

# NEUROSPICY

*Dyslexia. ADHD.*

‘spicy’

JOHN O’SHEA

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eBook ISBN: 979-8-89795-750-7  
Paperback ISBN: 979-8-89795-751-4  
Hardcover ISBN: 979-8-89795-752-1

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## DEDICATION

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This is my tribute to those who believed in me even when I did not believe in myself.

To my family, Sarah, Oscar, Finn, Baxter, and Pepa I'm sorry for all the ups and downs, but so grateful to have you all in my corner. It's not always easy to live with a person like me with so many issues spinning around in my head, who thinks and acts differently on most things, including relationship management, business, family issues, raising kids ... the list is endless.

As you know, it's been an amazing journey, and I can't wait to see how the next stage of life pans out.

## TO THE READER

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This book might seem all over the place, disorganized, with no clear beginning or end. It probably won't follow the structure of a typical book, and if that's a problem for you, I'd say stop reading now.

Like the cover of the book, designed by my son and a few mates for a slab of beer, my head is like a jigsaw, pieces flying out of it represent my thought processes. This is just how my brain works—bits and pieces, all jumbled up.

Sometimes breaking it down into smaller thoughts helps me get things in order. I feel like my brain's fast—not necessarily smart, just quick. I think and process things rapidly, but the issue is, it's not always in the right direction. I've got Dyslexia and ADHD, and I welcome you to join me on this ride.

# CHAPTER - 1 -

---

*My brain feels like a jigsaw, like just after you pour the pieces on the table to get started and they spill out everywhere.*

Why I think we are here. At my present age of 58, my life has been like this:

I have no attention to detail.

I rush and lose focus quickly.

Very dyslexic and misread information then react with misinformation.

Impatient with others, don't do enough due diligence, and will rush into deals chasing quick wins.

Chop and change all the time, no clear path forward just jumping from rock to rock.

I don't have any enjoyment for myself because all my energy is in making money and supporting my family.

Take too many risks and don't respect money.

I seem to be able to build businesses but can't make them secure enough to provide stable income.

My choice of business partners is never good.

Take too many shortcuts in life, always need immediate satisfaction.

Involved family and friends in businesses which all seem to end badly.

Repeat bad behaviour and slow to learn from mistakes.

Don't communicate my true feelings and fear I have every day trying to support the family.

Smoke too much marijuana and drink too much, although I have cut this back.

No balance in life.

Due to my reckless behaviour, I lost our money with my brother with whom I was in business. This event also crashed my relationship with my family and started the downturn with my wife Sarah.

Did not pick up on Sarah's calls for help early.

Decided on a sea change to Bali, it was stressful as I had no steady income; we were always short of money.

Stayed in Bali too long as I was scared to come back to corporate life and the pressure.

## ⌘

I've probably said enough for the time being, but I'm sure you've got the picture. I've always had dyslexia, then in 2023, at age 56, I was diagnosed with Adult ADHD. My separated partner insisted I get diagnosed as she felt a lot of the damage in our marriage was due to my ADHD and dyslexia. So, I got a double whammy. But I always knew I had ADHD, I just didn't want to get on that bandwagon. I also have a very addictive personality and did not want to add another vice to the long list of vices I already had. My brain just feels like a jigsaw, like just after you pour the pieces on the table to get started and they spill out everywhere.

As a way for me to get information down onto paper I'm always looking for words I can spell or at least get close to being able to

spell, like writing number 56, not fiftysix, just small things which I do to cope with being dyslexic and ADHD but it's a constant struggle.

My life up until 2023 has been amazing. Beyond amazing. I've lived with Aboriginals in far north Australia who now call me 'Uncle'. I've travelled through the Middle East with nothing but a tent, visiting Nepal, India, Pakistan, Iran, Syria, Jordan, Israel - and all before I was 22 years old. I am the founding member and later Chairman of Wallangarra Outdoor Education Centre, which is a not-for-profit camp that has over 800 kids go through it each year now and employs eight to ten staff. I have had three amazing businesses that I started from scratch, all ahead of their time, which was exciting but also a nightmare at times. I have the best kids who are really grounded and live life to the full maximising every day like it's their last.

Yet I lost it all - my wife, my kids' respect, my self-worth and self-respect and so much money it makes me feel sick to think about it. Then in December 2023, it all came to a head. I got the worst news I could ever imagine, but more about that shortly.

I've been a failure for so long in my life, it's become like a comfort blanket. And I didn't realise the damage I was doing to the people who loved me and I loved so much. I was blind, walking through life like it was some crazy game, not caring if I moved ten steps back or jumped ten steps ahead. It was all just a game that in my view of the world was working really well. But it was all a mask, and I was faking it most of the time. When I was successful, I felt like an imposter, when I was failing, I felt more like myself.

Let me start somewhere near the beginning and explain my journey as best I can. School was a nightmare. It was fucken' hell. Every day and every minute were mental and, at times, physical torture. Pissing my bed until age ten, crying most days on the bus to school, feeling trapped and just wanting to kick the shit out of life and my teachers.

Can you imagine starting every day like this? Knowing you're about to take your bedsheets to the washing machine, knowing the next eight hours are going to be a battle with failure, not knowing if it'll be small and manageable or a massive canyon you feel you can't climb out of. It's like Groundhog Day—anxiety, stress, anger, self-hate. Rules I just couldn't follow—sit still. Teachers asking, "Why could you understand yesterday, but today you can't? You're just lazy and stupid." It's like being stuck on a roller coaster you can't get off, and every corner you turn, more crap gets thrown at you. Catch it or duck.

With early signs of a learning problem, my parents arranged after-school tutoring for me when I was just eight years old – one hour of special tuition while my friends played outdoors in the neighbourhood. I could hear them kicking the football, skateboarding, and having fun. To be set apart from my friends like this was a recipe for resentment, anger, and more frustration. Playtime is not the best time to be working on your English. I felt like a retard.

I'm going to tell you more about my school days, but my mind is jumping to 1994 and I feel I need to give some context to why I would be writing this book. Seems so long ago, but 1994 is so fresh in my mind because it changed so much for me and my struggles. I was in my late twenties, and I collaborated on a book about my dyslexia and how people learn. It sold thousands of copies. What a joke. I was an author and yet still struggling with reading and writing. I hated being an author and I hated the fact that people thought it was cool. Even my former school, Geelong Grammer, wrote me up as being one of the school's success stories because of it. That makes me laugh. The school that treated me like shit, like a retard, and punished me for being stupid in their eyes then claims my success as part of *their* achievements! So fucking typical of the education system. As you can tell, I'm not a big fan of the education system but more about that later as well.

Research has come a long way since that first book. Now, we hear the term ‘neurodiverse’, which generally encompasses autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia (language), dyscalculia (numbers), and dyspraxia (coordination).

Put simply, neurodiversity is a way of saying that some people’s brains have developed differently from the majority – and rather than focusing on curing or fixing what’s wrong, it’s important to see how we can accommodate people whose minds work differently – they’re neurodivergent.

Recently a friend Issy said I’m ‘neurospicy’. I just love that term. I looked up the meaning and apparently, it’s a lighthearted term that originally came from an online community of neurodivergent people. ‘Neurospicy’ is a way of describing a person who experiences multiple forms of neurodivergence, or a collective, such as a family that has many neurodivergent members.

I can’t keep writing dyslexia and ADHD so I was going to use ‘neurodivergent’. Fuck that, it’s too hard to spell, just ‘spicy’ will do. So, from now I’ll use the word ‘spicy’ when referring to my brain and also when I’m talking about both dyslexia and ADHD together but when I want to focus on one of them separately, I’ll refer to that in a singular form.

I’ve never thought that the term ADHD described the truth of what it’s like for me. I don’t have an attention deficit disorder. Quite the opposite, I have an overload of thoughts that are firing like a V8 engine that’s hard to control. It’s like a fast brain with no parachute or control valve and I find it difficult to keep the V8 vehicle on the road with my thoughts often on the side streets or on the curb.

So, in this book, I want to broaden the conversation. I want to explore how dyslexia and ADHD have affected my adult life – my marriage, my children, my business, partnerships, my decision-

making, and my successes and failures. I want to do this to better understand myself and why I have made such ballsy decisions and such bad decisions - and why some have been great and some have been a disaster.

I also hope to help others who are spicy and their family members who might understand them better and be able to see the world through their lens. Possibly! And if this book strikes a chord with someone else who's grappling with dyslexia or ADHD or being spicy then I feel it's been worth laying my life bare and telling my story, warts and all. Even reading this draft right now gets my eyes watering as it's flaring up the pain I've been sitting with for years.

The reality is setting in that this is no longer a draft but I'm going to publish this book, for good or bad. Will I sell any copies? What will my friends think, what will my family think? Will it be a flop? Fuck, maybe. Should I just sit on it? Do I really need to publish it? It was just meant to help me work out why I do things the way I do. I have a thousand thoughts all pulling me in different directions. Maybe it should be a theater play, not a book which makes more sense to me as you don't need to read anything and it's visual, or maybe it should be a computer game for kids .... Who knows!

Back to why the fuck would I bother to put my fingers to work and re-visit the original book? My mind is telling me you have already climbed this mountain so why go back? I'm now 59, I've done a shit load of really different stuff and have four healthy, well-adjusted kids and a much better relationship with my ex-wife. She is now my friend and partner who sometimes loves me when I'm not being a dick and allowing my spicy brain to get ahead of myself.

This is not meant to be an autobiography. I don't think my life is that interesting. But what is interesting is my experience with dyslexia and ADHD and how it's been both a blessing and a curse. It's also a story of how I've managed my spicy life and how I have changed because I have a far greater understanding and respect for my gift, my spicy

brain. I do plan to tell a few stories of my life but mainly to draw attention to how and why those situations happened and how they relate to me being so very spicy. I know that if I wasn't spicy then my life would have been like most people - stable, planned, calculated, a steady job, a steady income, and all the things most people aspire to have. My life is so far from that type of person!

When we started having kids, Sarah and I would often talk about what would happen if the kids had issues like me. In a funny way, she would say words like 'backward', 'crazy', and 'can't read or write'. I also had deep concerns that they might have had dyslexia too. But why would I be concerned with that outcome when I feel it's a blessing and I have superpowers that others don't have? I even feel sorry for all the people who aren't spicy - how boring their brains must be!

Well, being spicy is a blessing and a massive curse. You want the best for your kids, so I didn't want them to be top of the class because that's just as hard as being at the bottom sometimes. I just wanted them to be normal and being like me was not normal. Far from it. One side of me was saying it would be OK because I understand it and can help them navigate the system and act as a blocker and guide them, something I never had as a kid. The other side was saying I really hope they're not like me because it's a hard road and one I would not wish on anyone unless you did not have to go to school and could jump that step. Don't get me wrong, I love my dyslexia and try to encourage the wild ride as much as possible. The downsides are also fucking hard to navigate. I would not wish it on anyone in their early years, it sucks.

It turns out that none of our kids are dyslexic nor do they have ADHD, but they did try and claim it a few times. I put that down to being lazy like most kids are when it comes to schoolwork because it's so boring.

So, this book starts with some bits and pieces from my first book, *Dyslexia: How do we learn?* Then continues with anecdotes from my adult years and reflections on what I think it all means. Anyway, here's how my life's adventures have taken place.

## CHAPTER -2-

---

*I hated English most of all. That's when my fears and failures were put on display for the whole class to see. What I dreaded most was being asked to read aloud in front of everyone.*

One of the awful parts about dyslexia is what it does to your self-esteem. At school, I was made to feel useless and stupid. I found school hard from day one and the feeling of having to go back day after day was very hard. I felt that I was guilty of some great crime and being sent to school was my punishment. But my only crime was that I had problems with reading and writing.

Often, I would leave words out of the sentence, but when I read the work back to myself, I would not notice anything missing. This made my stories disjointed. When I'd sit down to read, only one word stood still on the page and the others decided to have a party. Within a matter of minutes, I would become nauseous. Like being car sick. It's hard to explain, but it's not easy to read or concentrate when this happens.

I hated English most of all. That's when my fears and failures were put on display for the whole class to see. What I dreaded most was being asked to read aloud in front of everyone.

And it wasn't only the reading. The lead-up was just as bad. When I knew it was getting closer to my turn, the sweaty palms would start. I'd get nervous, and agitated. Often, I'd watch the clock to see how many minutes were left in the lesson, hoping the bell would ring before my turn. Or else I'd insist I had to go to the toilet - any excuse to escape the humiliation.

The years that followed looked a bit like this: speech therapy, more tutoring and testing, and evaluations with learning specialists. The outcome? No improvement in my academic ability and as my engagement with teachers declined, my despondency increased.

I remember especially one night sitting in bed trying to read aloud to my mother. It was some English text like Hamlet for Year 11 exams and I continually struggled with every word and couldn't grasp the meanings or themes the book was trying to convey. In frustration and anger, I began to cry. For the next hour, my mother held me and she was crying too. Can you imagine how foreign it was for me to try and make sense of Hamlet when normal English was such a struggle? I could well have been reading Russian, it all made no sense to me.

