us from external rejection. We essentially try to beat the world to the punch. This leads to a toxic cycle. We silence ourselves. Isolate. We withdraw from others, which only accelerates our defensiveness and aggression. We end up seeing ourselves as broken, or we arm up and attack, seeing everyone else as the problem.

ANCIENT HARDWARE, A MODERN HELL

So, how did the effects of these rulebooks get under our skin like this? The answer lies in our ancient internal operating system: our nervous system. Our neural circuits evolved over hundreds of thousands of years to keep us safe in a much simpler world.

The world has changed a lot in the last 200 years; our nervous systems have not had the chance to catch up. Our ancient circuits are now reacting to a world they were never designed to handle. Think about it this way: imagine trying to run the most sophisticated, data-heavy application on a computer system that was originally designed for basic text processing. That vintage machine is robust, it's kept things going for ages, but it's not equipped for the constant influx of information and the high fidelity and rapid-fire pace of the digital age. Our autonomic nervous system is that vintage machine. It is constantly absorbing the world around us. Just beyond our conscious awareness, these

ancient circuits are holding onto our past experiences, taking in new information in the present moment and predicting what might happen next, often anchored in fear.

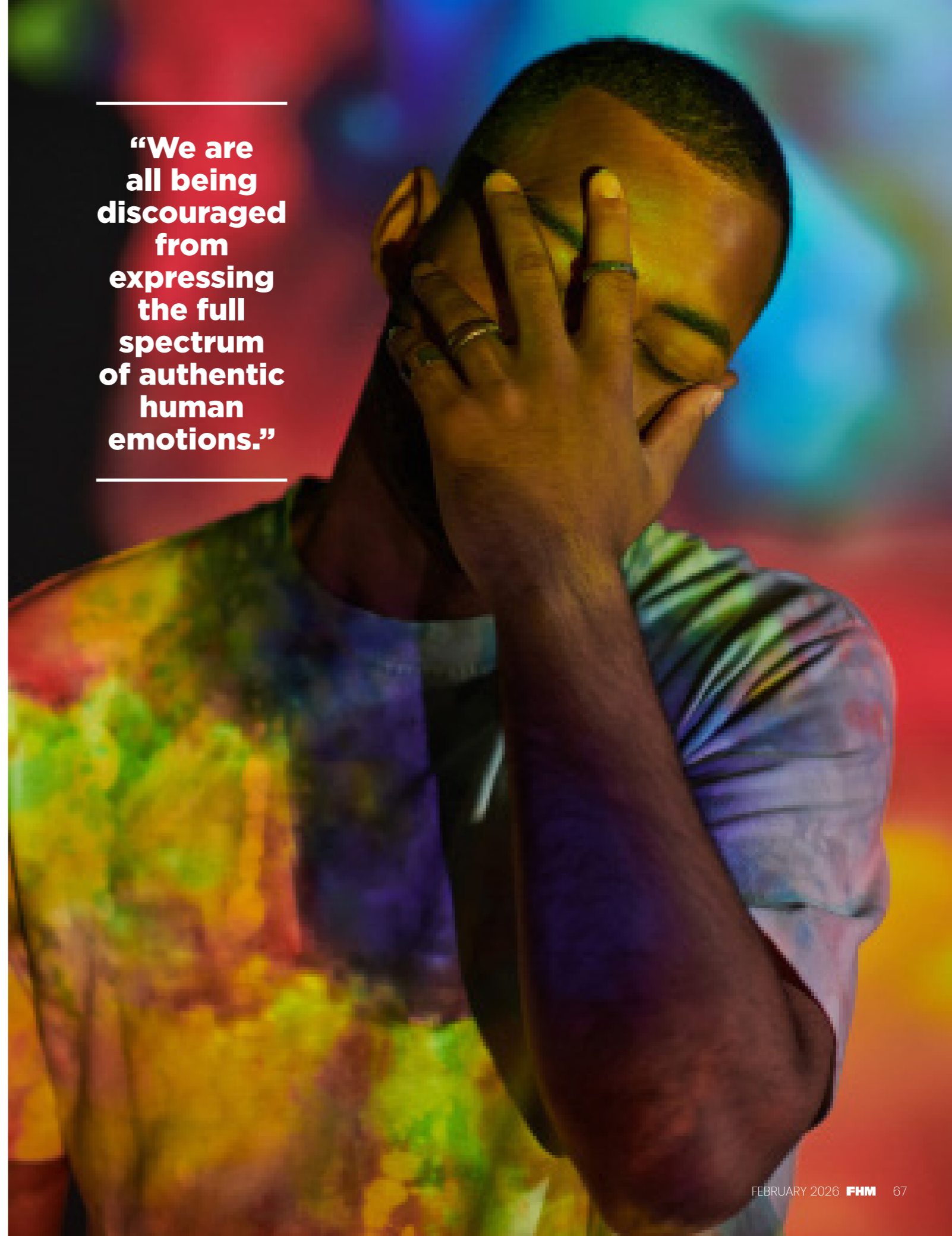
This system has two main modes: the accelerator and the brake.

