

WHITE PAPER

What Success Is Really Costing You

Why Peak Performance Is Quietly Destroying the Health, Relationships and Cognitive Capacity of the World's Highest Performers

A Performance Psychology White Paper

Extensive Clinical Practice with Lawyers, Doctors and Executives at the Top of Their Fields

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01. The Paradox of Excellence

Being exceptional comes with a price. It is not the kind of price that high achievers brag about. It is not the late nights, missed dinners, or lost weekends that people use to show how dedicated they are. I mean a different cost. A biological cost. A neurological cost. A relational cost that accrues silently over years, decades, entire careers, until one day the person sitting in front of me who runs a nine-figure legal practice or leads a surgical department or sits on four boards looks at me and says, quietly, that they cannot remember the last time they felt well.

That moment is not a breakdown. It is a revelation. And it is almost always long overdue.

The world has an extraordinary appetite for the outputs of high performers. Firms want their billing partners. Hospitals want their specialists. Boards want their decision-makers. Families want their providers. Society wants its leaders. What nobody asks, and what almost nobody in my field adequately addresses, is what it costs the human being inside the performance to sustain it across a lifetime.

This white paper is my answer to that question. It is built on years of direct clinical work with lawyers, doctors and executives at the very top of their fields. It is not a theoretical document. It is a record of what I have witnessed, what the research confirms, and what I believe the professional support industry has been systematically getting wrong.

The central argument is this: peak performance, as it is currently defined and demanded in elite professional environments, is not sustainable without a deeply integrated approach to the human being behind the performance. Anything less is simply managing the decline while pretending it is not happening.

The question is not whether you can sustain this level of performance. The question is what you are quietly paying for it.

02. What Years in the Room Has Taught Me

I have spent decades in rooms that most people never enter. Rooms where extraordinarily capable people allow themselves, often for the first time, to be honest about what is actually happening inside them.

I have sat with senior partners of major law firms who negotiate billion-dollar transactions by day and cannot sleep for more than four hours at night. I have worked with surgeons who perform procedures of extraordinary complexity and then go home and are unable to be present with their own children. I have spent years working with chief executives who can read a market, lead a team and execute a strategy with surgical precision, but who have not had a conversation with their partner that was not contaminated by distraction or irritability in months.

These are not people who have failed. These are people who have, by every conventional measure, succeeded at the highest possible level. And that is precisely the problem.

Because the system that got them to the top, the neural conditioning, the emotional suppression, the physiological override, the relentless prioritisation of output over everything else, does not switch off when they leave the office. It runs continuously. It rewires the nervous system. It degrades sleep architecture. It strips away the ability to feel a full range of emotions. It slowly destroys the ability to connect with others, to be present, and to feel joy. And because these people are very good at looking fine on the outside, this all happens where no one can see it.

I am not a coach. I am not a therapist in the conventional sense. I am not a consultant or a trainer. What I am is something that does not have an adequate name in this industry yet: a practitioner who understands elite professional performance at the level of the nervous system, the brain, the body, the relationship and the psychological structure of the person simultaneously. That intersection is where the real work happens. And that intersection is where almost nobody is working.

CLINICAL OBSERVATION

Across my years of practice, I have never met a high performer whose difficulties were confined to a single domain. The body, the brain, the relationships, the sleep and the performance are always connected. Always. Treating any one of them in isolation is the single most common and costly mistake in this field.

03. The Architecture of Silent Collapse

The collapse of a high performer is almost never sudden. It is architectural. It is built over time, layer by layer, in the spaces between the achievements. Understanding its structure is the first step toward interrupting it.

The Competence Shield

Top performers are very skilled at using their abilities to protect themselves from difficult emotions. The more uncertain or distressed they feel internally, the harder they work and the more masterfully they perform. This means that the very mechanism through which distress would ordinarily signal the need for intervention, a decline in output, a visible deterioration in function, is replaced by an intensification of performance. The shield goes up and the world sees only success. This is why the people who most need support are consistently the last to receive it.

The Identity Trap

For most elite professionals, performance and identity have been fused since early adulthood. The lawyer is not someone who practices law. The lawyer is their results, their reputation, their billing history. The surgeon is their outcomes. The executive is their company. This combination is incredibly motivating early in a career. But over time, it turns into a trap. Admitting that something is wrong, that the system is struggling, feels the same as admitting that you are failing. And for people who have built their whole life around never failing, that is simply too much to accept.