If for long enough you get told that you're not good at some things, regardless of your own personal strengths, with time you'll start to believe what's said. Your self-image is so important for growth and improvement, otherwise, all those negative thoughts will overwhelm you and will lead you down the path of failure. In my earlier school days, I felt that I knew the work, I even felt like I was quite good at it, but as time went by, I seemed to fall further and further behind. Then, before long, I got labelled and the teachers put me on the 'extra English' shelf for life!

The only time there was any relief for me was when I was doing sports or any other activity that took me out of the classroom. Fortunately, there was a reprieve for me when I was fifteen. My school had a campus for Year 9 students located in the mountains. It was situated at the base of Mt Timbertop just out of Mansfield in Victoria and only one hour from Mt Buller ski resort. This meant for a whole year my schooling would include outdoor activities, emphasising fitness, self-reliance, and independence. In summer, there was hiking each weekend, carrying all your own food, water, tent, and gear. In winter there was cross country and downhill skiing

each week, then when the snow melted, there was canoeing and more bushwalking.

Running was also a massive part of the school program, including making it one of the punishments they handed out. We called this punishment a ‘Buller Road’, which meant you had to do an early morning run from our campus down to Buller Road. About seven kilometers in total. You had to leave at about 6.00 am or earlier to be back for breakfast at 7.00 am, all showered and dressed. What a great punishment I thought! I got about 34 ‘Buller Roads’ and loved every one of them!

To understand how much our fitness improved over this year, we thought the first weekend bush walk was hell. Blisters, heavy packs, setting up tents, sleeping on the ground, cooking your own food. It was five kilometers long, meant to test us for the end-of-year full marathon. By the end of the year, the last seven days of school consisted of a five-day hike carrying all the shit needed in a super heavy backpack. Then you had to get back to school, if you didn’t get lost in the bush, to do a 27-kilometer marathon through the hills and bush tracks, then home the next day after packing up your things and cleaning up your dorm. I think I slept for a week when I got home and ate all the food in the house.

I was already good at these types of activities. Good at skiing, and surfing. So, I just added bushwalking, and canoeing wasn’t a big stretch for me. I could play team sports, but they didn’t excite me as much as individual activities that you could challenge yourself with and be self-reliant if needed. Now I was in my element. My physical skills were being valued and the benefits were transferred to my academic subjects as well.

For the first time, my school reports were glowing with praise:

*... high standard, positive attitude, continued to work hard. Energetic, interested and most cooperative, keen and conscientious*

*... the year as a whole has been a grand success for him*

*... John has finished the year on a very strong note and seems set to make an excellent start to his time in senior school.*

However, this was short-lived. After Timbertop, life at school resumed with me being a failure and struggling badly. I was a complete disaster at school again and it seemed that no one there could help me.

Once back in the regular classroom environment in Year 10, my grades were usually in the E range, and I was even criticised for relying too heavily on my spoken language for success! What I really hated was an E+ meaning “you’re stupid but trying”.

When I look back on those years, I find that I was lost in a world that made no sense to me. I had been tested, retested and analysed, poked and prodded, yet there was no clear answer that explained why the words on a page had a ‘party’ while I was trying to read. Once again, looking at the spew of jigsaw pieces tossed on the table in front of me is how words looked in a book.

So, I decided to excel at being a class disturbance. I had more detentions than cut lunches! As I grew older and my reading and writing stagnated, my devious exploits grew and expanded into areas that even surprised me. While the other students worked, I would often spend the day testing the limitations of my teachers.

I was always taught to have enormous respect for my elders. I still feel this is important. But now this must be accompanied by them giving similar respect too. This didn't happen at school. In my mind I was not being rude or disrespectful, it was like I was at war, a war of survival. It was all of them against me.

When I felt I was losing control of my situation, the only way I knew how to survive was to become aggressive. I don't really like that word. I prefer to think I was angry and stubborn with frustration, but my

teachers called it aggression. I guess this is about the fight or flight syndrome and I know a lot of people out there who took the flight route and hid, but that was not in my DNA. I'll admit I could use cutting remarks that were always very direct. My language could be colourful too, and I had no hesitation in swearing at a teacher. I did it because I felt provoked. The frustration I had been feeling throughout most of my schooling would just spill over and my remarks or reactions often carried with them years of accumulated hurt, confusion, tension, and embarrassment.

I was more than just a disturbance. I baffled them with my learning problems as well. So, they put me in the too-hard basket, and I always ended up at the bottom of the pile. Like when they graded us according to our ability, I was put in the 'G' set. The best students were in the 'A' set. Even I knew that G came after A, B, C, D, E & F! When you spend your life in the 'G' set, you start to believe all the negative things about yourself, and by the time your maturity catches up with you, you've been left behind, labelled and categorised by everyone around you – your family, your mates, your teachers.

The only time I got a B grade for a subject was for Physical Education. All my other results were always D or E. But what got to me the most was that even when I did try my hardest, they still failed me. All they could look at was my spelling and writing. They never gave me any credit for my effort or my sporting prowess.

I couldn't believe it when my final P.E. report said:

*He put in the effort but was not up to the general standard in his written work.  
Spelling really held him back.*

Imagine putting a whole year's work into something you loved, only to be told that you had failed. It was an area of school that I totally enjoyed yet still failed. The thing I most wanted to be was a Physical Education teacher and I had just failed Year 11 in that subject as well as all the others.

Over the years, my school reports reinforced the entire situation:

*John does not appear to have much confidence in his own ability, and his extrovert manner in class does not disguise this.*

*He has been impetuous, restless, and disoriented.*

*Crashed abysmally in the examination paper.*

*Something of a hazard in the laboratory.*

*Concentration span is very limited.*

*You may find these reports gloomy.*

*Huge fluctuations in mood and behaviour.*

*I know he is capable of better attainment.*

*Both distracts and is distracted.*

Finally, this prestigious grammar school had had enough of me, culminating in this letter to my parents.

*From the Housemaster.*

*December 15th, 1982.*

*John's academic results will be a disappointment to him. He has worked hard this term and there has been a considerable improvement in most subject areas. The unpalatable fact has to be faced. Namely that John does not have the ability to reach the standard that this school requires for a Year 11 pass in most subjects. In your letter to his teachers, you asked that he "be given a fair go in regard to his ability and given as much encouragement as possible". I am pleased to say that this has been done and he has at last realised that being a nuisance in class is totally unproductive...*

*There would seem to be three options open. First, he should come back to repeat his form five year in totality. I doubt very much that the results at the end of 1983 would be vastly different from those in 1982.*

*Secondly, he could attempt the new mixed course that I have spoken about. By this means he might manage to secure a so-called Pass, but we must ask ourselves to what end this Pass is aimed. He is not going to be able to cope with tertiary education on any scale at all...*

*The third alternative is probably the most sensible from an academic point of view. He should leave the school and continue his studies part-time. He is not likely to make much academic progress here, but he might hopefully make some progress in other areas...*

*As you know. He has caused a great deal of trouble in the past few weeks. As I mentioned earlier in the letter, he has now stopped being a nuisance in class, but his behaviour to some masters had been most objectionable. At his best, he is keen, helpful, and well-mannered. At his worst, he is aggressive, rude, and devious...*

*If he is to have a successful year, he has got to learn to live with authority. If he is willing to do that, then I shall be only too happy to have him back again. He has a lot to offer in many fields.*

*Happy Christmas.*

The opening line said my reports will be a ‘disappointment’. What an understatement! I had failed every subject. In addition, there were graphic examples of my aggressive, rude, and devious exploits during the year.

I was doomed. Happy Christmas - what a joke!

My parents subsequently set up a meeting with the Headmaster to discuss their options moving forward. So here I am with my parents and the Headmaster hearing about how the school could help me to continue to move forward. I’m sitting there hearing this pitch to my parents and they were fully believing the bullshit coming out of his mouth.

Let me try and explain the situation. This was one of the most prestigious schools in Australia, built on the foundation of old

English hierarchy and educational principles. If you can imagine Hogwarts from *Harry Potter*—the dining hall, the dorms, the classrooms—that’s exactly what this place felt like. Massive old buildings steeped in history, vines creeping up the stone walls that had been there for over a hundred years. You were constantly reminded how *privileged* you were to be allowed to attend, and let me tell you, that privilege cost my parents shit loads.

The Headmaster? He may have been tall, skinny, and pale but he scared the absolute daylights out of the students. His office was huge, filled with old furniture and towering bookshelves, all meant to reinforce his importance. I had been in that office more times than I could count, and while most students would be scared shitless just stepping through the door, I had been here so often that I’d gotten used to it. The fear had worn off.

The reason I ended up in the Headmaster’s office so much? Well, it wasn’t just for disrespecting teachers or bad classroom behaviour. It was also because of my *business enterprises*. See, I was a day student, which meant my schedule was brutal. I’d get to school at 7:00 am, stay for sports or some other after-school activity, do “prep” (homework), have dinner in the grand dining hall, then finally catch a bus home at 8:15 pm, getting through my front door at 9:15 pm. Every single day was long and exhausting - a world of hell.

Like most schools, all the kids at the Grammar were divided into house groups with a House Master. My house was called Allen and the House Master hated me and another kid we called ‘Vino’. But he just loved my older brother and sister because they were great at school and didn’t rock the boat. But from day one, this guy hated my guts and had no problem showing it.

Like the time vino and I were supposed to be given ‘house colours’ for our sporting achievements, which was a pretty big deal. At this particular sports meeting, Vino and I entered every activity in Year 10 and helped the house win quite a few of the events. The House

Master didn't give us our house colours until *one hour* before the Year 11 house photo, which was another big deal. When we finally got our blazers with the colours, Vino and I refused to wear them. We had the photo taken in just our school shirts, and then we threw the blazers straight into the bin right in front of him.

Vino and I ran the house in Year 11. The Year 12 prefects, who were supposed to keep the house in order, were scared of us. Well, not me so much, but definitely Vino.

We had this study room with two desks, plus two bean bags to relax on. It was heaven. We were meant to use it as a study area, but let me tell you, there was no studying happening. I was busy selling shotgun cartridges to the boarders who were into clay bird shooting as a sport. On weekends, I'd load the shells using my dad's shotgun cartridge-making machine that he had in the back shed at home.

Vino and I would also rent out our study to boarders who had girlfriends, giving them a private space to do their naughty stuff. We had cases of wine, condoms, and music - all for a small fee. Vino and I were making good coin and always had cash for the tuck shop to buy drinks and snacks. We were running rackets at the school too, supplying things like cigarettes and booze to anyone who was willing to pay.



The Headmaster's secretary knew me by name. Whenever I was sent to his office, she'd usually give me this knowing look, like *you'll be okay*, and that was always kind of reassuring. But not this time. This time, it was all business.

So I'm in the Headmaster's office with my parents, who had sacrificed so much to send me to this school. I was feeling the weight of their struggle. The tuition was far more than they could afford, and they made sure we kids knew it. My dad worked in life insurance, came from a strict family, and had no qualms about using physical

discipline. I was no stranger to the belt, more than I'd like to remember. My siblings? Not so much.

When the Headmaster wrapped up his pitch, trying to get more money from my parents with nothing to show for it, I could see in his eyes that he thought he had this locked in, and that I'd be back under *his* terms. When he asked me what I thought about returning, I hit a kind of ‘flow’ state. I didn’t fully understand it at the time. It wasn’t about being cocky or overconfident. It was a quiet confidence, a deep sense of clarity and calm, like I had a glimpse into the future, seeing things in perfect detail. I just knew that if I didn’t put an end to this madness, I’d spend another year failing at this school, draining my parents’ money with zero results. It was a feeling of absolute calm, almost meditative, and the room seemed to slow down. Everything was amplified, and I was seeing it all clearly—more clearly than I had before.

I looked at the headmaster in the eyes, like I was in charge now, I was not intimidated by him or his overbearing office nor was I scared of my parents’ reaction. “Are you fucking joking?” I said. “Your school has had me since Year 6, and you’ve done nothing to help me. Now you’re telling me next year will be different?” I told him to take his school and shove it up his ass, and I walked out.

As I passed the secretary, I saw her jaw drop. I’d done something no one else dared to do—tell the Headmaster exactly what I thought. I was the only one in that room who truly understood that the system was failing me, and no amount of money or empty promises were going to fix it. I needed something better, something that fit me, not just expecting that a prestigious school was going to solve my problems.

The drive home was silent—very, very quiet. That was the first time I didn’t get a belting when I got home. I guess my dad had given up or was relieved that he didn’t have to spend any more money on something that wasn’t working.

## CHAPTER -3-

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*At last, someone had recognised it. I wasn't dumb. I could learn, but not by reading books or writing things down.  
Instead, I learn by doing. I am a do-er.*

I consequently changed schools, opting for a government high school that was trialing an alternative Year 12 program – called the Tertiary Orientation Program (TOP).

This change of school was 100% now my responsibility because my parents had pretty much thrown their hands in the air and given up. I ended up going to one of the roughest schools in Geelong which was about 20 minutes by car from home and I had to ride my bike there regardless of the weather.

