

# **The Practice of Groundedness**

# **What's in it for me? Learn how to ground yourself for a life of happiness and sustainable success.**

October 2017. The author, Brad Stulberg, was in the middle of a long-distance drive. He was just sitting there, minding his own business when suddenly, an unprovoked thought hit him like a brick dropping from the sky. "You should just drive off the road and end it all right now," it said. "Your family will be fine without you." Deep down, he knew he didn't really believe that thought. But he couldn't shake it. What followed were four of the hardest hours of his life. And it wasn't the first or last time he'd suffer an experience like this. Highly distressing, intrusive thoughts and feelings had become normal occurrences for him. This is the story of what he went through, how he got out of it, and the lessons he learned along the way. In these blinks, you'll learn

why many of us are suffering from a way of thinking called heroic individualism; why the alternative is to cultivate something called groundedness; and why human beings have a lot to learn from redwood trees.

## **Heroic individualism leads to burnout and unhappiness.**

A few years ago, Stulberg's life seemed right on track. He was only 31, but already establishing himself as a well-respected expert on the science of human performance. He'd recently published a best-selling book on the topic. His articles had appeared in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. He was coaching elite athletes, entrepreneurs, and executives. But beneath the shiny surface of his external success, something dark was happening inside him. Seemingly out of nowhere, he developed a debilitating form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD. For nearly a year, he was almost constantly tormented by intrusive thoughts and feelings of despair, anxiety, and self-harm. The experience shook him to his core, and it led him to rethink the way of life he'd been practicing and preaching – a way of life he now calls heroic individualism. The key message here is: Heroic individualism leads to burnout and unhappiness. Do you feel like whoever you are and whatever you do, it's never enough? Are you always measuring yourself and your achievements against impossibly high standards and fixating on the inevitable gap between them? Are you always pushing yourself to bridge that gap? And do you feel like however far you go, you've never arrived at the finish line – which makes you want to push yourself even harder? If so, you may be suffering from heroic individualism – a way of thinking that's become widespread in Western culture. It tells people that whoever they are and whatever they do, it's never enough. Everyone always needs to be more productive, more optimized, more successful. Under the spell of heroic individualism, people feel compelled to tackle too many tasks at too fast a pace, under way too much pressure. As a result, they feel scattered, rushed, and exhausted. And because they're so fixated on their external accomplishments, they can't even properly rest; they feel empty or restless whenever they're not pursuing them. The predictable result? Persistent feelings of burnout and unhappiness. For many people, this creates general dissatisfaction with life. For others, it can provoke serious mental health problems, like the ones Stulberg experienced. Either way, heroic individualism

leads to a dead end. So, how do you escape? That's what Stulberg asked himself after his struggle with OCD – and he found the answer in an unlikely place.

## **The antidote to heroic individualism is to focus on your roots – the principles and practices that keep you grounded.**

On a cool, breezy day in northern California, Stulberg went on a hike in a forest. Looking up at the massive redwood trees surrounding him, he had an epiphany. What enables a redwood to soar hundreds of feet into the air while getting buffeted by strong, sometimes violent winds? It's not the tree's canopy constantly striving to grow higher and higher. It's the roots keeping it firmly anchored to the ground. But under the spell of heroic individualism, people become fixated on their metaphorical canopies. They worry too much about their external achievements. As a result, they overstrain themselves, making them vulnerable to the winds of life. Eventually, they may topple, as Stulberg learned firsthand with his struggle with OCD. The alternative? Be like a redwood. The key message here is: The antidote to heroic individualism is to focus on your roots – the principles and practices that keep you grounded. What does it mean to be grounded? Well, for starters, it means you feel a sense of inner strength, stability, and confidence. The word inner is crucial here. The sense of being grounded doesn't rely on or derive from external achievements; it dwells deep inside of you. As a result, it doesn't wax and wane with the ups and downs of success and failure. It stays constant – helping you stay calm and steady, even in the midst of turbulence. But it's more than just a feeling. When you're grounded, you're grounded in something – namely, the people, activities, and areas of life you care about the most. That's why being grounded also means living in alignment with your values, and focusing your time and energy on what's most important to you, whether it's family, health, community, spirituality, or anything else. The essentialness of being grounded is hardly a new discovery. In one way or another, it can be found in both the modern science of clinical psychology and the ancient spiritual traditions of Buddhism, Taoism, Stoicism, and Christianity. Drawing from their ideas and research, it's possible to identify six core principles of groundedness, along with a variety of practices that you can use to implement them in your life. Together, these six principles and their related practices provide you with the roots you need to develop to become grounded. So, what are those principles? That's what the rest of these blinks are all about.