The Deferred Life Ledger

Every high performer I have ever worked with maintains what I call a deferred life ledger. It is the internal accounting of everything that has been postponed in the service of the career. Sleep. Exercise. Connection. Rest. Play. Medical attention. These are the debits. The ledger is always larger than the person realises. And at some point, often set off by a health problem, a broken relationship, or a deep feeling of emptiness in the middle of an apparently successful life, the bill comes due.

The deferred life ledger is never cancelled. It is only paid, with interest, at a time not of your choosing.

04. Sleep: The First Casualty and the Last Priority

Sleep is the domain I investigate with every single client, without exception. It is also the domain that elite professional culture has most thoroughly and most dangerously corrupted.

There is a mythology in law firms, hospitals and boardrooms that reduced sleep is a sign of commitment. Four hours is worn as a credential. The person who slept six hours is somehow softer than the person who slept four. This mythology is not merely incorrect. It is, based on the weight of evidence accumulated over the past two decades of sleep science, one of the most destructive operating beliefs in elite professional culture.

What Sleep Deprivation Actually Does

Matthew Walker's research and the broader body of sleep science are unambiguous. Chronic sleep insufficiency, defined as fewer than seven hours per night sustained over time, produces measurable degradation in prefrontal cortex function, the part of the brain responsible for judgement, impulse control, emotional regulation and strategic thinking. It increases cortisol and inflammatory markers. It impairs memory consolidation. It accelerates cognitive ageing. And it dramatically increases the risk of anxiety, depression and a range of physical health conditions including cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.

In other words, the very cognitive capacities that elite professionals are paid to deploy at the highest level are the first and most severely affected by the sleep habits that elite professional culture actively promotes.

I have looked at the sleep patterns of hundreds of high performing professionals. What I found is consistent and concerning. Broken sleep. Not enough time spent in deep sleep stages. Cortisol levels rise at night when they should be falling. This makes it hard to fall asleep because the brain stays in a state of alertness, unable to switch off the same threat monitoring

it runs all day at work. Often, the person does not even realise their sleep is bad, because they have slowly grown so used to poor rest that it now feels normal to them.

Sleep as a Performance Weapon

Sleep is the most powerful performance tool available, and the only one with zero negative side effects. This is not just about health. It is about how well your brain works. A lawyer who is well rested and operating with a fully recovered prefrontal cortex thinks and decides at a completely different level than one who has been running on poor sleep for years. The question is not whether you can afford to prioritise sleep. The question is whether you can afford not to.

THE SLEEP SCIENCE REALITY

Research is clear that eighteen to twenty hours of wakefulness produces cognitive impairment equivalent to a blood alcohol level of 0.05 percent. Many elite professionals are making decisions that affect the lives and financial futures of their clients in this state, every day, and calling it dedication.

05. The Body That Carries the Career

The body is not separate from the performance. It is the platform on which all performance runs. This is a statement so obvious that it should require no elaboration. And yet the treatment of the physical body by elite professionals is, in my clinical experience, almost uniformly characterised by neglect, override and wilful ignorance.

I work at the intersection of performance psychology and physiology because the two cannot, in practice, be separated. What happens in the body happens in the brain. What happens in the brain happens in the body. The nervous system does not recognise the boundary between physical and psychological that most professional support services impose.

The Physiology of Chronic High Demand

When the body is under sustained high demand, whether from cognitive load, emotional suppression, time pressure, or the anticipation of threat, it activates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis and produces cortisol. In short bursts, this is adaptive. The body mobilises resources, sharpens focus, manages the challenge, and returns to baseline. This is the stress response functioning as it was designed to function.

In chronic high-demand environments, this system does not return to baseline. It runs continuously. The cortisol is sustained. The body remains in a state of physiological mobilisation that was designed for acute threats, not for the thirty-year practice of corporate law or neurosurgery or executive leadership. Over time, chronic cortisol elevation produces inflammation, immune suppression, gastrointestinal disruption, cardiovascular strain, and neurological changes that include, critically, the degradation of the hippocampus, the brain structure central to memory and learning.