I got beaten up on the second day by some kids who thought they could intimidate me. They soon worked out that I was not the easiest target. But school life was a little different from the private grammar school setup I was used to - going from a school that had 30 tennis courts, 15 football ovals, its own hospital, and hundreds of staff and thousands of students usually from wealthy families to a school that could have fitted on three football ovals, had limited resources and a mix of all types of kids and teachers mainly from the nearby working-class suburbs. It did have one oval that no one used much as school sport was not a big thing.

It was scary going to a new school, especially in Year 12 when everyone else already had many years together and had established their own tribes. It was also daunting because I knew under the surface it would not be long before they would all know I was stupid and couldn't read and write very well. I knew I was going to have to

fake my confidence and be an imposter in a system that was like trying to hold back the tide called reading and writing. But because I was now in charge of my own destiny, it did not matter how hard it was going to be or what challenges were thrown at me, I was going to make it work. I had to prove to myself I could do it and it was really hard I must say, but the end results were pretty good considering what the last few years had been like.

This TOP course included an alternative to the regular English class called ‘English B’ where the traditional, end-of-year 3-hour final exam was replaced with a continuous assessment model. Very innovative for the times.

My English B teacher described it like this:

*“There is one way in which assessment can be used to benefit students through its actual process. I discovered this through teaching English B where assessment is ‘continuous, diagnostic and participatory’, and I wish that every English teacher could have the opportunity to experience, just once, what this means in practice and feel the intrinsic joy and satisfaction that it brings for teacher and student alike.*

*The most immediately noticeable difference in the assessment process of English B is the absence of an external examination. This departure is greeted by students with a deep sense of liberation, but there is a profound fear in the minds of most teachers that once the barrier of the external examination is removed, laziness and mediocrity will sprawl unchecked. Standards will drop. Individual excellence will wither away and the subject of English itself will be utterly and irretrievably demeaned. I would like to try to allay some of these fears by describing what actually happens to a group of Year 12 students from whom the threat - or spur - of an external examination has been removed.*

*The first thing I noticed amongst them, as I said, was a buoyant feeling of relief, expressed in terms of such intensity that I was forced to realise fully for the first time how crippling the prospect of an external examination is for many students.”*

One student wrote,

*“As the crowd gathered around the door. And all the year’s work was riding on my shoulders, I felt the enormous pressure of the examination. Everyone was chattering when the huge doors opened and then a nervous hush came over the room and over me. The rules were read out to us and then the race was on. It was like the start of a marathon and I was stuck to my seat. I felt the whole room rushed past me and I was dumbfounded.”*

That student was me.

My English B teacher continued:

*“At the end of the first session, John stayed behind to tell me that he had a great deal of difficulty with reading. He asked me not to call on him to read aloud. He described his difficulties in such a straightforward way that I was inclined to disregard what he told me as an exaggeration. Or perhaps some lack of confidence. How could such an articulate student be unable to read? John appeared to be such a competent student that I was unable to take in the clear message that he was giving me. It was only later that I realised how much effort it must have cost him to make that statement to me.*

*One of the most exciting parts of the English B course was the Production Unit, which allowed each student to complete a project of their own choice. This unit of work was a challenging one. It demanded careful forward planning, organisation, and a certain amount of vision and enthusiasm. John and three other boys decided to do something to help unemployed young people. Their discussions focused on a fundraising activity and finally decided to hold a Sportsman’s Dinner at the Geelong Football Club.*

*As I watched them designing tickets, making phone calls, organising publicity, arranging for catering, managing interviews, writing letters to sponsors, and attending to hundreds of other necessary tasks, they seemed to grow before my eyes into confident young men.*

*The night was a magical success. I doubt if John will ever forget it. When John led the speakers in the door, I knew that all those months of hard work had been worthwhile. One of the boys wrote later in his evaluation report, “It is still difficult*

*to understand how a group of students could organise such an evening". But they did."*

At last, someone had recognised it. I wasn't dumb. I could learn, but not by reading books or writing things down. Instead, I learn by doing. I am a do-er.

No doubt about it, I was different. I didn't understand the writing on the blackboard, and I couldn't do dictation.

But I'm not stupid.

And school shouldn't have boxed me into the slow learning group. I should have been put into an area that allowed me to learn with great speed and understanding - the 'DO-ERS' class.

But I don't want you to think everything was rosy at school. I also enrolled in Drama and on the first day the teacher handed out the script to a play - he put us in a circle and then started asking each person to read sections aloud. This is my kryptonite - reading aloud in front of a group, not to mention a new group of kids I was trying to get to know. I also felt I had to impress on them that I was not a private school kid who had a silver spoon in his mouth. To escape reading, I said I needed to go to the toilet. Here I am at this new school sitting in the toilets, crying like a baby. I ended up leaving that day and rode my bike like hell man, not stopping at red lights and hardly using my brakes all the way home. I was angry and ashamed and knew I needed to man up and face the inevitable.

Those feelings of distress, shame, and being lost and completely isolated in this new environment were terrifying. At the grammar school, I knew everyone, and I knew how to hide or found it easy to navigate the pitfalls. Here it was like being on the moon and there was no light and no one to guide you. I was in hell again and the walls were falling in around me and this was only my first week.

I approached the Drama teacher the next day and apologized for not coming back to class. I explained my situation to the teacher. I don't think he believed my story and was not very understanding. To be fair, he was a Drama teacher and maybe wasn't overly familiar with reading issues, and it was in the 1980s, but he agreed not to ask me to read aloud in class again. He never really liked me after that, and I only got two lines to speak in a two-hour show we performed which was a direct reflection of his attitude I guess. What really pissed off the Drama teacher more though, was his dad was also a Drama teacher and made comments in the after-show drinks that he really liked my performance. I never did any Drama after this.



As I've said, I learn by doing. At school I was disadvantaged whenever I was in the classroom, but not when I was outside doing sport. I can ski, surf, run like the wind, rock climb, paddle grade 3-4 rapids, and pick up almost any sport on sight. It was this ability to *do*, not read nor write, that eventually helped me to pass my final year at school.

A friend of my brother and a physical education major at university volunteered to help me study for my final exams. While I sat there staring at my books, knowing that all this stuff wouldn't sink in, she noticed my frustration. She then asked me how did I learn? At first, I wasn't sure what she meant. No one had ever asked me this before. But my reply was the reason why I passed my exams at the end of the year – “I learn by doing”, I told her.

So, she suggested we go down to the beach and by the time we got there, I had explained my answer in detail. The learning was about to start, my way.

The rest of the weekend I didn't have to open a book or write one word. We played tennis, went swimming, ran along the beach and studied. While we played tennis, we would talk nonstop about all

aspects of P.E. Every time I made a move or did something, I had to describe the action or explain the muscle used. She was teaching me all the things I had tried to read about but found so hard to understand. It was fantastic. Not only could I understand, but I could also remember it. For the very first time in my life, something so difficult was becoming second nature.

On the way to the exam, my P.E. teacher said (and I'm not joking), "Why are you here? You can't pass this exam so don't waste your time and our time." I wasn't impressed but I was very used to this type of attitude from teachers. Then in the exam room, I went through all the same procedures to recall the information I'd learned at the beach. I'd stand up and swing my arm to remember the names of the muscles. I know it gave everyone else the willies, but what the heck, I passed.

I had no idea if I was going to pass this exam, but I felt like I was in some control of the outcome even if it was a crazy way to get there. I also think that because some of the teachers at this school had my back and could see I was trying made a big difference to my confidence. At the time, I don't think I really appreciated how much that new learning process changed my way of learning, nor did I realise I could do things related to reading and writing if I took a different approach. I still felt smothered by the negative experiences and did not have the maturity to realise how much I had achieved just to get to this exam.

Although my dream was to be a P.E. teacher, I ended up gaining a tertiary place to study Outdoor Education. My final exam results, with special consideration in the marking and a successful interview, helped to get me there. So much for the Headmaster's comment the previous year, when he wrote: "He is not going to be able to cope with tertiary education on any scale at all. Unfortunately, his grades would seem to preclude this option."

However, I still had a great many hurdles to climb before I'd complete this course. With assignments, I'd often have a friend correct my punctuation and spelling before submitting my work, or I'd send it home where it would be corrected by my father's secretary - only the spelling, not the ideas.

But on one occasion, a lack of time forced me to hand in work uncorrected and this resulted in me being called to the Dean's office where I could see my assignment completely covered with red pen. It looked like it had been to war. The lecturer had been so disgusted with my work he'd sent it to his Dean and the notes written all over it were not complementary! As a result, I was threatened with expulsion. Again.

Fortunately, I had an ally in another lecturer who supported my case. This man understood that whilst I didn't want any special privileges, there were times when other strategies were warranted. I met him in the Dean's office and knew that without his support I was history. He went in batting for me and, as a result, I was given a reprieve. Nevertheless, completing the course wasn't easy and I often found myself spending time during holidays re-doing subjects in order to continue my studies the following year.

By the way, these days I often swing a golf club when working out business strategies!

## CHAPTER -4-

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*Suddenly, I snapped. Perhaps it was my tiredness, I don't know. But it was as if years of frustration, humiliation, and battering surfaced inside me and I exploded.*

Anger has been a massive part of my journey. Being angry and not being able to control that anger. Not understanding why I was angry, I'd lash out. I'd run away. I'd be violent with stuff around the house. It was a very private, almost self-destructive action. I was just not able to cope with the continual failure and disappointment that I had. It wasn't like I was failing every now and then. It was *every* day.

It was every day that you knew you'd get something back on your paper which was just covered in red ink. It was every day that you were going to get some sort of pain. You could say, well it was no different to being in jail, but the thing is I got let out of jail every day and then they'd throw me back in! So, a lot of the time I just couldn't control my emotions. And so I would lash out with anger or be aggressive to teachers or be disruptive to the whole class. It was my survival mechanism.

I guess it's like the fight or flight syndrome. You could become very insular and very quiet and I'm sure a lot of dyslexic people are like that. I chose the fight response which meant I was lashing out, but I wasn't necessarily lashing out at others. I was lashing out at myself. I was too immature to even understand what was going on in school. There was no help. There was no useful assistance with reading or writing. They just taught kids like me by slowing down the pace of learning. You went into the retard's room and basically, there'd be five other retards in there. You're all struggling with this system. So, all they did was slow everything down. But they never tried a different

way of teaching so that we could have a different experience of learning.

They didn't say okay we'll just forget about the reading and writing. We can just do verbal communication. But no, I just did the same stuff over and over. It was torture. Just like the grading system. I remember the grades at Timbertop were from A to G. Well, you knew that if you were in the 'G' set you were the stupid one. It was pretty simple.



The following incident happened when I was in my 20's. But when I look back now, what happened was really about me lashing out because of what happened to me when I was a kid.

I had been travelling for a month, skiing, relaxing, drinking beer, and partying my head off. On my return trip to Australia, I found myself in Hawaii with an 11-hour stopover, feeling very stuffed. And wanted nothing more than a good sleep, but I intended to make the most of the stopover by hiring a car, getting some rays, and seeing something of the countryside. It had always been a dream of mine to see Pipeline.

I realised that while I had been asleep on the plane, other passengers had received their USA entry cards and had filled them in. This meant I had to leave the queue after disembarking to go in search of one. It didn't take long, but the crowd was gathering, and the queue was lengthening while I struggled with the small print on the card.

Once I had filled it in with the information that I thought they probably wanted, I joined the queue again. After another few minutes of waiting I presented the card to the customs official, who looked at the card, then looked at me with some confusion and pointed out that I'd filled in the French side. He told me I'd have to go back and do another one, so I left the queue and went back to the counter where the cards were. This time I read the card more carefully. I filled

in my name and then when it asked where I had come from, I wrote ‘Australia’. Similarly, when asked where I was going, naturally I wrote ‘Australia’ again. Feeling pleased with myself, I once again very casually joined the queue and waited my turn to step over the yellow line.

I handed my card and passport across the counter to the extra-large, Hawaiian customs officer. She took one look at it and told me, somewhat disgustingly, that I had filled it out incorrectly and I would have to do it again. Not wanting to go through the whole queuing process again, I asked if she could help me. She drew her large black pen out of her pocket like she was drawing a sword and proceeded to scrawl across my card. Maybe she had had a bad day, but it was about to get worse.

She asked me questions in short, clipped sentences that did not attempt to disguise her annoyance at having to perform this additional duty. I was feeling pretty relaxed, but becoming increasingly aware of her annoyance. In order to get back at me, it seemed, she sneered as she handed back my documents and, appearing to look straight through me, she said, “My 4-year-old son could fill this card in better than you.”

Suddenly, I snapped. Perhaps it was my tiredness, I don't know. But it was as if years of frustration, humiliation, and battering surfaced inside and I exploded. I stepped back in order to take a deep breath - somehow, I knew what I was about to do and I couldn't hold it back. I can't remember exactly what I said, but it was something to the effect that how dare you speak to me in this way when you don't know anything about me. I was loud, abusive, and determined to humiliate her as she, and others before her, had humiliated me. I had a great sense of power and invincibility. I was determined to make the most of it.

