



AMC 2023

Closing Plenary

**Be On Fire, Not Burned Out!
Strategies for Resilience in
Challenging Times**

Courtney Clark, Austin, TX

About the Presenter...

Courtney Clark is the luckiest unlucky person in the world. After a series of major struggles beginning in her mid-20s, she has built two successful businesses and is the author of two books, including her most recent book *The Successful Struggle: Powerful Techniques to Achieve Accelerated Resilience*. She works with people who want to adapt faster and achieve more and has spoken worldwide to organizations like Procter & Gamble, Dell, S&P, Humana, Cisco, and Cardinal Health. Courtney's resilience work has been called "practical, " "powerful, " and "empowering" by industry leaders, and she's been featured in *Forbes*, *Psychology Today*, *USA Today*, and *The Chicago Tribune*. If she wasn't writing and speaking about resilience, Courtney would have wanted to be a tap dancer. Thankfully for her audiences, she wasn't very good at it.



Be On Fire, Not Burned Out!

Strategies for Resilience in Challenging Times

Introduce Theme: How do we succeed when life doesn't go according to plan?

- Professional concepts explored: resilience-building tools, stress management, work-life balance

Strategy 1: Let Go of the Plan

- Participatory activity: "Touch something"
Purpose - the tactic of finding a new plan when we hit an obstacle
- Developing professional and personal resilience

Strategy 2: Control Chaos

- Participatory activity: "Snowball Fight"
Purpose - Stress management. Identifying the triggers that cause us to lose focus when we become overwhelmed
- Introduction of the Stop, Drop & Roll technique for navigating stress
Understanding how to override stress hormones
- Participatory activity: "Internal Locus of Control"
Purpose - learning how to identify internal vs external locus of control to aid in stress management

Strategy 3: Find Perspective on Our Challenges

- Case study: how we lose perspective
Develop strategies to improve work-life balance,
- Present Courtney's original research: the #1 strategy to increase perspective if you've lost it

Closing



POWERFUL TECHNIQUES
TO ACHIEVE
ACCELERATED RESILIENCE

Courtney Clark

Incline Ink
Austin, Texas



THE SUCCESSFUL STRUGGLE

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Austin, Texas

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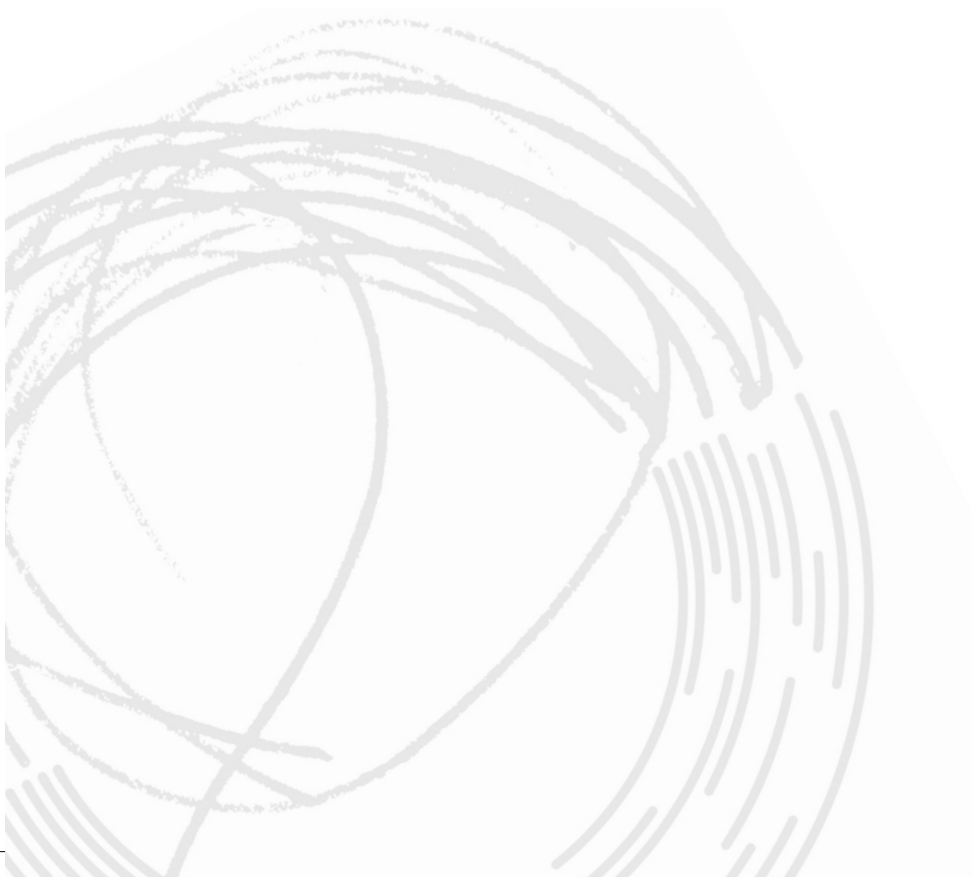
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To the ones in my life who have been there
for both the successes *and* the struggles:
none of this is possible without you.