The Override Habit

High performers develop an extraordinary capacity to override physical signals. Pain, fatigue, hunger, the need to move, the need to rest: all of these are subordinated to the demands of the work. This is experienced as discipline and it is celebrated as such. What it actually is, physiologically, is the progressive suppression of the body's feedback system. The signals do not stop. They build up. And when the buildup becomes too much for the body to keep suppressing, the result is not a slow decline but a sudden and often severe physical breakdown: illness, injury, heart attacks, autoimmune conditions, and the full range of stress related physical problems that bring people into the offices of the specialists I work with.

I see this pattern so consistently that I have given it a name in my practice: the override habituation cycle. The longer the override habit continues, the more signal the body needs to get your attention, and the worse the physical reaction when the body finally takes over.

The body has enormous patience. But it does not have infinite patience. And when it calls in the debt, it does not accept a payment plan.

06. Relationships: The Ledger No One Audits

Of all the domains in which the cost of peak performance registers, relationships are the one most consistently and most profoundly under-addressed by the professional support industry. This is a significant failure, because in my clinical experience, relational

deterioration is both the most common presenting context and the most powerful lever for sustained change in the high performers I work with.

The partner who has been waiting for years for the version of this person that occasionally appeared on holidays. The children who have grown up knowing their parent primarily as an absence, or as a presence that is physically in the room but psychologically somewhere else entirely. Close friendships that slowly fell apart because they were not given enough time or care. Work relationships damaged by the emotional distance and difficulty connecting with others that long term stress causes over time.

The Relational Cost of Emotional Suppression

Elite professional environments systematically reward emotional suppression. The ability to remain controlled under pressure, to make decisions without visible emotional influence, to maintain performance in the face of significant personal distress: these are treated as virtues and compensated accordingly. What is not accounted for is that the suppression does not stop at the office door. The neural pathways that grow stronger through years of holding back emotions do not turn on only at work. They run across all contexts. The lawyer who cannot show vulnerability in a negotiation cannot reliably show it at home either. The executive who has learned to treat uncertainty as a threat to be managed brings that same orientation to the ambiguous, uncontrollable terrain of intimate relationship.

Couples at the Edge of Excellence

I have worked extensively with the partners and spouses of high performers, both individually and in couples therapy contexts. The picture is consistent. Partners describe feeling like a supporting role in someone else's career. They describe a type of emotional neglect that is especially confusing and isolating because it happens within a life that looks good on the outside. They describe trying to speak up, often for years, only to receive responses that acknowledge their ability to cope but completely miss what they are actually saying. A holiday, a gift, or a change in routine does not fix it. The problem runs deeper than that.

In many cases, by the time the couple arrives in my consulting room, the emotional distance has been sustained for so long that rebuilding genuine intimacy requires not just relational work but the kind of nervous system work that enables the high performer to access emotional states that have been offline for years. This is slow, challenging, profound work.

And it is work that most conventional relationship therapy is not equipped to do, because most conventional relationship therapy does not understand the physiology and neurology of the person sitting across from it.

THE RELATIONAL REALITY

In my experience, the partner of a high performer is often the most accurate diagnostic instrument available. They have been observing the system for years. When they say something has changed, or something has been wrong for a long time, they are almost always right. Starting there is not a therapeutic indulgence. It is clinical intelligence.

07. Cognitive Erosion in the High-Functioning Brain

The brain of a high performer is one of the most extraordinary instruments I have ever had the privilege of studying in clinical context. The pattern-recognition capacity of an experienced senior barrister, the spatial and procedural precision of a specialist surgeon, the systemic and strategic intelligence of a seasoned executive: these represent decades of neural development, experiential learning and cognitive refinement. They are genuinely remarkable.

They are also, under the conditions in which most elite professionals operate, being gradually and systematically degraded.

Allostatic Load and the Cognitive Premium

Allostatic load is the cumulative biological cost of adapting to chronic stress. It is measurable through biomarkers including cortisol rhythms, inflammatory indicators and cardiovascular variables. It accumulates over time and it has a direct, well-documented relationship with cognitive function. As allostatic load increases, the precision of the prefrontal cortex, the flexibility of working memory, the speed of processing and the accuracy of judgement all decline.