Looking back, I can see now that I was making an example of her to myself and was determined to defend my self-esteem against

someone who I believed had no right to challenge it. In a perverse way, I was enjoying it and was aware that the whole customs area had stopped and was drawn to this spectacle. The customs officer retreated, belatedly aware that she had overstepped the mark. It was like a boxer retreating to the corner of the ring, but I was holding her up determined to keep delivering the punches. I didn't care how she was feeling, I was too intent on avenging myself on the whole world of insensitive, uncaring, literate people.

The next thing I knew was that two other customs officers were approaching and telling me to settle down. They attempted to manhandle me away from the scene, but I shrugged them off, and having expended my frustration, I went with them to an office nearby. We were joined by the customs official and apologies were demanded. However, so great was my sense of the justification for my actions (even though they weren't to know the real source of my anger) that I refused to apologise and challenged them to do their worst.

Eventually, they released me, but not without some reluctance some hours later. I know I presented an image of defiance and determination but actually, it was all a front - behind it all I was scared as hell. And in my anxiety, I left my passport behind, which I only realised when I returned to the airport ready for my flight home.

I didn't feel that my actions matched the crime, but I think people need to be aware that what we see on the surface can be deceptive, much the same as how a flat, majestic river with an excess of water can turn into a raging torrent.

I don't see myself as an aggressive person or someone who flies off the handle when something doesn't go my way. In fact, I've never hit another person or been in a fight, although I did hit a teacher once when I was in fourth or fifth grade. No matter what the situation, I feel that violence is no solution. So, I'm not saying that every individual you come across who treats you like a stupid moron or

makes you feel socially incapable gives you the right to retaliate harshly.

After arriving home in Melbourne, I visited a close friend Bram, and told him and his mother Pam about the custom's officer incident. His mother said it was no way to behave and that I should meet a friend of hers who was doing some groundbreaking shit with people like me, and maybe this person could decipher my spicy brain. That advice changed my life.

So I took myself off to the Learning Skills Unit at the Gordon Technical College in Geelong to meet Jenny Dalton.

Through Jenny, I became aware there was another way to learn and tackle my dyslexia. She was well versed in understanding that the key to helping people learn effectively is to find out “how” they learn. When she asked me how did I learn, I knew this was my chance to learn my way. I had already explained that I was here to improve my reading and writing but I didn’t want to go back to all the useless exercises I’d done at school for so many years.

Jenny wrote about me saying:

*John is a ‘kinesthetic learner’ – he learns by doing, by being physically involved in the learning task, by having a go – Let me do it. I want to try. Can I have a go? In his words, he is a “do-er”. His visual mode is his next preferred learning style, and his auditory mode is his least preferred. So for John, sitting quietly at his desk while the teacher lectured from the front of the room and wrote copious notes on a blackboard was not an effective way to learn.*

In working with Jenny, she began by asking me to write – something which I had been avoiding all my life. She suggested I write about myself and my childhood experiences.

Over time, we developed my personal dictionary using words from my writings about subjects that were of interest to me. Eventually, we even spent time on the unforgiving rules of English, which for the first time seemed to make sense and stick in my head.

Slowly I was beginning to feel confident to tackle tasks that I thought were impossible before. I was no longer alone and fighting a battle that I could not win. The desire to write about my school experiences started as a good way for me to be motivated to write for the sake of writing. It developed into a passion that I could not stop. Jenny continually encouraged, corrected, and encouraged more.

The thought of confronting my biggest social and personal problem became more exciting than powder skiing in France. The challenge ran deep and my fear was great, but the desire to succeed was even greater. There was so much I wanted to write about. It was as if I had not been able to talk and all of a sudden, someone granted me the use of words.

Here is my first attempt at writing something for Jenny:

### ***The galaciy of Dislecsia***

*I feel really goos about the thought of writing a book or some notes on a problem which I have. Maybe I can help some easle,mabe I can help myself. Commit to terms with personal problems is never easy, but coming torailly about this problon I have is almost impossible.*

*Im the normal kid in class, I have nothing extrat to offer and No really special skills in the environment they call learning. Infact I hate learning and the class room so much... Fustration would be on of the biggest effect I have, the understand even the knowledge, but not the ability to exspress it or read it.*

*I have only written two very small pages in this old diary I have and already I feel this great sence of achievement. I now don't care if I never see my words on a book shelf or in the best sellarslist. I just feel fantastic about the challenge and the feelong that I really want to do this.*

*My mind know thinks that if I'm going to do this I must do it well. Show myself can do it and if some day you end up reading it you will say Hay that block could really do something if he puts his mind to it.*



It was through working with Jenny that we decided to collaborate on a book about dyslexia – that's how I became a reluctant author!

In the book, Jenny identified some key issues that emerged from my education experience:

- 1 That failure is cumulative.
- 2 That bad behaviours may well be a healthy reaction to a self-threatening situation.
- 3 That, to judge a person's learning ability or their intelligence on the basis of their ability to read and spell is to apply far too narrow a criterion.
- 4 That, on the basis of early school experiences, learners may learn to become learning disabled.
- 5 That, learning success is possible if the teaching style or criteria for assessment are more flexible and creative.



So fast forward to more recent years. I've learned that I have a lot in common with the likes of Sir Richard Branson. Take our school reports for example. Sir Richard posted this on Instagram in 2024:

*I stumbled across this school report from the Easter break, 65 years ago. It felt very fitting to hear that I was “very backward” in spelling and reading – as I get set to launch my audiobook next week! In case you can’t read the handwriting, here are a few highlights:*

*Classics: “Very keen but handicapped by a bad memory. Some progress.”*

*Mathematics: “The first half of the term saw a great improvement in his work, but once he began to get onto really new processes his keenness declined, and his standard dropped.”*

*French: “A slight improvement this term but his work is still below standard.”*

*English: "He is still very backward in this subject, especially in spelling and reading - constant practice in the latter is necessary."*

*Drawing: "If he took a little care he could be good."*

*Going through school with undiagnosed dyslexia wasn't at all fun, but I'm glad I didn't let it squash my big ideas. I hope this inspires anyone out there who might be struggling at school right now. Just remember there's a whole lot more to life out there, and one day you'll be able to look back on these reports and smile.*

I've learned there's a huge list of highly successful, famous, creative, intelligent, spicy people in the same boat. Plenty of names here that most people will know:

- **Walt Disney:**

Founder of The Walt Disney Company, and the mind behind one of the largest and longest-running entertainment empires.

- **Jamie Oliver:**

Top chef and a household name known for his TV shows, cookbooks, and restaurants.

- **Steven Spielberg:**

One of the most renowned movie directors across the world, and the founder of Dream Works, Spielberg now has a net worth of over \$3 billion.

- **Charles Schwab:**

An investment banker who struggled in college but is one of the greatest successes in the world of economics and investment.

- **Ted Turner:**

Founder of Turner Broadcasting Systems and the man who founded the first 24-hour news channel.

- **William Hewlett:**

Together with David Packard, he founded the Hewlett-

Packard Company, the very recognisable HP multinational information technology company.

- **Henry Ford:**

Founder of Ford Motor Company and the man who developed the concept of an assembly line of production.

- **Steve Jobs:**

Founder of Apple and the man who revolutionized smartphone technology, making him a billionaire many times over.

- **Tommy Hilfiger:**

Internationally successful fashion designer known for his iconic and cool approach to clothing.

- **Elon Musk**

Known for his key roles in the automotive company Tesla, Inc. and the space company SpaceX.

- **Bill Gates**

American businessman and philanthropist best known for co-founding the software company Microsoft

The entertainment industry is also well represented with actors, singers, and musicians who are spicy. Again, there are plenty of household names on this list.

- Justin Timberlake
- Ryan Gosling
- Orlando Bloom
- Robbie Williams
- Cher
- Adele

- Octavia Spencer
- Trevor Noah
- Tom Holland
- Johnny Depp
- Justin Bieber
- Susan Boyle
- Dan Ackroyd
- Sigrid Thornton

This list could go on and on, but you'll get the picture – being spicy doesn't exclude you from realising your dreams and achieving success in your chosen career. But it would have helped me a lot to know this when I was at school instead of being branded a failure and a retard for the first 20 years of my life.

Now the problem with this list is that we are not all going to be this successful and I take my hat off to each and every one of them. And I'm not saying that we are better because we are dyslexic or have ADHD. Let me be clear, if you measured CEO success on money alone, then these guys have done OK. But so have a lot of non-dyslexic people. I'm talking about the other bunch of us who are struggling every day and have not found that secret to success yet have the same issues as all these spicy people.

My favourite example of someone who flew under the radar and yet managed to change a whole industry is Bob Miller, better known as Ben Lexcen, the famous yachtsman and marine architect. He left school at the age of 14, was very dyslexic, and discovered boats in the coastal town of Newcastle in Australia. He built his first boat at 16, started winning races, and became a sailmaker and part-time yacht designer specializing in the 18-foot skiff class, which he revolutionized. He designed light-displacement ocean racers,

including Apollo for Alan Bond. When Bond challenged for the America's Cup in 1974, he commissioned Miller to design his boat. An unusually long 12-meter, Southern Cross showed bursts of speed but lost the match.

In 1977, Miller changed his name to Ben Lexcen to avoid confusion with the sailmaking firm of which he had been a previous partner, and which still used his surname in its branding.

For the 1983 America's Cup challenge, Alan Bond commissioned Lexcen to design his challenger for a race that had been dominated by American winners for 132 years. Lexcen produced *Australia II*, the best example of this freethinking, self-taught designer's potential. He made a significant improvement to the 12-metre design with an extraordinary inverted, wing-keel shape that paid dividends, reducing drag and improving mass distribution. Down 3-1 in the final series, the crew recovered to win the America's Cup 4-3 in a thrilling final race, ending the American domination. He and the crew became national heroes, and he was awarded an Order of Australia in 1984. That year he also won the Prince Philip prize for Australian design. Bond, John Bertrand the skipper, and Lexcen had all been named Australian Yachtsman of the Year for 1982-83.

After 132 years of America winning this prestigious race, this school dropout changed the challenger's design to an unconventional wing keel and transformed sailing as we know it today.

His biographer Bruce Stannard described him as a 'forgetful, dishevelled dreamer'. Constantly active, creative, and possessing an explosive temper, Ben was helped by colleagues who could provide a balance to his energy and impetuous approach to issues - I can relate to that!

## CHAPTER -5-

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*Failure has been my friend all through my life so if I took a risk and failed it was something I was used to.*

The Outdoor Education course allowed me to develop my confidence. Finally, I felt like I had a skill set and could achieve something. In the past, everything had been around failure. This was a strange feeling because I'm back in the education system, but this time I felt confident and strong about what I was trying to achieve. It's amazing how much a positive attitude can make a world you hated with all your heart seem like a great place to be.

I also learned that one of my strong suits was my verbal communication. Again, at school, I'd been criticised for relying too heavily on my spoken English, but now, this was a skill that was really valued.

Whether it was rock climbing or canoeing or skiing or snow caving, I felt comfortable in that environment, very capable, totally in my element. I found I was a good instructor with kids. Even today with my kids and others, I have the ability to be able to see things, whether it's a golf swing or a skiing move. I just have the ability to know how to communicate, in a visual way, that allows them to understand. As an example, my father was a very good golfer, but he could never tell me what I was doing wrong or right because he would use language that made no sense to me. And that's what I think a lot of instructors do. And a lot of teachers. They talk in a language that only they understand.

I coached all my kids at AFL football and within two years each of their teams had won a grand final. It was natural to me, and I enjoyed

it and I think the kids did too. I understood how some kids were there because their parents thought it was the right thing, but they weren't really committed and mostly scared of going near the ball. I understood that there were other kids whose lives revolved around the game, and they knew every statistic and had a ball in their hands 24 hours a day. It was important to know that the team was only as good as the weakest player and my job was to get them all to work together. I really enjoyed it, and in the end, so did the kids that were scared because I would put them in a position that would make them feel good about themselves and their role in the team.

Because of my spicy brain, I was very, very good at being able to talk to a young kid who was scared stiff and about to abseil off a 40-foot wall. Crying, bawling, absolutely petrified. Yet I could talk them over the edge of a cliff. That was a strength of mine because I could relate to that individual and then explain to them what their fears were and then dissect those fears for them and be able to give them the confidence to take those two steps off the back of a cliff, 30 or 40 feet in the air. Even though you just didn't want to do it! But I was good at talking a kid through his fears.

I guess people would say I had 'the gift of the gab'. While I was in Bendigo studying, I had a casual job on some weekends working at a petrol station and packing shelves at the supermarket. The supermarket job I like to refer to as a stock take, take as much fucken stock as we could! I also worked as a ski, canoeing, and bushwalking guide in the Victorian high country for the Stoney family. The business was called High Country Adventure and I really loved that job and stayed doing it well after I finished my tertiary course. I still have very close friends from those days and their kids are friends of my kids which is fantastic.