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INTRODUCTION

AT 26 YEARS OLD, I BELIEVED I WAS INVINCIBLE.

You've probably experienced that feeling of being invincible at some point in your life, too. Most of us can remember a time when we felt like nothing could touch us, and everything we wanted could be obtained through a simple combination of hard work and luck. We were charmed. Life was good. Anything was possible.

Earlier that year, the year I still believed I was invincible, I had moved across the country, bought a house, and landed a prestigious new job with a local nonprofit agency. After a particularly harried month of work and volunteer events, I knew I needed to get away for a weekend of relaxation, so I booked a trip to a beautiful spa a few hours away. I planned a lovely long weekend of yoga, hiking, and massages to try to shake off the stresses of my busy life. I even turned off my cell phone, to complete the happy illusion of having truly "escaped" the real world for a short while.

My getaway was a success! I left the spa after three days in a complete state of rejuvenation and bliss. I had gotten so relaxed, in fact, that I forgot my phone was still turned off. I made the entire two and a half hour drive home in silence, never once giving a thought to the phone that was tucked away in my bag, its screen dark. It wasn't until I was turning onto my street that I realized I had never turned it back on. Grudgingly, I reached into my purse and hit the power button. The phone churned to life as I pulled into my driveway. As I was walking through the door, the phone pinged in my hand, alerting me to a message.



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As I listened to the voice mail, it didn't occur to me to be alarmed by the words I was hearing. I didn't realize, back then, that when your doctor, whom you had recently visited for a routine dermatology exam, calls at 9pm on a Sunday night and leaves an urgent-sounding voice mail to call her back immediately, that you **should** be alarmed! So I punched in her number, completely oblivious to the fact that my life was about to change.

As she spoke, I suddenly realized I was no longer invincible. I had cancer.

Over the next few days, I became an expert on things I never thought I would even need to know about. I learned what malignant invasive melanoma meant. I learned about treatment methods, surgical techniques, and medical options. I researched doctors and hospitals. I finally learned how my health insurance actually worked! And I learned things about myself too, like how I would react when it became clear that my very life was being threatened.

When my surgeon took out the tumor, he also removed two nearby lymph nodes to check for cancer. For 10 days I waited as they dissected those lymph nodes, looking for any sign that the cancer had spread. Metastatic melanoma is a devastating disease, and I sat up in bed those 10 nights, wishing for sleep but knowing it wouldn't come until I had some good news.

When the call from my doctor came in I hesitated before picking up. My heart was pounding in my ears as I reluctantly answered. But my doctor's voice on the other end of the line was happy, and the news was good. The surgery had gotten it all, and I was cancer-free. Life was good. For now.

Looking back on that day, the day my illusion of invincibility was shattered, I realize now that none of us is bullet-proof. Life is filled with moments of challenge. Struggle is unavoidable. Job security isn't guaranteed. We get ill. We fight with our families. A raise and promotion go hand in hand with longer hours and more stress.



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When life doesn't go the way we expect, we're often knocked off balance. Have you ever caught yourself saying, "Why is this happening to me?!" If so, you're not alone. In fact, almost everyone I've spoken to on this topic has had that exact same thought. The answer is that it happens to a lot of people. **Everyone struggles at some point in life.**

In those moments when we feel like we've somehow lost the path we're supposed to be on, and life has become extra-challenging, we look for ways to set the world right again. Resilience-building techniques have become a focus of research, articles, and books over the past several years as all of us look for ways we can buffer ourselves against the struggles of life. We're on a hunt for strategies to continue to succeed at life and at work.