The clinical irony is that this decline is often imperceptible to the person experiencing it, precisely because the cognitive systems responsible for self-assessment are themselves among the first to be affected. The high performer does not realize that their judgement has gotten worse. They do not see that their thinking has become more rigid, more reactive, more cautious, or on the other end, more reckless than it was ten years ago. They notice only that certain things feel harder than they used to, and they attribute this to age or volume of work

rather than to the neurological consequences of sustained high demand without adequate recovery.

Brain Hacks Are Not the Answer

The response of the performance industry to cognitive decline in high performers has been, almost uniformly, to offer cognitive enhancement. Nootropics. Productivity systems. Optimisation protocols. Mindfulness apps. These are not without value. But they are, in isolation, the equivalent of trying to increase the output of an engine that is running on degraded fuel while ignoring the fact that the cooling system is failing. You can optimise the fuel all you like. If the underlying system is not addressed, the engine will fail.

Real cognitive performance work begins not with enhancement but with recovery. With understanding the load that the system is carrying and systematically reducing it. With addressing sleep, with recalibrating the stress response, with restoring the physiological conditions under which the prefrontal cortex can operate at the level the person is capable of. Enhancement comes after restoration, not instead of it.

08. Survival Mode: When the System Designed to Save You Starts Destroying You

The human threat response is one of the most elegant pieces of biological engineering in existence. Faced with genuine danger, the body mobilises with extraordinary speed and precision. Cortisol and adrenaline flood the system. Non-essential functions are suppressed. Focus moves to the danger. Muscles prepare for action. The entire organism is oriented toward survival.

This system was designed for the kind of acute, time-limited threats that characterised the ancestral human environment. A predator. A rival. A physical danger that could be resolved through fight or flight and then released. It was not designed for the sustained, ambient, multi-domain threat environment of a senior partner's working week. It was not designed for the daily experience of a specialist medical practitioner holding the weight of patient outcomes, medical-legal risk, practice management and professional scrutiny simultaneously. It was not designed for the executive whose threat environment includes market conditions, regulatory change, board expectations, talent retention and global uncertainty, every single day, for decades.

The Chronic Threat State

When the threat response is activated chronically, without adequate resolution and recovery, the nervous system undergoes a process of recalibration. The threshold for threat detection drops. The system becomes hypervigilant, scanning continuously for danger that may or may not be present. Ambiguity is processed as threat. Novelty is processed as threat. Interpersonal conflict is processed as threat at a level of physiological intensity that is disproportionate to its actual danger. The person experiencing this does not recognise it as hypervigilance. They experience it as realism, as sharpness, as the necessary awareness required to operate at the level they operate at.

In my consulting room, I can measure this. I can identify the nervous system that has been running in chronic threat activation for years. The physiological signature is consistent and unmistakable. And the consequences of operating from this state over an extended period are severe: degraded immune function, cardiovascular strain, disrupted sleep architecture, compromised emotional regulation and a progressive narrowing of the perceptual and cognitive field that is the opposite of the broad, flexible, creative intelligence that peak performance actually requires.

Rewiring the System

The good news, and it is important good news, is that the nervous system is plastic. The recalibration that has occurred through years of chronic activation can be reversed. Not quickly. Not through a weekend workshop or a meditation retreat. But systematically, with the right understanding of the specific patterns present in a specific nervous system, the threat baseline can be lowered. Recovery is possible. And the performance that emerges from a nervous system that has been restored to genuine regulatory capacity is categorically different from the performance produced by one running continuously on survival energy. It is deeper, more sustainable, more creative and significantly more durable.

Every high performer I have ever worked with who has done the genuine work of nervous system restoration has said the same thing: I did not know I could feel this way and still be this effective. That

combination was not something I believed was possible.

09. The Brilliant Blind Spot: IQ vs Everything Else

The people I work with are, without exception, highly intelligent. Many are among the most intellectually capable individuals in their respective fields. This intelligence is both their greatest asset and, in specific ways that the professional world rarely acknowledges, a significant vulnerability.

High cognitive intelligence, in the absence of equivalent emotional and relational intelligence, creates a particular and recognisable profile. The person can solve extraordinarily complex problems. They can analyse, synthesise, argue, strategise and execute at a level that most people cannot approach. They can hold enormous amounts of information simultaneously and process it with impressive speed. And they can do all of this while being almost entirely unaware of what is happening emotionally and relationally, in themselves and in the people around them.