But back to another of my casual jobs, every second or third weekend, I would go to Myer, the big department store in my hometown Geelong. Because of my love of the outdoors, they put

me to work in the sports section and the job was pretty easy. I noticed that next to the sports section was the lawn mower section and the lawn mower section paid a sales commission and so did the car stereo section alongside it. What I worked out was if I got to sell these sit-on mowers and car stereos I'd get my wage plus a commission! Anyway, I found myself selling a lot of sit-on lawnmowers to people who probably only had a small nature strip to mow and while I was at it I'd sell them a car stereo too.

I was earning all this bonus money, a lot of money back in those days. But what happened was that you had to put your sales through the cash register and that involved putting in item code numbers and prices and I had no idea what I was pushing. Apparently, in the three months that I'd worked there, I rang up about \$30,000 worth of sales in one weekend which was totally impossible. I was just pushing whatever numbers I felt like. So, I ended up getting fired on the spot.

I was walking out of the store, all depressed and feeling like a failure yet again because my spicey brain could not handle what most would think was an easy task. This feeling which I had so often at school and in life was always under the surface just ready to pounce whenever it could. Anyway, the department head on our floor came up to me and asked where I was going. I told him I'd just been fired. He told me to hang on a minute and went to see the manager. He told him that I can't get fired, because I'm the best salesperson he's got. He insisted they keep me on.

So, they ended up changing the sales model. When I worked my shift, there was one person allocated to stay at the cash register and do all the transactions, and people on the floor never needed to use it themselves. At first, this made me feel great but also a little ashamed as now everyone knew I was different and not able to master this basic equipment. I don't remember going back to that job, I guess the feeling of being useless outweighed the feeling of achievement.

## ⌘

Coupled with my confidence in my ability to talk easily to anyone who came along, I also developed a real sense of being comfortable with risk. Remember, failure has been my friend all through my life so if I took a risk and failed it was something I was used to.

This is how it worked in practice. For our final year assessment at college, we had to do a 3-week outdoor expedition, planning all the necessary activities to survive. Some students planned to start inland at the top of Mt Kosciuszko and make their way to the ocean, which meant planning every detail of the trip and then submitting a full written report. This was a huge undertaking. Coordinating everything from food drops morning to evening, organising hike plans, bike drop off plans, and more, all being done with no outside help. This seemed like a lot of work to me and more importantly lots of writing - my kryptonite! This idea of an impending adventure was overshadowed by the thought of all the detailed planning, writing, and itemised lists which are such a hard ask for me.

I decided to do something different. My aim was to try to live with the true bush people, the Aborigines of Australia. But no matter how hard I tried to organise a trip to visit an aboriginal community, I just couldn't make it work. Now looking back on it, how was a white boy from the city going to connect with people who had been punished and tortured by white people for 200 years? Why would they care about me and my mission? Time was running out and I was too late to organise a different activity, so I was advised to just go out into the wilderness and try to make things happen once I was on the ground. That seemed like heaven to me. No written plans. In fact, no plan at all. A true adventure. Just go and be in the moment.

So, imagine this. Getting on a plane, flying to Darwin, and getting a lift for 11 hours to the toughest town in Australia called Borroloola. It was officially declared a town in 1885 and today it's described as

one of the largest communities in the Roper Gulf region with a population of 755 people. In the local Indigenous languages of Yanyuwa, Garrwa, Marra, Gudanji, and Binbingka, Borroloola is written as Burrulula. The name belongs to a small lagoon just to the east of the local caravan park.

We eventually arrived at Borroloola which sits alongside the McArthur River full of massive crocks and barramundi. The supermarket was a shed and most of the Aboriginals had a spending card which was some government program to stop them wasting money, especially on alcohol.

I couldn't help but notice straight away how poor and dusty the place was. Garbage was strewn everywhere, like the town was half town, half rubbish dump. There were doors on buildings for whites to enter and other doors for non-whites. I've never been to Africa and seen apartheid in action, but from what I've seen in films, this was very similar. Buildings were half destroyed because they were using the wood for fires and most people slept outdoors from their government-provided houses. Looking back, it's another disaster of one race trying to tell another race how to live. It was very clear from day one that whatever was being done to 'help' the locals wasn't working. Square peg in a round hole.

The other thing I noticed was the lack of young people like teens and young adults. It was full of old people and small kids. I later learned that due to drinking or family violence, this age group had all moved to the city.

I spent a few days hanging around and getting to know the locals who spoke in their version of pidgin English. I didn't understand a word of what they said, except for maybe one word in about five or ten!

It was then that I was introduced to Dinny and Ellen McDinny. At the time, I could see that Dinny was an important, aboriginal elder but it wasn't until years later when I took my family back to

Borroloola that I realised just who my aboriginal ‘father’ was. We visited the local museum, and every second article was about Dinny McDinny and his knowledge of land and country. I was really spun out as I realised that at the time I didn’t truly understand who was looking after me. I was ignorant of the magnitude of what I was doing and now felt both proud and ashamed that I took some of this for granted. I was so young and just trying to survive every day in such an extreme environment. It was so fucken hot you could hardly bear the heat, and the flies were so thick, they wouldn’t leave you alone for one second.

Not only was this experience one of my most memorable adventures ever, it allowed me to have an authentic involvement with people I now call family. I was ‘adopted’ by Dinny and Ellen who gave me an aboriginal name and a small ceremony to confirm my connection to them.

I spent my days learning the art of collecting bush tucker, hunting, fishing, making lots of dampers, and drinking warm tea with massive amounts of sugar. I ate kangaroo, goanna, turtles, and even dugong. We made spears and would paint our bodies most nights and sing and dance around the fire. We slept on the ground with no tent and no protection. It was truly magical. But it was also tough.

There was a lot of boredom. If we had enough food, like a kangaroo, we just didn’t do anything. After killing the kangaroo and gutting it, they would blanch it in a hole with rocks and cover it with branches and then dirt and build a fire over the top of it, like a New Zealand Hungi, to remove all the hair, and sear the outside. The roo would then be hung in a tree and when you were hungry, you would go over, brush the flies off, cut off a piece of roo, throw it on the fire, and cook it straight on the coals. No plates, no knives, no forks. The only real utensils we had were a big old paint tin for boiling water and old mugs for drinking tea.

There was a lot of stuff that didn't go right. There wasn't much planning when there was something to do, like the time we went on a sea turtle and dugong hunt. We took this old car and a dinghy and drove for hours to the coast on nothing but a dusty track. This was all their land given back to them by the Australian government.

Anyway, we arrive at the river mouth where the McArthur River and sea become the Gulf of Carpentaria, and we start to unload the dinghy. About two hours later they're ready to go hunting but realise that no one has brought the fuel. No big deal. We slept there and the next day someone went back to get the fuel and then we finally all went hunting. We killed three massive turtles and one dugong. Their hunting skills were amazing. After the killing of any large animal, there were a few quiet moments, like meditation, to send the creature's spirit back to the sea. This is normally done by the person that killed the animal. Then the food was divided up as part of a ritual which I didn't really understand but it was clear that who got what and how much was very important to them.

Because of my spicy brain and trying to get out of writing the long planning details for my college assignment, I was transported to a place where I didn't need any of the stuff which they taught in school. I just needed my desire and passion to learn. So, if it weren't for me trying to dodge the system and take a shortcut to get out of writing, I would never have had this amazing journey, and I'm very thankful for being spicy because that adventure changed my life.

Dinny and I spent days together as men doing roles that the women didn't do and vice versa. Dinny had this really deep, husky laugh like a smoker's cough, but he wasn't a smoker. Also, no one was allowed to drink alcohol on their land. Then one day we were hunting goanna and land turtles, and the whole time I was there I never caught a thing. I'd have been dead very quickly if not for their support. So, we're out hunting and then I see Dinny running past me laughing so hard he could hardly run. I turned around to see what he was running

from. It was a massive water buffalo. So, I took off up a tree where Dinny was already perched, still laughing and wondering how this white boy would survive out here in the wild. We sat in the tree for hours waiting for the water buffalo to lose interest in us and then walked back to camp.

Whenever we walked, he would stop and tell me stories, point at things, and tell me the history of the land and how it related to their dreamtime. It was awesome. After a few weeks, I grew accustomed to their pidgin language and could understand them better. We would talk for hours. He was truly interested in passing on the knowledge he had. A remarkable man considering what the white man has done to him, his family, and their land. No book or lecture from the education system could have taught me what he did, and it's shaped me as a person and how I've lived my life from then to now.

One time, I got very sick after eating the fatty back of a dugong that we had speared. I think I spent two days completely out of it, not remembering much. After I came to, they gave me some medicinal grass that fixed me up. When I asked why they didn't give it to me sooner, I never really got an answer, maybe it was a test, who knows!

I stayed in touch with my aboriginal family over the years and more recently I took my family and some close friends to visit Dinny and Ellen's relatives who were now the same age as I was when I first visited them in 1988. We were all treated with the same warm and friendly welcome I had as a young man. I am now called Uncle John which is a huge honour for me, and they treated my family like their family, reflecting the strong sense of community and hospitality within their culture.

I guess being put into a situation that was so wild from the start and with no real plans highlights my comfort in high-risk taking and the ability to feel ok in that position. I believe this comes from my spicy brain and the abstract way I can process data and view risk. I never really saw the downside of being in Borroloola, I just saw the

adventure and challenge to make it work. And that I had in spades. I saw the positives of not having to write too much or do too much planning. I just went in headfirst and thought, what the hell!



After working for a while and saving every cent I could, I was about 22 or 23, when I decided to go overseas for a year. The first destination was Nepal where I walked up to Annapurna sanctuary and tried to get into Tibet, just carrying a backpack and a sleeping bag. I had no guide or help, and after looking at the map, I realised there was one path in and the same path back so getting lost was not a big issue. I was advised in Kathmandu that I should take a guide, but I was confident in my skills and decided it would be better to go it solo. I walked for one month on my own. I stopped in little villages and mostly stayed with the locals. They were very keen to rent me some space and feed an adventurer like me. After some time, a friend of mine from Australia joined me and we went on an overland trip through Nepal, India, Pakistan, Iran, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Turkey, and then finally to Europe ending up in London.

The entire trip took around about four months and we stayed in tents or just slept on the ground. We ate local food and travelled cross country in a truck with open sides. Before we had even left Nepal, the truck broke down on the side of a hill. Someone went back to Kathmandu to get a new part for the truck which took a few days. I saw a farmer in the distance and decided I would ask if I could be his labourer. He didn't speak any English, and my Nepalese was from a book, which was pretty funny considering I struggled enough with English. Lots of sign language later and I was hired to work in his field for two days, no pay just food and water. It was hard labour, and his wife would feed me and give me drinks. It was quite surreal, but my spicy brain would not allow me to sit idle waiting for the truck to be fixed. Can you imagine the conversations they had at night talking about some bloke just helping out who couldn't communicate

with them but was willing to work in their field? They must have thought I was nuts!

The trip was a full-on adventure, filled with one dangerous experience after another. We travelled during Ramadan, the Islamic period of fasting when Muslims don't eat during daylight hours for up to 40 days. It's hot and dusty and the locals were tired and cranky because they haven't eaten but then they stay up all night celebrating and eating. It was all bewildering for us, but we had to respect their customs and it wasn't easy.

We did see some of the most amazing, colourful, and cultural sights as we mixed amongst the locals, buying food in the markets, cooking on campfires, and travelling off the beaten track where tourists were rarely seen in the 1980s. I remember the USA was bombing Iran at the time and there were bomb shelters everywhere. The sirens would go off and everyone would take cover. Thinking back now it was pretty crazy to be there, but we were young and dumb and fearless.

We also used the black market to exchange currency at borders. This was normally done by a young local kid, you'd give him a few dollars to test him out, and he'd run down to the border, go under the fence, and come back with 100 to 800 times the original currency. This made the trip extremely cheap. I loved this task, the risk of losing all the funds with the excitement of getting rolls of money in return which you could barely hold in one hand. Big notes like \$100 would get you more than five individual \$20 notes because it was easier to smuggle one note with a big denomination than it was to smuggle several notes of a lesser value. I learned this from a guy I sat next to flying to Nepal after we ran into each other in a smoking den getting high.

One of my most favourite memories was running in these remote places. Most mornings about 30 minutes before the truck would take off, I'd start running. Being out there in these really remote places just on my own was amazing. What I really liked was seeing these

farmers in their fields stop and look at me. How strange it must have been for them, seeing this skinny white guy in running gear just appearing out of nowhere and running off into the distance.

It's crazy to think that of all these countries I visited, Iran seems to spark the most interest when I tell people about this trip. I guess they have a perception of Iran as the enemy due to how they're portrayed in the media. My experience was very different. They were so kind and caring towards us, like the time a group of six of us needed tickets to catch a bus into town. Apparently, all bus tickets had to be purchased at the beginning of the month which meant we didn't have any. Even though we didn't speak their language, six people gave up their tickets for us which meant they would miss out on one day's bus ride themselves.