If you've ever turned to a friend for advice on how to bounce back after a struggle, or found an internet article on the topic, you'll be familiar with a lot of these techniques: Meditate. Volunteer. Adopt a pet. Lean on a friend. Avoid venting. Don't blow things out of proportion.

All of these techniques certainly do build resilience. I have used them often, as ways to get over my own struggles. But there's something interesting about these techniques. While they're all valuable, they aren't quite all created equal. They don't all work the same way or solve the same problems. Specific tactics, research shows, work well for specific types of situations, struggles, and stressors. Likewise, specific tactics clearly **don't** work in other situations. They are all useful, but not *interchangeable*.

If you don't understand how to apply the right resilience tools to the particular challenging situation at hand, you run the risk of frustration when the tactics you try don't work. The more you try and fail, the more helpless you feel, until you eventually give up.

In this book, you will learn how to determine which type, or state, of struggle you are experiencing, which coping strategies





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are the best match for that struggle, and how to deploy those specific strategies to be at your most resilient. By matching the struggle you are experiencing to the right resilience strategies, you will achieve accelerated resilience, and be able to recover from times of struggle more quickly. You will, in essence, have a more successful struggle.

Using The Right Tool at the Right Time

The word “coping” is off-putting to some people. Coping can be perceived as negative, such as when you say someone is “merely coping” with a situation. It’s true that coping and resilience can appear very different to an outside observer, because “coping” seems to connote an ongoing, laborious struggle, while “resilience” is perceived as describing a near-instantaneous recovery.

But even those people who exhibit extreme resilience, and bounce back quickly, do so using coping tactics. In fact, it’s their effective and prompt use of these powerful techniques that allows them to be resilient in the first place. Resilient people don’t bypass coping completely, they just don’t linger there very long. To put a prompt end to your struggle, you must cope effectively and quickly.

Focusing on the wrong resilience strategies, however, not only doesn’t help us, it can actually set us back. When we deploy a technique that doesn’t pay off, we can begin to feel like nothing will work. We worry that life might never return to normal again.

For accelerated resilience to occur, we must select the right resilience tool for each job. The powerful techniques in this book are designed to move you from struggle to success in the shortest amount of time possible. In today’s world, we don’t have time to solve our struggles slowly. We don’t just need resilience; we need accelerated resilience to recover as quickly as possible. The two figures below show the difference between resilience trajectories when the strategies are applied correctly and when they are not.