1. The Sympathetic Nervous System – The Accelerator: This is our "go mode". It is responsible for movement and our protective instincts of fight and flight. When activated, the sympathetic nervous system increases our heart rate, makes oxygen available to our muscles and organs. This network of nerves is a masterful system for keeping ourselves safe and getting shit done, with one major limiting factor: when it's overactivated – the accelerator jammed down to the floor for too long – we can feel burnt-out.

2. The Parasympathetic Nervous System – The Brake: This activates our capacity for rest and digestion. It is often referred to as the "slow mode". It activates our ability to slow down, create a sense of calm inside of our bodies and when needed freeze in the presence of a threat that is too big for us to protect ourselves from. Here's the kicker: The hustle of modern life (as we hold our rulebook) has hijacked our sympathetic nervous system, leaving it chronically activated. We are all under relentless pressure to go fast, perform, achieve and compete. It's the background noise to every conversation both inside of us and with the people in our lives. It's often the first question we are asked when we meet someone new: "What do you do for work?".

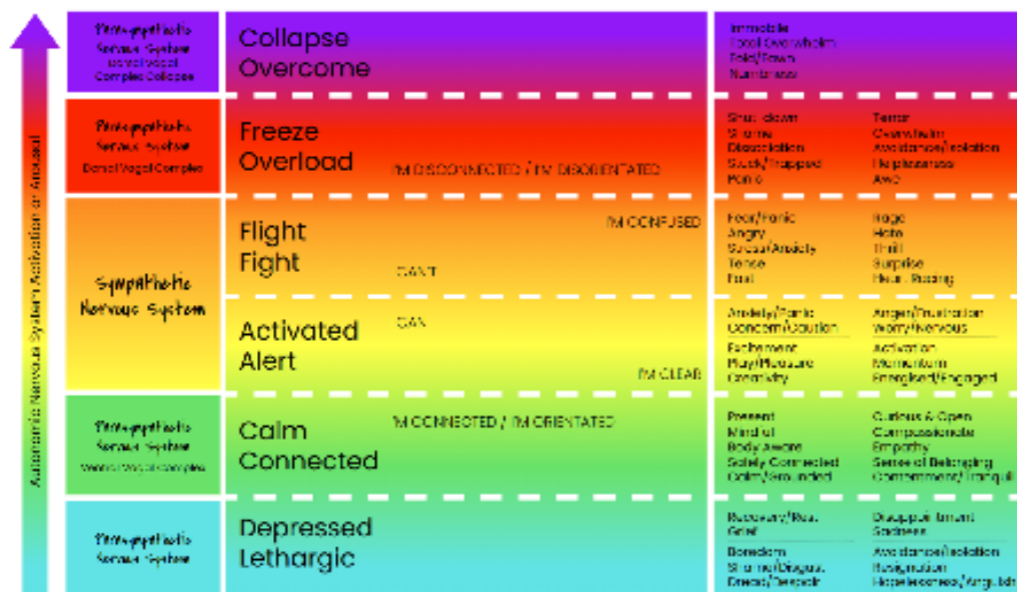
Our nervous systems are geared towards combating threats to our safety first, with all other impulses second in line. Lions and tigers are now sales targets, endless notifications and the relentless hustle. No wonder things feel so incredibly overloaded and, yeah, often completely f—ked.

“We are all being discouraged from expressing the full spectrum of authentic human emotions.”



MAPPING THE MESS

To navigate this, we need a map. The nervous system map from my book *Why Things Feel F*cked*, is a framework to help us explore what parts of our nervous systems are activated or deactivated at any one time.



v22 Adapted by Andrew Sloan - www.andrewsloan.com.au from Stephen Porges, Dan Siegel, Babette Rothschild, Ruby Jo Walker and Brene Brown's work.

When the systems of disconnection have historically forced us to be in sympathetic nervous system states, we get stuck in the Activated Zones:

- **The Yellow Zone:** Where we go to be creative or burn ourselves out. When overactivated, we feel anxious, panicked, stressed, frustrated, worried and burnt-out.
- **The Orange Zone:** Where we go to express healthy anger, advocate, fight or run. When overactivated, we feel intense anger, fury and panic.
- **The Red Zone:** Where we go to feel safe by freezing. When overactivated, we feel terrorised, trapped, frozen, numb and shut down.