After arriving in London, it was time to get a job. So, I bought a suit and decided that I could get a job at Harrods department store, After all, I had worked at Myer the biggest department store in Geelong! All dressed up and feeling confident, I went to the job interview only to be put back in the classroom environment in the first minute and a half. They required that I write a paragraph about why I would be suitable to work at Harrods. I just got up and walked out as I knew that what I would write would not help me get this job. I still was carrying the scars of school yet had just travelled across some of the harshest environments in the world and navigated them without speaking a word of their language. The scars run deep, and I still carry them. Even writing about it now gives me a strange feeling.

So instead of my ideal job at Harrods, I found myself in a small country town cutting hedges, living in a caravan, and going to the pub with my drunken employer every afternoon.

I then decided to apply for a job I saw in a magazine which advertises positions for people who are travelling. I saw an ad which required

looking after a disabled boy who I thought was maybe going to be 12-14 years old, primarily to take him on some travel adventures. Perfect, I thought. I applied for the job and got an interview which was about an hour and a half out of London by train. I located this really nice house in the countryside and knocked on the door. About 10 minutes later, someone answered, then I waited for another two hours before Mike Nemesvary, a really good-looking, young man, but very, very fucking disabled, appeared. Mike struggled to push his wheelchair on his own, it took him about 5 minutes to go 10 feet. He slowly wheeled himself out into the lounge room with great determination. I've never seen such resolve and guts. It was nothing but true grit. I was fucken impressed but thought to myself what the hell am I doing here. I felt some dread and was way out of my comfort zone as this was the first person I'd ever meet that was disabled. I wasn't sure how to act or where to look, it was all very uncomfortable in those first few minutes.

What Mike needed was a nurse who could travel with him, because he planned to do a number of international trips. Not having any nursing qualifications, except for my first aid training as an outdoor instructor, there was no way this was going to be possible. You have to understand this is the most disabled person I had ever seen, he was completely fucked from the neck down. Mike was an ex-British ski champion and had done some stunts for James Bond movies. It turned out we knew some ski mates and a bond was formed very quickly. So, we got really drunk and stoned, listened to music and I missed my train back to London and ended up staying the night at his place.

About a week later, I got a phone call from Mike inviting me to Spain to have a trial run for this position. Of course, I assumed I was going to assist the nurse not become a nurse!

The reason why Mike chose Spain, was that he said you didn't have to wear a catheter, and he could piss himself while sitting on the

beach. Something I truly didn't understand at the time. By the third day, I was getting the hang of all the nurse's activities and daily routine which is very intensive and extremely hard as you're dealing with an adult who has no bodily functions yet still has a lip and a tongue that work. Mike could lash out with the most savage comments due to his frustration and inability to do things for himself. When you realise where he'd come from and who he was before the accident, I have some sympathy for his sometimes unnecessary tongue lashings.

One day, I was passing this shop that had a blowup inflatable dinghy, and I thought this would be good for taking Mike out onto the water. So, I bought the boat and blew it up. I can still remember the head rushes I got from doing that. I proceeded to put a lifejacket on Mike, pick him up, and put him in the inflatable.

Mike instructed me to go into his bag and bring out another waterproof bag which was full of joints. Big joints. We proceeded to smoke one tremendous, humongous joint, not understanding how powerful it was. We both lay in the boat laughing and drifting further and further out to sea. Once I realised how far out we were, in my panic I jumped overboard and started swimming back to shore with the boat tied to a rope around my ankle.

I don't know how long it took us to get back, but I was pretty well stuffed and found we were about a mile down the beach from where we had started. I had to carry Mike, who is a dead weight, and drag the blowup dingy up the beach, all while being stared at by hundreds of beachgoers, no doubt wondering what these two guys were up to. We survived Spain and on returning to London he offered me the job of being his nurse and companion on some more international trips. That's right I was his full-time nurse, just me, and my spicy brain, which said you can do it, can't be that hard.

Mike had worked out a schedule for all of his drugs and routine procedures and had written them up for me to use like a bible. My

concern was that I could hurt him if something really went wrong. Mike was adamant that I couldn't hurt him, he said I could grab a knife and stick it in his leg and he wouldn't feel a thing. He was determined to have me work for him. Mike had done everything the opposite of what he should have since breaking his neck at C4 in a trampoline accident, showing off to one of his 100 girlfriends! This made him completely incapable of using any part of his body below his nipples. He did have limited movement in both arms but was still completely incapable of doing even the most simple tasks.

He told me his aim in life was to be able to drive a car so he could kill himself. He said he wanted to be in control of his own death because disabled people's life expectancy is a lot shorter than normal.

I really understood his frustration at being stuck in a body that did not function correctly. I didn't feel sorry for him, but I felt like I understood the emotional pain and that made us great mates. He was stuck in a body that did not work, and I had a brain that would misfire, go off on crazy tangents, and was disconnected from basic tasks like reading and writing. We were a good pair of misfits. And Mike saw the advantage of having me over some of the nurses he'd had in the past two years.

Getting Mike up in the mornings or getting him ready for bed was a process that could take up to three hours, especially if a bath was involved, which usually happened at both ends of the day. Think of the bathing, drying, catheter, dressing, putting him in the wheelchair, feeding him, and doing everything else you do but take for granted.

Added to this, Mike was a night owl. He could stay up all night listening to music, reading, and misbehaving till all hours of the morning which meant I had to be on duty. You see, when he wanted a drink, even just a sip, I needed to help him. He couldn't even scratch his own nose. Every action we do every day, needed my help.

Over time I found myself thinking like him and would be doing tasks before he even asked for them to be done. I'm not going to go into all the details but when your body doesn't work from the nipples down nor do your bowels, bladder, and other bodily functions that we take for granted. Let's just say there were tasks I had to do with double gloves and plenty of air freshener on hand.

I'd have to say the adventure of working with Mike was the hardest physically and mentally challenging thing that I've ever done. Even harder than the trip through the Middle East. I worked out that I was living on about four hours of sleep a day and some of that was grabbed in one-hour bits. Add to that, Mike had to be turned over during the night so he wouldn't get bed sores and continually needed to be checked on for breathing and other issues that could occur.

Because he had no blood flow, he was always cold, so the heater was on max all day and night and I worked in boxer shorts and a singlet in the middle of an English winter. Driving the car was also hell as he wanted the heater on full all the time. Stopping to get fuel, I'd get out of the car in my shorts and stand in the freezing cold to get a reprieve from the heat and the attendant would think I was some crazy idiot.

When we went out for dinner with his mates I would often have to try and find bricks to jack up the table so he could get his wheelchair to fit under the table and I would disappear under the table to empty his pee bag so it didn't overflow.

But it wasn't all bad. In fact, we had so much fun travelling the world together. Our first trip was to Hungary to meet all his distant relatives. Mike was born in Canada but resided in London due to his career as an Olympic trampolinist. He switched to skiing and became a world champion at aerial skiing. And what made him really famous was being cast in a James Bond film - at the beginning of the film, there's all these scary jumps through flames and over mountains - well that was Mike. Apparently, on the opening night of the James

Bond film they had a very successful charity function to raise money for him. He also had full benefits from the UK government as Mike switched from Canadian citizenship to UK citizenship to ski for the UK team.

Getting back to our trip to Hungary. You do have to realise this is over 35 years ago and there were lots of guns and lots of soldiers as it was a communist country. This one night at dinner with all of Mike's relatives they got pretty rowdy in the restaurant and everyone was getting really, really drunk. Sitting at a dinner table, Mike looks quite normal, propped up in a chair being the centre of attention. That's when he was in his real element. He had a fantastic personality, engaging, funny, full of stories and the girls absolutely loved him.

One of the reasons that Mike liked having me as his nurse was that I was strong enough to pick him up, like when I'd get him out of the bath. I'd just jump into the bath, put my arms under him, and just pick him up, take him to the bedroom, put him on the towels, and dry him. It was all pretty easy, getting on and off aeroplanes, getting in and out of the car. Mike liked to be normal and hated the plane's wheelchairs for disabled people and shit like that, so I would piggyback him on and off the plane. He was quite light due to his muscles wasting away from lack of use. All these tasks would normally require maybe two assistants or a machine to help. But I would just do these on my own. It gave Mike an enormous amount of freedom but also caused us a few issues.

Anyway, after dinner we're heading back to the hotel. We're both quite drunk. I've got Mike on my back. As I'm piggybacking him through the hotel, all of a sudden, a security guard appears with this huge gun which he pushes into my chest and tells me to put Mike down. The guard thought we were drunken idiots, which was not far from the truth but only one of us was very legless and couldn't walk, not even for a billion dollars. Mike starts abusing the security guard who isn't seeing the funny side of this at all and demanded that Mike

get off my back. Well, there's nothing else I could do. I put him down on the floor, both of us pissing with laughter. But Mike was getting more and more angry at the guard, abusing him, yelling at him. Once the situation was finally understood by the security guard, he helped put Mike on my back, and off we went to our room.

The feelings Mike must have felt after those times when he was helpless to fight back must have been very hard for him and he would stew on it for days. I related to this because this is how I felt at school the whole time, trapped in a body that did not work when it was meant to.

We also travelled to Los Angeles where we were guests of Peter and Chorale Stringfellows who owned nightclubs in London. I remember having lunch in the fine dining room at The Beverly Hills Hotel, drinking only the most expensive champagne. In London, we could go to their nightclubs dressed in just our jeans and were given the best tables in the house. Mike and I would be on the dance floor, with me swinging his wheelchair as hard and as fast as I could. I also once got to sit next to the bodyguards for Princes Charles and Edward at a function where Mike was presented with an award for his work with charities. The two of us dressed up in black tie was quite a sight to see, but Mike insisted that we don't wear dress shoes but very bright white sandshoes instead. When he was introduced on stage, he began his speech with, "G'day mate!" pretending to be an Aussie, should have seen their faces!

We went to Disneyland. I took him on all the rides, and he loved the roller coasters most of all. So much speed and adrenaline he had felt as a skier. We also went to Canada on a trip to catch up with his father and other relatives. I took him skiing on my back at a dry ski resort in London. We visited the Audi car manufacturer in Europe to get Mike fitted for a new system to allow him to drive a car. Basically, Mike was up for any adventure, and I was his ticket to do it. No limitations due to my strength and spicy brain. The world

opened up again for Mike and he took full advantage of every opportunity we could put together.

Years later when I had two children, Mike came to Australia on a worldwide driving adventure. He had a vehicle manufactured especially for him, where he could guide his wheelchair into the driver's position and operate the car with his limited movement. He showed me how he could drive using his head to hit these big buttons on his wheelchair and a small three-pronged joystick, like a PlayStation, which controlled the brakes, acceleration, and steering. It was amazing to see him drive it with such freedom and the ability to control his environment. This is something he always said he missed, not having full control over his activities. He had reached his goal of driving a car, but instead of turning it into a negative, he turned it into a positive. He was the first C4 paraplegic to drive around the world on his own.

What a fucked champion and it makes me think how amazing we are as humans that when something is taken away from us we actually can do without those skills. This is how spicy people should think. We have some things that have been taken away or made difficult by being spicy but we have 10 times more possibilities in other ways. You just have to know how to tap into it. This is what is most important, not to allow the negative feelings of being spicy to overpower the positives. I know it's a daily struggle because I live the daily struggle. It's important to see the good sides and work with the weaknesses, not letting them overpower the amazing gifts we have. Even if others don't see it as a gift. It's your gift but it's also your responsibility to learn how to control it and how to make you a superman, even if only a little bit at a time.

The six months of working with Mike were like climbing a mountain. Extremely difficult and challenging but in the end I got to experience the most amazing time and I'll never forget that view looking down from the top and thinking I did it. All this because I didn't get a job

at Harrods because of my dyslexia and I was too scared to show my weakness of not being able to write. Yet the reason I got to work with Mike was a direct consequence of my dyslexia - reading the job ad incorrectly and being willing to take a challenging, out-of-the-box experience. Way, way outside my comfort zone!

Most people would expect that you just couldn't do such a job without years of training in nursing as well as knowing how to manage all the risks associated with such a job. I didn't see it like that. I just saw the challenge, the adventure, more challenge, and an attitude that I could do it. Mike had two full-time nurses with him when he came to Australia, and I remember them both complaining how hard it was. That made me feel really proud of my efforts, doing that job on my own with zero training except for a week or two in Spain on the beach.

This is one of the things I love about being spicy. I encourage every spicy person to embrace being different and not run away from it because that's what society wants you to do. They want you to conform and be like their view of what's 'normal'. Well, guess what? I like to think you're not 'normal' or 'abnormal', you're just spicy. So grab it with both hands and champion it.

And that's what I've done ever since. I've continued to take these massive risks. Some of them worked out. Some of them were massive failures. But, in theory, failure has been my friend because I've been so comfortable with it. When I've failed, most people would have packed up their bat and ball and fucked off. I just see it as a little road bump that I need to fix. It's like I've got this warm blanket, and I can wrap myself around it and go, okay, how am I going to fix this problem? It's really very unique and therefore I can take on a high level of stress when I take on a high level of risk. Unlike most people who are put off by failure, I actually go into my comfort zone.

Which then brings me to where the problems lie.