The Intellectualisation Defence

One of the most consistent patterns I observe in high-IQ professionals is what I call the intellectualisation defence: the use of sophisticated cognitive processing as a mechanism for avoiding emotional experience. A high performer experiencing grief, fear, loneliness or relational distress will, almost reflexively, convert that experience into a problem to be analysed and solved rather than a feeling to be acknowledged and processed. They will generate frameworks. They will develop plans. They will read the literature. They will, in short, use thinking as a way to avoid the actual experience, while that experience stays unresolved and keeps producing its effects.

This is a learned pattern that once had a purpose, often in a family system or educational environment that rewarded intellectual performance and offered little safety for emotional expression. Understanding its origins is part of the work. Gently, carefully, respectfully dismantling it is another part. And helping someone who has spent forty years building

exceptional thinking skills now grow their emotional and relationship skills is some of the most layered and fulfilling work I do.

Body Language and the Signals Being Missed

Elite professionals in client-facing roles are often surprised to learn how much information they are missing in their interpersonal interactions by virtue of operating from a narrowed threat-activated nervous system. Body language, micro-expressions, tonal shifts, the relational subtext of what is being communicated underneath the content: these are the signals that the most effective negotiators, advocates and leaders read with extraordinary precision. They are also the signals that become harder to notice as the nervous system reduces what it can take in when under long term stress. The lawyer who was once able to read a room with remarkable accuracy finds themselves increasingly unable to anticipate the emotional trajectory of a client or opposing counsel. The executive whose interpersonal acuity once gave them a genuine competitive advantage finds themselves increasingly surprised by how people react to them. This is not a mystery. It is neuroscience.

10. A New Model: Integrated Performance Psychology

What I am describing throughout this paper is not a new set of problems. These are ancient patterns playing out in modern professional environments. What I am proposing is a new way of addressing them: an integrated approach that works simultaneously across the domains of neuroscience, physiology, psychology, performance, relationship and leadership without subordinating any one domain to the others.

This is what I call Integrated Performance Psychology. It is the framework I have been developing and refining for three decades of practice. It rests on a set of foundational propositions that distinguish it from both conventional psychological practice and from the performance coaching industry.

The Propositions of Integrated Performance Psychology

The first proposition is that the person and the performance cannot be separated. Any approach that addresses performance without addressing the person, or addresses the person

without addressing the performance, is working with an incomplete picture and will produce incomplete results.

The second proposition is that the nervous system is the substrate of all performance. Cognitive capacity, emotional intelligence, relational effectiveness, physical energy and decision quality are all downstream of nervous system regulation. Working at the level of the nervous system is not an alternative to performance work. It is the foundation of it.

The third proposition is that recovery is not the opposite of performance. It is the precondition for it. The industry that treats rest, sleep, emotional processing and relational investment as indulgences is systematically undermining the very capacity it claims to be developing.

The fourth proposition is that lasting change at this level requires working across all relevant domains simultaneously. The sleep cannot be fixed while the nervous system remains in chronic activation. Relationships cannot heal while emotions are still being pushed down. Mental performance cannot improve while the physical toll on the body is left unaddressed. These systems all affect each other continuously. They need to be treated as one connected whole.

The fifth and most disruptive proposition is that the professionals most in need of this work are the least likely to seek it voluntarily, because the very patterns that make them exceptional at what they do, self-sufficiency, performance orientation, the conversion of vulnerability into productivity, are the same patterns that create barriers to help-seeking. Which means that the framework for engaging this population must be built around credibility, precision and the language of performance rather than the language of therapy.

Integrated Performance Psychology does not ask the high performer to become less. It asks them to discover what more is possible when the system is finally running at its actual capacity.

11. What Recovery Actually Looks Like

I want to be specific about this because the word recovery has been colonised by a wellness industry that has made it synonymous with spa retreats, meditation apps and green juice. What I mean by recovery is something significantly more rigorous and significantly more demanding.

Recovery, in the context of integrated performance psychology, is a systematic process of restoring regulatory capacity across the biological, psychological and relational domains. It is not passive. It is not quick. And it looks different for every person, because the specific patterns of depletion and dysregulation are always individual.