## **Accept your present reality the way it is, so you can work on changing it into the future you desire.**

When Stulberg began his struggle with OCD, his initial reactions were denial and wishful thinking. He told himself his intrusive thoughts and feelings were “just” in his mind – they weren't real. Or maybe they were just the symptoms of a weird physical illness that would eventually pass. When that didn't happen, he switched gears from denial to resistance, trying to force his thoughts and feelings to go away. He figured that if anyone could will himself out of a mental problem, surely it was him – an expert

on mental performance. But the more he tried to push it away, the stronger it became. Eventually, he realized he couldn't just fight his problem, pretend it didn't exist, or hope it would magically disappear. He needed to do something else – which brings us to the first principle of groundedness. The key message here is: Accept your present reality the way it is, so you can work on changing it into the future you desire. In the face of undesirable thoughts, feelings, or circumstances, many people succumb to the same reactions Stulberg exhibited with his OCD: denial, wishful thinking, or resistance. Now, the first two tactics are obviously unhelpful, but resistance might seem like a different story. After all, what's the alternative? Just accepting things the way they are? Well, yes – but that doesn't mean passive resignation. It just means acknowledging the reality of a problem in a calm, nonreactive, neutral manner. The more neutral, the better. Take a page from an ancient Buddhist parable and think about it this way: If you're experiencing a negative thought, feeling, or event, it's as if you've already been pierced by one arrow. But if you react to it with another negative thought or feeling, you're shooting yourself with a second arrow, making the injury even worse. These negative thoughts and feelings often hinge on the idea that things shouldn't be the way they are. With that in mind, try to avoid the word should when evaluating your present reality. Instead of saying, I should be doing this differently, say, I want to do this differently. And instead of saying, This shouldn't be happening, say, I wish this wasn't happening. That way, you're not just unproductively gnashing your teeth about your situation. Instead, you're calmly acknowledging it – along with your desire to do something about it. That's not resignation; that's preparing for action.

## **To be grounded in what matters to you and grow things to fruition, stay present and be patient.**

Accepting his OCD was the crucial first step on Stulberg's road to recovery, but it was also just that: the first step. The path ahead was long and difficult. There was no overnight cure. In fact, strictly speaking, there was no cure at all. Rather than getting rid of his OCD, he had to learn how to deal with it in a healthy manner, and that meant many months of therapy and work on himself. The details vary, but the same general lesson applies to everyone's life. When it comes to the biggest problems and goals, the path to success and happiness is rarely short and easy. To stay on that path and keep making progress, you have to maintain focus and stick around for the long haul, which is what the next two principles of groundedness are about. The key message here is: To be grounded in what matters to you and grow things to fruition, stay present and be patient. Think of your attention as being like water. You have only so much of it to go around – so the question becomes: Which seeds will you give it to? Chances are, you're scattering it in too many directions rather than focusing it on what's most important to you. That's partly because digital distractions are almost constantly vying for your attention. And it's also because Western culture promotes busyness for its own sake, which leads people to getting caught up in busywork. To stay focused, you need to minimize distractions by turning off notifications, putting away unnecessary devices, and blocking off times for uninterrupted work or quality time with yourself or your loved ones. You also need to reassess your busyness by periodically asking yourself, Is what I'm doing really necessary? And is it serving my deepest values? If not, what could I do to stop scattering my "water" and focus it on the seeds I want to grow? Of course, a seed needs more than water to grow; it also needs time. The same goes for the biggest

goals in life. Unfortunately, Western culture also encourages people to rush everything to completion as quickly as possible. This not only leads to burnout but also half-baked results at best and self-defeating outcomes at worst. For instance, athletes can easily injure themselves if they train too hard to achieve their fitness goals too fast. To counteract this tendency and adopt a more patient attitude, break your goals down into smaller steps, and then focus on just completing the one you're on. Slow and steady wins the race – step by step by step.

## **To achieve real strength, embrace vulnerability.**

A few years ago, Stulberg received an email from a young man. He wanted to ask a question that would normally seem rather flattering: How had Stulberg achieved such an accomplished and fulfilling life by his early 30s? Little did the man know that on that very day, Stulberg was struggling with especially acute symptoms of OCD. He was being tormented by thoughts and feelings of his life being meaningless. The email made him feel like a fraud. On the outside, he was presenting himself as a strong, successful person – an expert on performance, no less. But on the inside, he was falling apart, hardly performing at all. He decided he needed to come clean. What happened next taught him a valuable lesson on the next principle of groundedness. The key message here is: To achieve real strength, embrace vulnerability. Like Stulberg, many people are living double lives these days. Both online and off, they present themselves as strong, happy, and successful individuals who are always living their personal and professional lives to the fullest. Think of the selective pictures they post on Instagram and accomplishments they tout on LinkedIn. Think of the hypercompetent personas they project at their workplaces. Of course, in reality, everyone has flaws, limitations, and struggles. But they feel reluctant to expose these vulnerabilities, due to the toxic combination of social media and a culture of heroic individualism, which encourages them to always be positive, act invincible, and operate at 100 percent. They're afraid of looking weak. Many people don't even want to admit to themselves that they fall short of these impossible standards, let alone to others. But true strength requires acknowledgment of weakness. It takes courage to be open and honest about your imperfections. It's also liberating. After receiving that email from the young man, Stulberg decided to write a magazine essay detailing his struggle with OCD – the first time he'd made it public. Afterward, he experienced a deep sense of relief. He was no longer feeling the weight of pretending to be something he wasn't. Next time you're feeling that weight, pause and ask yourself: What are you hiding? What would you tell people if you could be completely honest about yourself? Then, as long as it won't hurt anyone, say it, and experience that liberation for yourself.