Because I'm so comfortable with failure, I don't recognise the failure signs when they're coming up and they're blatantly belting me in the back of the head. Sometimes, I actually don't change direction or pull out and say, no, I'm not going to do that. I continue to push through. That's why sometimes my businesses have been sacrificed because I wasn't able to just recognise things were going wrong and I needed to make adjustments. I would just continue to push ahead. That's been both an advantage and a disadvantage. When it works, it works big but when it goes wrong it's a disaster and I take everyone with me, investors, employees, clients, and my family most of all.

Now that I'm older and more mature (maybe), I recognise that I don't have to push through. I don't have to make every failure into a success. I can actually absorb it, go, shit, well, that didn't work, did it? Or I can see it clearer now and say why don't I pull back here and add more there? Learning to control that spicy brain is a work in progress because the world is not set up for us, so we need to be more flexible and more agile to move around it and understand that sometimes our crazy brain is working against us, not for us.

I guess I can understand what my partner has said about me making “solitary, high-risk decisions” and jumping into new ventures and opportunities “without regard for others” who will be affected. Yes, it's like a roller coaster for others looking in from the outside, but being spicy has given me an immense reserve of energy, enabling me to focus on multiple projects and tasks at once. Dyslexia offers a unique perspective, allowing me to approach problems, situations, and opportunities from angles others might not see. It empowers me to think and create in ways that others might miss simply because they can't perceive them the same way. All they see is a roller coaster ride, all I see is an opportunity, another adventure!

## CHAPTER -6-

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Here's some information which I came across recently that's worth thinking about.

*Dyslexia is an alternative way of thinking, which affects an estimated 20 percent of Australian children. This means that between one and five children in every Australian classroom has mild, moderate, or extreme dyslexia, or is a struggling reader.*

*Approximately 40% of students across the nation cannot read at a basic level.*

*Globally, by many estimates, ADHD may now be the most common mental health condition on Earth, by some counts affecting some 366 million symptomatic adults worldwide – significantly larger than its closest competitor, anxiety, at 300 million - according to the Journal of Global Health and the World Health Organisation.*

Studies have found that 25% of CEOs, 35% of entrepreneurs, and 50% of NASA employees have dyslexia. Why does NASA employ dyslexic people? Their strengths translate into real-world success. They're deliberately recruited for their exceptional abilities in areas like 3D perception and creative problem-solving, skills so essential for space exploration.

I remember going to the careers office at school, sitting through an hour of questions, thinking they were actually going to help me figure out my future. Then, after all that, they came back with their big recommendation—I should try working in Antarctica.

What the fuck? Antarctica? The most remote, brutal, and unforgiving place on Earth? My first thought was, are they just trying to get rid of me? Like, let's send this kid as far away as possible where he can't cause any trouble.

At the time, it felt like they were basically saying, *you don't fit in here, so let's dump you somewhere you can't do any damage*. But looking back, maybe it wasn't meant as an insult. Maybe they saw something in me—someone who could handle the stress, the isolation, the extreme environment. Maybe, in some weird way, it was actually a compliment. I just didn't have the perspective to see it back then.

Because of my disastrous experiences at school, I've got some pretty strong opinions about the education system, both then and now. My daughter has just finished Year 12 at a private school in Melbourne and I didn't see that very much has changed from the days when I was at school. To me, it looks like we have a system designed by educators for educators. What I mean is that the school system is designed to get people to university to continue their studies in order to become doctors, engineers, architects, and of course more teachers.

Where is the classroom for the 40% who are struggling to read but have other skills that the education system could focus on? There's a massive gap with the current system and it's not hard to see that it's not working.

Given that ADHD and dyslexic individuals can be highly effective in senior and leadership positions, and 30% to 40% of entrepreneurs are ADHD, it's unsurprising to find people like Richard Branson growing and running companies. So, it makes sense that the

education system needs to incorporate more learning around critical thinking and leadership with courses designed to be innovative and to fill the gap between those who think like them and are good at the usual school ways of doing things and those like the 30% to 40 % that don't think like them – but are still capable of being high achievers.

Here's my idea for a course to help fill the gap in the modern curriculum and it goes beyond the traditional stuff you learn at school to really prepare students for the challenges of the real world. These classes are not just "nice-to-haves" but vital tools to help students thrive in an ever-changing, competitive environment.

### **Course: Enhancing Education: A Call for Critical Thinking and Leadership**

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#### **Proposed Classes**

##### **1. Critical Thinking**

- **Purpose:** Teach students how to analyze problems, evaluate information, and make reasoned decisions.
- **Implementation:** Use real-world scenarios and case studies to encourage logical reasoning and evidence-based solutions.

##### **2. Out-of-the-Box Thinking**

- **Purpose:** Encourage creativity and unconventional approaches to problem-solving.
- **Implementation:** Introduce brainstorming sessions, design challenges, and projects that require innovative thinking.

### 3. CEO Development

- **Purpose:** Cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets, focusing on business strategies, financial literacy, and risk management.
- **Implementation:** Simulate real-world business scenarios, including startup projects, pitching ideas, and managing resources.

### 4. Think Like a Leader

- **Purpose:** Teach students the qualities of effective leadership, including communication, teamwork, and adaptability.
- **Implementation:** Use role-playing exercises, leadership workshops, and mentorship programs.

### 5. Redesign Existing Systems

- **Purpose:** Empower students to critique and improve existing systems, whether in education, technology, or society.
- **Implementation:** Encourage project-based learning where students identify inefficiencies in current systems and propose innovative solutions.

## How This Can Be Done

- **Integrating into the Curriculum:** Schools can introduce these classes as electives or as part of interdisciplinary learning modules.
- **Teacher Training:** Invest in professional development for educators to equip them with the skills to teach these subjects effectively.

- **Partnerships with Experts:** Collaborate with entrepreneurs, business leaders, and innovators to bring real-world expertise into the classroom.
- **Hands-On Projects:** Focus on experiential learning through workshops, internships, and community projects.
- **Assessment:** Move beyond traditional tests to evaluate students through portfolios, presentations, and practical demonstrations.

## The Impact

By embedding these forward-thinking classes into the school system, we can nurture a generation of critical thinkers, creative problem-solvers, and confident leaders ready to tackle the challenges of tomorrow.

Richard Riley, former US Secretary of Education, encapsulated this need succinctly by predicting that “*We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist, using technologies that haven’t been invented, in order to solve problems we don’t even know are problems yet.*” This stark reality underscores the need for an educational paradigm that evolves past the traditional focus on memorization and rote learning to embrace a more robust focus on **critical thinking in the classroom** and beyond. (Source: learningfocused.com)



Being spicy isn't my only reason for being one-eyed about changing the way we educate our kids – especially that 40% I've just talked about. To me, education is not about remembering facts but the love of learning. It's important that we learn *how* to learn and that we realise that success at learning isn't all about how good you are at reading and writing or how fast you are at doing a test.

I've actually experienced first-hand how a school system can function by turning traditional classroom learning on its head. Let me introduce you to Green School.

In 2011, after a disastrous financial collapse of my business and personal wealth, from many, many millions to zero, it was decided we needed a sea change. We had heard about this school called Green School, based in Bali. Cheap accommodation, surf all year round, great access to Asia, it really ticked all the boxes for a one-year break.

Green School was off the planet. If you could picture everything you would want in a school, whether your kids are bright, challenged, or just average, this place was that and more. Built on the foundation of caring for the environment and building business leaders, it was just so exciting for me to drop the kids off at school and see them running eagerly to the campus.

Green School's website sums up their purpose:

*We strive to champion a new model of education that nurtures the whole child, giving them agency in their own lives and learning, so that they can thrive with purpose in our ever-changing world. We invite you to join our global community and discover the difference for your family.*

*Our shared vision is motivated by a deep concern for and attention to, the wellbeing of our students **and** our planet.*

The global Green School movement first began with the opening of Green School Bali in 2008 by lifelong entrepreneurs, John and Cynthia Hardy. After years of homeschooling, they wanted their daughters to attend a school that they believed in.

Since opening, Green School Bali has become a beacon for the future of education, with new Green School locations around the world. Chris Edwards, Head of Curriculum, elaborated on their goals in this interview:

*“Our parents and communities want to inspire a lifelong love of learning in their children and understand that while their own schooling may have helped them succeed in today’s world, that their children will need a different approach in order to succeed in the world of tomorrow,” said Edwards.*

*Although each campus is unique in many ways, Edwards said that each values the concept of ‘local to global’ as part of a larger mission. This focuses on developing a new, innovative learning model that relates to the ever-changing real world.*

*“This is challenging,” said Edwards. “It takes unusual levels of commitment, ingenuity, and ability to work outside of the established norms and protocols of public institutions.”*

*Green School uses the term ‘nature-based learning’ as a foundation of their approach. Edwards said that it’s very challenging to compare any type of online learning in any meaningful way to what is done at Green School.*

*“You use two senses online,” said Edwards. “However, one uses five senses every second of every day at Green School because we incorporate nature in every lesson.”*

*Ultimately, Edwards said Green School is about educating changemakers for a more sustainable world. Green School graduates have been admitted to universities in 18 different countries, travelled the world, and pursued every type of career imaginable.*  
*(Source: Gettingsmart.com)*

So, this was our experience at Green School. All four of our kids attended after previously being educated back home at Geelong Grammar School, Wesley College Early Learning, and Elsternwick Primary School both in Melbourne.

At Wesley College, we heard about this incredible teacher, Kirsten. After just one minute of meeting her, Sarah and I were completely

hooked. Her approach to education was everything we wanted for our kids. It wasn't cheap—not by a long shot. Compared to traditional daycare or preschool, it was a serious investment. But we figured it was worth being broke for a little longer if it meant giving our kids the best foundation in learning.

And Kirsty—she was amazing. Still is. Back then, she was a pioneer in early learning, following the Reggio Emilia philosophy. This approach saw kids as creative, intelligent beings who could explore, discover, and make sense of the world in their own way. It was about giving them freedom and respect to learn on their own terms, in a way that actually made sense to them. Originally developed in Italy in the 1950s, it was designed to be progressive, democratic, and liberating.

I loved everything about it. I'd beg to be the one to drop the kids off at school, and then I'd end up hanging around—sometimes way too long. Kirsty was just that good. She connected with each child in a way I'd never seen before. Every moment, every little thing in the world around them, she turned into a learning experience. It was inspiring to watch.

Back at Green School. Our kids were there during its early development stages. Thinking outside the box comes naturally to me, but then I met John Hardy—the founder of Green School. And let me tell you, this guy was on another planet! I take my hat off to him. He had a vision, and against all odds, he made it happen. Even when people told him it would never work, he pushed forward with insane determination. And he was right—kids and teachers came from all over the world to be part of it.

But living in a third-world country? That was nuts. Asia isn't an easy place to live when you're not just passing through for a couple of weeks on holiday. There's this constant undercurrent of danger. You feel it all the time.

We got shaken down by the police—regularly. They wanted money because Sarah had started a shop and built a successful design company. It got so bad we had to hire the local mafia just to protect our family *from the police*. Then there was the nightmare of unpaid rent on a commercial property we owned—another trip to the police, another call to the mafia for help.

And it wasn't just us dealing with this chaos. The kids saw it too. They saw locals stoning people who had stolen. They learned early on that you always had to be on guard for a shake-down, even at the beach. It was an insane, eye-opening, and at times, terrifying way to live. But it was also an experience like no other.

With all the advantages of living in Asia, it's very unstable and they operate in a different way to what we're used to – corruption, shakedowns, bribes, fire! We didn't know how much that underlying fear was weighing on us until we returned to Australia and felt safe again.

It still amazes me how good this whole experience was for our kids. Like having our meals cooked by one of the local families that supported us with cooking, cleaning, driving cars, and anything we needed. They were so kind and gentle, but you still needed to keep your guard up. Things went missing.

Back to Green School.

So, all our kids were enrolled in Green School and everyone is thriving. Great lifestyle, surfing every day, eating amazing food at one-tenth of the cost in Australia. After one year had passed, Sarah and I were ready to return to our old life back in Melbourne.

Over dinner, we informed the kids that we were planning to go back to Australia and they would be heading off in the next few months. I have never seen such a scene of defiance! They made it clear they were not leaving - because of school. As a parent that statement is

gold, something I bet all parents would like to hear. How could we refuse such a love of learning and willingness to learn?

So, when the second year came around and we had the same conversation over dinner, we got the same reaction, only worse. The kids were older now and at this stage were riding motorbikes to go surfing, had the freedom to be young and adventurous, ate locally from the street vendors, spoke the local language, and had a great clan of international friends.

Finn, our second oldest, was not really enjoying school like the others. We had a lot of discussions with the school who said it was related to his confidence. They suggested that we encourage him to start reading books on subjects he's interested in like surfing.

Well, that sent my dyslexic brain into overdrive.

If the school was saying he could learn by using a passion like surfing, then why could the whole process of learning not be focused on surfing? So, Sarah and I, with lots of input from others, designed a program that would teach Finn about how to learn with surfing being the foundation of the structure.

With the full support of Green School, we set up a home school. We found an ex-windsurfing professional who was a qualified secondary school teacher living in Bali and needed a job. The two of us worked on the curriculum, making sure we covered every aspect of the requirements of the Victorian education system, but we had to relate it all to surfing and the local community - and it had to be fun. We called it Brain Wave.