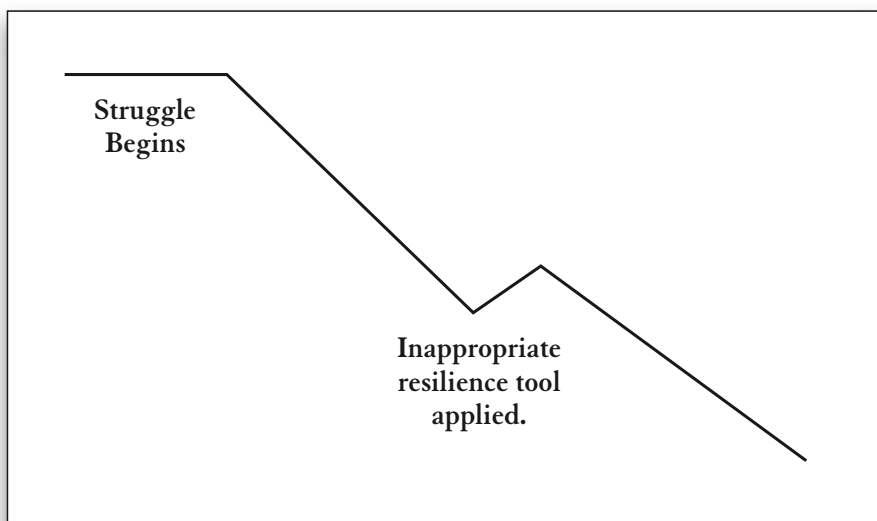




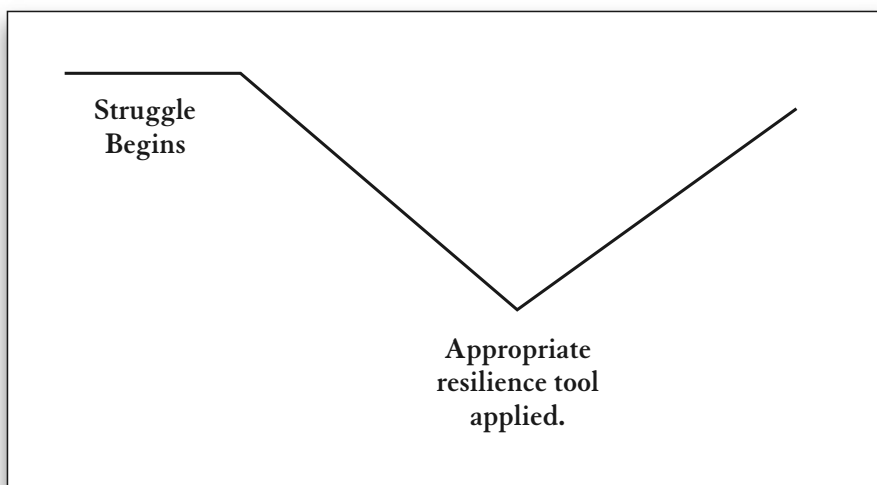
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MODEL 1.1



MODEL 1.2



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Following my cancer diagnosis and subsequent surgery, I tried to shake off the experience and go back to being a normal 26-year-old. Many things about my life were the same: I was still working at a nonprofit organization, I still had lots of adopted dogs waiting for me at the end of every day, and I still blasted Broadway show tunes during my commute (don't judge!). But I made a lot of changes, too. I moved to a new city and took a job at a young adult cancer survivor support nonprofit. I started dating again, after the breakup of my previous relationship following the cancer. I quickly started mentoring other young adults with a diagnosis of melanoma like mine.

It was a full year, however, before I realized that my zealous pursuit of "normal" was leading me to a dead end. At the end of the day, I still found myself feeling vulnerable and sorry for myself. I was stuck feeling like a victim. I was working at the cancer nonprofit full-time, helping other young adults navigate the crazy waters of diagnosis, treatment, and recovery when the founder (my boss) sent me to speak at an event a few hours away, presenting to a room full of doctors and survivors. I talked about the mission of our organization and told a little bit of my story. Mostly, I tried to inject plenty of humor into the situation, and was even able to laugh about my diagnosis and the ways my life had changed since then.

When I finished speaking, two women walked up to me. The mother introduced herself first, with tears in her eyes. Her daughter, she told me, had been diagnosed four months earlier. They had been fighting for weeks about every little thing: whether the daughter could safely go out with friends, what kind of treatment should she choose, etc. The mother then told me, and the daughter confirmed, that the cancer diagnosis had been tearing their relationship apart. The mother looked at me and grabbed my hand:

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“Everything I heard you say is what she’s been telling me. I wasn’t listening to her, I didn’t understand,” she whispered. “I’m so glad you were here today. Now I get it. Now I know how I can support her.”

Whether anyone else heard what I said that day or not, I changed two lives. And I changed my own perspective on my diagnosis as well. Instead of feeling sorry for myself, I felt grateful that I had the opportunity to smooth the path for somebody else, based on my own struggle. My cancer finally had a payoff, a deeper meaning.

For months I had been relying on survival tactics that had worked for me before, to get over things like breakups, big changes at work, or losing a job. But none of them had worked this time, and they just left me more and more frustrated. At last, I had found the tactic designed to work for exactly this moment—finding the silver lining.

Finding the right resilience tactic is a little bit like trying to accomplish household chores at my house. I’m now married to a wonderful man. But... every single time I ask my husband for a household fix, he cheerfully walks up to me with his electric rechargeable screwdriver. Using that screwdriver is quick and easy. That screwdriver does solve a lot of problems in our house, like when a nail just isn’t big enough to hold the new painting we bought at a nonprofit auction. But sometimes, I just need him to bring the darn hammer. Or the saw. If my husband could, I think he would mow the lawn with the electric screwdriver!