## **To ensure you're fully grounded, surround yourself with a supportive community.**

After Stulberg published his essay, he was flooded with hundreds of emails from readers. They wanted to thank him for opening up about his struggle. They also wanted to share their own mental health issues. Suddenly, he felt much less alone. That's a



powerful feeling – and there’s a reason for that. Remember those redwood trees? Stulberg learned something else about them after that epiphany he had while hiking. The reason they’re so firmly anchored to the ground isn’t that their roots are especially deep. In fact, they only descend six to twelve feet into the soil. Instead of growing downward, they focus on growing laterally. And as a result, their roots end up getting intertwined with those of their neighbors, forming a dense network of mutual support. That’s the secret to their stability. The key message here is: To ensure you’re fully grounded, surround yourself with a supportive community. Heroic individualism encourages people to view themselves as the name suggests: as lone individuals capable of performing heroic feats all on their own. Under the spell of this way of thinking, people come to see strength as an ability to shoulder their burdens by themselves, without any help. But in reality, no one is an island. As humans, we’re an intrinsically social species. Even more than those redwoods, we rely on each other for our strength. Acting like we can “go it alone” is just another way of pretending we’re something we’re not. It’s not a sustainable way of life. The alternative is to embrace the spirit of community – the sense that we’re not alone, that we’re all in this together. Of course, to embrace that spirit, you need to have an actual community to be part of. Unfortunately, in a time when many of us are living isolated lives, that’s easier said than done. If you’re not already part of a community, find one – or create one yourself. It could be a book club, a support group, a sports team, a volunteer organization, a religious congregation, or any other circle of people who share your interests and values. But don’t just show up to gatherings. Remember the other principles of groundedness. Be present. Be vulnerable. Put away your phone, be your authentic self, and share that self with others. In all likelihood, they’ll reciprocate by doing the same – and that’s when the power of community is truly unleashed.

## **To keep your mind grounded, keep your body moving.**

Among the many people who contacted Stulberg after he published his essay was a 32-year old woman named Andrea Barber. If you’re a similar age, you might know her better as Kimmy Gibbler – the character she played on the sitcom Full House back in the late ’80s and early ’90s. Her life hadn’t gone smoothly after her time as a child star on a hit TV show. For years, she’d struggled with depression and anxiety. Like Stulberg she eventually found help in many forms, including therapy and medication. But there was one thing that helped her more than anything else – and it was also the thing she was most eager to share with Stulberg. No, it wasn’t some miracle cure. It was running. And that brings us to the last principle of groundedness. The key message here is: To keep your mind grounded, keep your body moving. In Western thought, there’s a long tradition of viewing the mind and body as two separate things. But according to modern science, they’re more like two sides of the same coin – an integrated mind-body system, to put it technically. For instance, your gut bacteria can affect your mood, and your mental state can alter your heart rate. In these and many other ways, your mental health depends on your physical health, and vice-versa. Now, your body was made to move, not sit all day. Exercise is therefore crucial to both physical and mental health. That might not be news to everyone, but the benefits of exercise can still be astounding. Numerous studies have found it to be one of the most effective ways of both preventing and treating depression and anxiety. Running was a lifeline for Andrea Barber, and it’s helped Stulberg recover from his OCD. In fact, any form of aerobic exercise or strength training can help you become more grounded. Part of it’s the feel-good hormones that

exercise releases. But it's also the fact that it helps you practice the other principles of groundedness. In working out, you learn to accept discomfort, stay present with your body, and be patient with making gradual progress toward your fitness goals. And while you can certainly exercise alone, it's much more enjoyable with a buddy or a group, so it can also be a great way of building community.

## Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Many people focus too much on external achievements and view themselves as isolated individuals who have to carry their burdens alone. For a more balanced approach to life, practice the six principles of groundedness: accepting your present reality, staying present with it, being patient with your progress, allowing yourself to be vulnerable, embracing community, and keeping your body moving. And here's some more actionable advice: Start small to get going. The principles of groundedness won't do you any good unless you actually put them into practice. Here's one way to begin: take the six principles and identify three things you can start doing and three things you can stop doing to live in more alignment with each one. Make sure you set manageable, realistic goals – think baby steps, not giant leaps. For instance, to get your body moving, you don't have to commit to running a marathon or buying a gym full of fancy equipment. A brisk, 30-minute walk per day could be enough aerobic exercise. And for strength training, you can just do push-ups, squats, sit-ups, and other exercises that require nothing but your own body.