Ever noticed how that looming deadline or overflowing inbox sends your nervous system into a spin? Procrastination isn't simply about being lazy; it's a dance between the yellow, orange and red zones. The pressure to perform in the yellow can feel bloody overwhelming, activating a "get me out of here" flight response into the orange. Or, if the task feels too massive, our system might just slam on the brakes and slide headfirst into the red zone, that frozen feeling where absolutely nothing gets done. And when we can't maintain that pace? We crash.

The Crash Zones represent either too much or too little energy in our nervous system. We end up in the Blue Zone – linked to deep sadness, depression, fatigue and hopelessness. Metabolically speaking, it's the only direction we can go when we've been operating at such an activated level for so long. When we spend too long in the Activated Zones we lose connection with the front two parts of our brains, the prefrontal cortex. Goodbye to logical thinking and empathy for other people's experiences. This all only contributing massively to our feelings of being in the f—k.

GETTING UNSTUCK: THE GREEN ZONE

So, how do we stop the crash? We need to find our way to the Green Zone. The Green Zone is activated as we experience safety. It enables our capacity to step back, connect, be more present, feel safe and open up towards other people (we have more access to the other parts of our nervous system and our brain). When this zone is in balance, we feel present, grounded, calm, curious and connected to other humans. This isn't just about positive thinking or some kind of magic. It's biology.

When the parasympathetic nervous system is activated, we have greater access to the front two parts of our brains connecting us to a balance of logic, facts, feelings and emotions. When it comes to brain function, "more is more". We need to purposefully activate the Green Zone in as many moments of our days as humanly possible.

But here is the problem: You can't "think" your way into this state. Eighty per cent of the nerve fibres in the nerve that activates the Green Zone, the vagus nerve, travel from the body up to the brain. To get back online, we need to engage manual overrides. I call this the CALM model. Here are five micro-practices to hack your biology:

- 1. Connect: The Social Fix (we are wired for connection):** If you are spinning out, connect with a safe person, preferably face-to-face or on a video call. The Green Zone is activated as we experience safety in the facial expression and the tone of voice of someone we trust.
- 2. Anchor: The Vagus Breath (forget rapid chest breathing):** Consciously slow it down and aim for your belly. The key is to elongate your exhale.

A longer exhale engages the parasympathetic nervous system, forcing your body to calm down.

3. Look: The Reality Check (if you feel like you're dissociating or "checking out"): Engage your ancient orientation reflex by physically turning your head and looking from side to side around the room you are in, moving your neck right to left. This signals to your ancient nervous system that there are no immediate dangers in the room.

4. Move: The Cold Shock (need an immediate reset?): Splash your face with cold water or jump in a cold shower (or ice bath). This stimulates the vagus nerve and sends an instant "brake" signal to your activated nervous system.

BEYOND THE HACK: THE REAL WORK STARTS HERE

Getting into the Green Zone stops us burning out. It calms the panic. But calming down isn't the same as moving forward. To truly get unstuck and stay there, we need to rebuild the way we navigate the world entirely. This is what we call Self-Leadership. Self-leadership is a process of grounding our nervous system enough for self-reflection and deep discovery of how we have been shaped by the world around us and how we want to reshape our response to the world exactly as it is. It's about moving from a life where you are constantly reacting to threats, to a life where you are actively choosing what happens next. In my book, I break this down into three distinct roles we must master to reclaim our freedom:

- 1. The Self Explorer:** Learning to decode our own unique wiring and knowing ourselves from the inside out.
- 2. The Choice Maker:** Transforming that self-knowledge

into creative action and claiming our autonomy.

3. The Co-Creator: Building shared power and creative partnerships, rather than defaulting to control or domination. The reality is, we need to take ownership of this for ourselves. The context and content of our lives have been shaped by many millions of micro-decisions, most of which are outside of our control. To change and create our unique pathway to self-leadership, it will take a couple of hundred thousand more decisions on the road ahead. That deep breath you take before you say something in a heated meeting or the five minutes of meditation you add to our daily schedule, might be all we need to start to make big and long-lasting changes in our lives.

The world is dominated by systems which have handed us rulebooks that have activated our nervous systems to predict fear in our lives more than creativity. But we have the power to build an internal system of connection. To refine and reshape the collaboration between the many parts of our nervous system and how we connect with other people in our lives. Ready to get unstuck? ■



Andrew Sloan is a psychotherapist, leadership coach and author. This is an edited extract from his new book, *WHY THINGS FEEL F*CKED: YOUR PRACTICAL GUIDE TO GETTING UNSTUCK* (Hardie Grant Custom, \$34.99rrp), available now online and at all good bookstores. Follow Andrew on Instagram: @hello_andrewsloan