Though you wouldn’t know it to watch my husband around the house, we do have more than one tool in the toolbox out in our garage. And they all come in handy for their different tasks. In the same way, your resilience is like a toolbox. When you are faced with a problem that’s dragging you down, you don’t need just any tool, you need exactly the right tool. This book is designed to help



you not only stock your toolbox full of techniques, but also to help you learn how to reach in and pick out exactly the one tailored to the specific challenge at hand. No matter what situation or struggle is draining your resilience, you'll be able to fix it with the appropriate techniques for the job.

By the end of the book, you may decide to retire some techniques you've been relying on that aren't working for you. Or you may decide to put them on hiatus, and only pull them out for the specific situations where they're prescribed. And it can be hard to part ways with resilience strategies on which you've relied for years! They sometimes feel like old friends. But the wrong techniques matched with the wrong situations can hinder you, so if you find you've been relying on the wrong strategy all along, don't dwell on it. Just work to move forward and start turning the new tactics into a habit.

Two Types of Techniques— And Why You Need Both

Sometimes when we struggle, we're actually struggling on two different fronts. We have the original root cause of the struggle, or the problem. That's usually something external to us, like something that happened in our environment or something that someone else is doing that is causing the struggle. But we can also be challenged by our own emotions and responses, which becomes a secondary struggle. The way we instinctively respond to a situation can sometimes make us feel worse!

Because we may be struggling on two fronts, you'll see that many of the solutions in this book are designed to help you cope in two ways. Problem-focused coping is one of the most commonly suggested ways to cope with any kind of struggle. Problem-focused coping means coming up with a solution that gets at the heart of



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the issue, and that – hopefully – ultimately corrects or remediates the underlying problem. Problem-focused coping is an active strategy, and the goal is that it fixes the cause of your struggle.

But not all struggles can be fixed, or they can't be fixed right away, and the lack of a quick solution can cause us to slide even more deeply into our struggle. Studies show that when problem-focused coping doesn't completely solve a problem, emotion-focused coping becomes important, as well. Emotion-focused coping is aimed at addressing the feelings and reactions you have to the problem. In other words, the aim of emotion-focused coping is to make you feel better whether the problem is fixed or not.

Problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping may feel like two completely different tactics, but you can and should make them work together. Problem-focused coping is appropriate and effective in the workplace, but we tend to deal with turmoil in our personal lives with a more emotional approach. Some people may feel that they are more inclined to use one type of technique over the other, because of their personality. But research shows that all of us, no matter our nature, need to have a wide variety of these tools at our disposal. Your application of any given strategy may be unique to you, but the techniques work regardless of who you are and how you prefer to behave. The bottom line is, both types of techniques can (and should!) be performed both at work and at home. In many sections of this book, you'll see that combining both problem-focused and emotion-focused tactics leads to more effective handling of the situation than using only one or the other.

Six States of Struggle

You may have a habitual way you usually react when you are under stress. Maybe you lash out at others, or maybe you retreat into silence. We often fall into the same patterns when we're under stress, even if the cause is different every time. In order to actually

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address the root cause of the stress and find resilience, however, you need to know what kind of stress you are facing.

This book addresses six major states, or types, of struggle. Each has a specific cause, makes you behave in certain ways, and threatens your well-being for different reasons. And because the root cause of each of the six states of struggle is different, the tactics you need to use are unique for each. If choosing the “right” resilience techniques means matching them to the struggle you’re experiencing, it’s essential that you know what struggle you’re experiencing.

The six states of struggle are *change*, *chaos*, *conflict*, *rejection*, *illness and injury*, and *powerlessness*. We struggle with *change* when it is unexpected, unwanted, or so massive that it causes upheaval. *Chaos* is the experience of being overwhelmed, too busy, and frantic. *Conflict* occurs when we have clashing beliefs or values with another person that cannot be easily resolved. *Rejection* is the experience of being unwanted, excluded, or blocked from a desire or goal. Physical struggles like *illness and injury* can threaten our very lives, as well as our capabilities to carry on the way we used to. Finally, *powerlessness* is a struggle that can arise out of any of the other five struggles, when our attempts to correct what’s going wrong in our world have failed, and we begin to feel we have no control over our challenges.