What the Process Involves

Sleep restoration is almost always the first priority, because without adequate sleep architecture, the nervous system cannot complete the recovery processes that everything else depends on. This is not simply a matter of going to bed earlier. It requires a detailed assessment of sleep patterns and the drivers of disruption, followed by targeted interventions at the physiological, behavioural and psychological level.

Nervous system recalibration is the second domain. This involves developing a precise understanding of the individual's specific threat baseline, the triggers that activate the survival response, and the patterns that sustain chronic activation. The work of recalibration is gradual and requires both insight and consistent practice. It draws on neuroscience, somatic work, and carefully calibrated psychological intervention.

Physical health assessment and restoration runs in parallel, because the physiological load that has accumulated must be understood and addressed rather than simply managed with supplements or biohacking protocols. This is where collaboration with medical specialists becomes important, and where my understanding of physiology and the medical world my clients inhabit becomes a significant clinical advantage.

Relational work is the domain that most clients approach last and that produces some of the most profound shifts. Rebuilding genuine intimacy, developing emotional intelligence that has been suppressed for years, learning to be present in ways that have not been practiced for a long time: this is difficult, sometimes uncomfortable, and consistently transformative.

Leadership and performance integration is the domain in which everything converges. As the system restores, the quality of the performance changes in ways that the person often finds surprising. They think more openly and adapt more easily. They understand people

better and read situations more accurately. They make better decisions when things get tough. They lead with more confidence and impact. These are not minor results. They are real, meaningful and lasting.

ON TIMEFRAMES

Genuine integrated recovery at this level is not a twelve-week program. In my experience, the transformation from the state in which most high performers arrive to the state in which they are operating at their actual integrated capacity takes between one and three years of consistent, committed work. What changes in that time is not a set of habits. It is the person.

12. The Conversation the Industry Refuses to Have

I want to close this paper with the conversation that most of my professional peers are not having, because having it requires a level of directness about the failures of the professional support industry that most practitioners are unwilling to bring.

The industry that purports to support high-performing professionals, the executive coaches, the mindfulness consultants, the leadership trainers, the organisational psychologists, the wellness programs delivered by firms to their most valuable people, is, with notable exceptions, working with models that are inadequate to the actual problem.

The coaching industry offers performance without depth. It optimises behaviour without addressing the underlying psychological structure. It delivers frameworks and tools into a system that is running in survival mode and calls the resulting performance improvement a success, while the depletion continues beneath the surface.

Traditional psychology and therapy focus on inner emotional work, but often miss what makes high performers different. They do not account for the specific pressures, expectations, and sense of identity that come with operating at the top of a professional field. The result is that many high performers have a brief, unsatisfying experience of conventional therapy and conclude, incorrectly, that this kind of support is not for people like them.

The wellness industry offers neither depth nor performance context. It offers temporary relief and sustainable revenue.

What is missing, what has been missing for the entire period of my practice, is a model that takes the performance seriously, takes the person seriously, understands the specific world these individuals inhabit, and works at the level of genuine integration. A model with the rigour of clinical psychology, the precision of performance science, the breadth of physiological and medical understanding, and the relational sophistication to work with people who are accustomed to being the most capable person in most rooms.

The Cost of the Status Quo

The cost of the current inadequacy is not abstract. It is measured in careers that end prematurely. In health events that were preventable. In families that were fractured. In leaders who reached the height of their organisational influence precisely when their personal resources were most depleted. In the enormous number of exceptionally talented, extraordinarily capable people who are operating at a fraction of what they are actually capable of, not because they lack intelligence or commitment or resources, but because no one in their professional life has ever addressed them as a whole human being.

That is the work I do. It is the work I have spent a career building, refining, and standing behind. And it is the work that I believe represents not just the future of professional performance support, but the standard that the field should already have reached.

You did not build this career by accepting standards that were insufficient. There is no reason to accept them now.

About This Paper

This white paper draws on extensive direct clinical practice with senior lawyers, specialist medical practitioners and corporate executives operating at the highest levels of their

respective fields. It reflects clinical observation, current neuroscientific and psychological research, and the author's integrated model of Integrated Performance Psychology.

It is intended as a resource for high-performing professionals, for human resources directors and talent leaders who support them, for researchers and practitioners in the field of performance psychology, and for any person who recognises in its pages something true about themselves or the people they work with.