Sometimes it’s obvious which of the six states of struggle you’re in, but sometimes it isn’t so clear. Struggle often just feels like struggle, when we’re in the middle of it. We’re stressed, we’re angry, we’re totally consumed. No matter what caused it, we just feel like we’re dangling at the end of our rope. When we’re stressed, we’re not seeing things in a simple way. Everything tends to roll together and get complicated, clumping up into one giant feeling of stress.

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So how can you tell which state you're in?

If you're feeling:

depressed, hopeless, helpless, and not in control

You might be experiencing:

powerlessness

If you're feeling:

confused, upended, out-of-sorts, and like you don't know your place in the world anymore

You might be experiencing:

change

If you're feeling:

overwhelmed, overloaded, exhausted, or burned out

You might be experiencing:

chaos

If you're feeling:

angry, irritated, and offended, particularly directed at a single person or group

You might be experiencing:

conflict

If you're feeling:

unimportant, unsuccessful, unwanted, excluded, or heartbroken

You might be experiencing:

rejection

If you're feeling:

like your life is threatened, your health is bad, and you're facing your mortality

You might be experiencing:

illness or injury



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Knowing what struggle you’re experiencing helps you resist the kind of rash reactions that can negatively impact you and the people around you. If you’re starting to feel stressed because of changes at work, but you haven’t yet recognized it for what it is, you might find yourself being ill-tempered with your friends and family. Or perhaps you’re becoming less solution-oriented at meetings with your colleagues. Identify the struggle as soon as you start to feel some of the signals listed on the previous page, and take action. When you deploy your resilience strategies in a timely manner (if they’re the **right** strategies!) you can work your way out of the struggle before it takes its toll on you and the people around you.

One common struggle this book does not address is grief. Grief is the feeling that arises from a situation of loss, and it has been widely written about. While grief can indeed be an incredible struggle, this book focuses on six other types of struggle because grief is a state people **expect** you to struggle with. You are less likely to be expected to “snap out of” grief, whereas with many other struggles you are called on to “just deal with it.” Accelerated resilience is not expected, nor necessarily possible, when confronted with grief.

The first struggle we’re going to explore is powerlessness. Powerlessness is unique because it is actually a secondary state that can often occur when you get stuck for too long in any of the other struggles. We need to start with it, however, because if you’re stuck in powerlessness, none of the tactics will work until you can shift your mindset and feel a little more personal control. So first you’ll learn how to regain your personal power, if you need to, so you can then attack the challenge that led you to feel powerless in the first place.

In the sections on change, chaos, conflict, rejection, and illness or injury, you will learn more about what your brain and your emotions are experiencing as you go through each of those struggles, and you’ll learn which resilience techniques are best suited

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for each one. The more techniques you know and can use to manage your struggles, the more flexible you can be. Reading this book, you won't just learn exactly which tactics match with which struggle, you'll also hopefully learn some new tactics, because the bigger the toolbox you have, the more flexible you can be when you need to overcome a stressful situation.

Each section also contains a Leader's Toolbox, with specific strategies for how to handle each state of struggle within a workplace setting. When an employee struggles, often an entire division or business struggles, and company leadership can be called upon to help navigate the effort. The techniques in the Leader's Toolbox section are intended to help you manage your employees in a fair and productive way.

LET'S FACE IT...WHEN YOU'RE STRUGGLING, NO MATTER WHAT the root cause, you just feel bad! But you don't have to stay stuck in that place, because there's a science behind feeling better, and we're going to unlock it with specific techniques designed to get right to the heart of your particular struggle. You're going to learn how to avoid wasting time trying techniques that aren't an appropriate fit for your problem, or tactics that would work for someone else but not you.

Every suggestion in the following chapters has been proven to work, and to work in specific ways, on specific problems. By the end of the book, you'll have assembled a toolbox full of tools you can use on any problem that challenges you. Knowing the right techniques will help you build resilience faster, and waste less time trying to cope in ways that don't work. Are you ready to stop struggling?

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