So, Brain Wave began with two kids, Finn and his mate Zeb. Zeb's Mum who is a gymnastics teacher saw that Zeb was in the same position as Finn and was willing to try this crazy educational process. You have to remember this was about 20 years ago.

I bought a mobile whiteboard, and classes were held in our villa. And it was on.

I bet you're thinking how can you create a whole curriculum based on a genre like surfing? Easy, all the books that must be read are about surfing. Maybe they're not reading long chapters but they're still reading words. Then there's math. Fucking genius! How many paddle strokes are required to go from one point on the beach to another? They used all types of math to work out the answer. But the real beauty of this new learning occurred to me when I arrived home at the villa to see how excited the kids were. Their teacher had taken them to the beach to check their calculations and their math worked! Gold.

So, Finn's day would start at 6:00 am with a surf coach that would video the boys surfing and work on their mental and physical health as well as helping them improve their surfing. He would run special fitness programs and all types of cool stuff that taught the kids about their bodies and how to get the most out of them. Today, Finn is so healthy, and although not a gym person, he really treats his body like a temple. After surfing and a massive feed, class would start at 10:00 am and go to 3:00 pm. Lunch was supplied and there was no uniform. The kids didn't wear shoes, not for four years, and their feet were tough as nails.

Brain Wave Surf School lasted about 18 months. There were seven kids from around the world before we decided it was time for Finn to return to Green School. To be able to change the system and still achieve a great outcome was a very cool experience and something we are really proud of. One thing that stands out for me is that the older kids in the group had to work on a specific project all year through and I got to listen to their most amazing TED Talks which would blow your mind.



Here's an extract of an interview with John Hardy from the website [dumbofeather.com](http://dumbofeather.com) which conducts regular interviews with extraordinary people.

It begins with an introduction by the interviewer Kate Bezar:

*In the mid-'70s John Hardy ended up in Bali. An art school graduate lacking direction, he became fascinated by the island's jewellery-making traditions and began to work with local artisans to produce his own designs. Success didn't happen overnight, but by 1992 his range was stocked in North America's most prestigious department stores. One of the keys to its success is that John and his wife (read 'right-hand woman') Cynthia have done well by doing good: the John Hardy brand is internationally respected for its platform of 'sustainable luxury'. Each piece is inscribed with the number of bamboo seedlings that will be planted to offset its impact. By 2007, John was ready to 'retire' so he sold the jewellery business and used the proceeds to fund a hugely ambitious project ... a 'Green School'*

KB: *When you left Canada were you designing jewellery? Had you already started that or was that something that came after you moved to Bali?*

JH: No, no, I didn't have any skills when I came here. I'd graduated from an art school. I was really dumb.

I mean, I was dyslexic and they didn't have dyslexia when I was at school, so I was just dumb.

The smart ones all went and worked for the Government or the school system for their entire lives and now they're retired in the double-wide lazy boy reaching for their diabetes medicine, trying to figure out what's on TV. I'm just really happy I didn't follow that path. I didn't really even have that choice; I couldn't pass the exam to become a fireman, let alone a doctor, or lawyer, or Indian chief! My father knew I wasn't stupid, but when I brought home the report card he used to try to figure out ways to motivate me to apply myself because he knew I wasn't stupid and I'm not really stupid, I'm a little bit retarded but ...

*KB: You just think differently.*

JH: It was kinda tough to get his signature on the report card. I tried to convince him that the Christmas report card came out in February. That didn't always work. He was never physically abusive, but he was really disappointed I was such a failure and I just wanted to live somewhere far away from him.

*KB: You did graduate eventually?*

JH: I did; I graduated from art school which is about the only place I could have really graduated from. The idea thing people liked there so I got good marks.

*KB: Did your teachers at high school encourage you to go to art school?*

JH: No. They didn't even know what art school was. I went to business school first and they had a design school in the same polytechnic as the business school. So I went to the design school and was really lucky that I met the guy who ran the art school. He thought I was a little weird and said, "Why don't you come to the art school?" So I went to the art school.

*KB: And then you ended up in Bali.*

JH: That's the story. I was just lucky ... I always say I walk under a hole in the sky where the ideas fall out. It's very hard on the people around me because I have way too many ideas for any human to ever get done.

## CHAPTER -7-

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*So, I've been told that my rollercoaster ride in life is too much for my partner and that she wants out or a break, which really means separation - but she's being kind to let me down easy.*

It was a tough start to 2023. I was informed in December, two weeks before Christmas, that my partner of 30 years, Sarah, with whom I have four amazing children, was leaving me. Within two months, my wife had moved out and I was left sitting in a house packing up a lifetime of shit. And thinking what the fuck did I do wrong?

Well, Sarah had written a long list to answer that question, and it goes like this:

- No stability or security.
- Prefers high-risk existence that puts enormous strain on the relationship.
- Ignores my need and pleas for calm.
- Desire to have millions rather than lead a comfortable secure stable life.
- Jumps into new ventures and opportunities without regard for others or the family and the financial and personal impacts.
- Behaves like a bachelor.
- High-risk decisions and behaviour without regard to how that affects me or the family.
- Makes decisions solitarily. A string of different businesses for the last 11 years that have created a roller coaster.
- No savings, assets, or investments at 57 years old.

- Fast emotional decision-making without any measured long-term planning. Like a child.
- Will not change any behaviours long term to lead to different outcomes. Eventually reverts to the same behaviours.
- Trust completely broken.
- Drinks heavily, drug dependent. Smoked too much pot
- Cannot communicate. Will not discuss any negative or challenging realities. Walks away “I’m not talking about this now.” Gets defensive in any conversation about finances or difficulties in life.
- I feel unheard. This is not the actions of someone who loves you.
- Extremely jealous of any male giving me attention.
- Makes commitments or promises he cannot keep or meet.
- Minimal contact with friends or family
- Socialising difficult and humiliating.
- Good, and loving father but treats the older kids like friends. Doesn’t act as a father.
- So here’s the reality for me. It’s time to understand and accept that he’s never going to change and does not want to. The cycle of behaviour is consistent and never-ending. I cannot turn a blind eye any longer. I’ve been communicating my needs for years and it goes unheard or ignites anger.
- I need to start carving my own path of security and stability. My mental and physical health are suffering and I need to put my happiness first. I need peace.
- We have nothing in common any longer. We’re very different people from 30 years ago. The love has been eroded by the reckless behaviour and childish inability to communicate.
- I’ve given 30 years of loyalty and support. But it’s just expected that I go along for every new ride. I’m getting off the roller coaster.
- Trust is completely broken. Respect gone.
- Love him as a friend, not a life partner.
- I’ve lost all hope to repair or change anything.
- He is very hard emotionally and I am not.

- It's time to accept things will never change back to our earlier years.
- It's taken me years to find the strength to speak up and evoke change.
- Trying to stay strong and get to the other side where there is peace, consistency, and rational measured behaviour. Love my own company and space. Always have.
- Nothing left in the tank.

⌘

When I first read this list, I was so sad, angry, and disappointed in myself. I knew I was better than this, yet I had let myself down and those around me. It's really hard when someone you love is so raw and direct, these words cut me like a knife. I still have the scars from these words. As truthful as they are, it still hurts.

So, I've been told that my rollercoaster ride in life is too much for my partner and that she wants out or a break - later I found out this was code for 'fuck off'. I still don't understand what that means. The difficult part of all of this isn't only the packing up of all our life's stuff, well the stuff Sarah didn't want and has left for me to deal with. It was that my world was crumbling all around me and I'm only millimetres from falling into massive despair.

It's also the fact that I didn't see the signs and I know the signs must've been huge, I had emails from her complaining about lots of stuff, but I dismissed them as I was struggling to fix the issues in my business and personal life. Later on, I learned to realise I was stonewalling her by not wanting to talk about the issues because talking with her was not going to fix them, only to be more reminders of what was wrong. My reaction was to say 'I don't want to talk about it' and I would walk away. I thought I was protecting her, but she just wanted to talk about what was going on in my life and she knew she couldn't help but wanted to be a part of the journey. I was very wrong to do this to her and I now understand that talking things over with

your partner, regardless of how hard those conversations may be, is very important. Not easy for men though, because we have a fix-it mentality.

There is a relationship concept I've learned about called The Four Horsemen: Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling. Being able to identify the Four Horsemen in your conflict discussions is a necessary first step to eliminating them and replacing them with healthy, productive communication patterns.

I was doing a lot of Defensiveness and Stonewalling, although they were an issue, they were not the only ones.

I got so angry with Sarah and myself for being in this position. Family means so much to me and I thought that all the sacrifices that I had made would measure up, but I was very wrong.

I got into a really bad place. Smoking too much cannabis, drinking heavily, and just not being myself. I was self-medicating because I thought that the more I smoked and drank the less pain I would be in. The truth was I was still waking up to the same shit in my life, and I was running away instead of tackling my problems headfirst like I used to do. I was weak and taking the low and easier road, well I thought it was the easier option but in fact it was self-destruction.

I could blame Covid or the crazy lockdown, (just for the record I was one of the ones who thought it was all crazy and how we are like sheep just following crazy government controls. I'm not an anti-vaxxer but I'm antigovernment telling us how we should live our lives). It wasn't because of the restrictions but it didn't help our problems of being held prisoner in our homes for nearly two years and having a full house every day with our kids not going to school.

I want to find out why she's fed up. So, Sarah has told me that she wants 12 months of separation. I'm scared. I'm frightened. I'm petrified because I still love her so, so much, and as I'm writing this, tears are streaming down my fucking face, and I feel like such a

fucking loser. I've always been the breadwinner. I've always provided but I have taken enormous risks. Risks well beyond my capability, my financial stability, and my aspirations. But I took these risks, calculated or not, to support my family as best I could. But now, regardless of what I've done in the past, what achievements and successes I've had, and what failures I have learnt from, I believe the next twelve months are either going to destroy me or make me fucking Superman.

Anxiety, what a fucking bitch. I have rock climbed 400 feet in the air and skied the most insane slopes. I've lived in igloos. I've lived with Aborigines. I've travelled through the Middle East, Iran, Syria, Jordan and Israel, and slept in a tent in the back of a truck in the middle of the desert. I've been in some really fucking tense situations, but I never had anxiety. Anxiety is a bitch. It gets you feeling weak, feeling vulnerable. Crying at the drop of a hat. Suicidal. And it's not like a broken leg or cancer. At least you're going to fucking address that. This anxiety shit is really hard.

I sit thinking about all the positives and negatives of being spicy and how it has influenced my life. Right now, I wish for nothing more but to be non-spicy. I hate being spicy and know that it has caused this damage, damage that in some ways I can't control. Like having a tick or termites that is out of your control.

Yet I have to live with the damage or success of being spicy. Can I blame my spicy brain on the events I'm currently experiencing? I think so, but I also feel it's a bit of a cop-out and that I need to take full responsibility and ownership of my spicy brain. I did not respect the power of it and the negative side of being spicy and I let it control me instead of me controlling it. In my defence, it's very fucken tiring being spicy and my brain is always firing. I would love to be able to sit on the beach for hours and relax and let the world pass by but that's impossible, my brain just won't let me ever relax or be still for one minute.

So let me paint the picture of my life at the moment. The kids have all disappeared in different directions. My wife is living in another house. I started a new job which I hate. My boss is a control freak who thinks sales come from cold calling. He doesn't even believe in the Internet. Fuck, there are some dicks in the world. I have to pack up my house. I'm staying in my son's bedroom because my wife has taken our bed. I take a train for one hour to get to work wearing a suit with a business shirt, shirts which I haven't worn in 20 years. I have to turn up for work at 8:30 am and leave by 5:00 pm, with 30 minutes for lunch. When you've been self-employed for as long as I have, being flexible, working on goals, and achieving those goals without restrictions of time, clothing, or working in an office, this job is shaping up to be very difficult. It's massively depressing on so many fronts. I feel like a massive loser and every step I take is like I have lead boots on. I have no car which has been my choice for a long time, so I travel by bike and train from out north to the city, I cook food for one person and I feel very sorry for myself.

Sarah and I decided to see a counsellor which was very difficult. She didn't really want to be there. I think she felt it was important to keep things calm for the kids. I wanted to fix the problem. This was not on her agenda at all. The sessions were good for us to get common ground and learn how to communicate better. There was still little hope of getting back together which made the sessions hard when we went our separate ways after the meetings.

I remember being so depressed one day standing on the curb and thinking I should just jump under a tram. Fucken how low can I go, feeling like this? Is this rock bottom? You're all alone, with no family, no money and now running two houses.

It took about 4 months before the fog lifted, the anger started to melt, and I was able to start to think clearly. I found a small house near where Sarah was living so I could be close to the kids.

Sarah and I were still fighting and seeing a counsellor together which I wanted but it was a struggle for her as she had already moved on. It was really hard for me to think that after all these years this is how our relationship would be defined moving forward. Once I realised that Sarah was not interested in any form of reconnection, I started to think about life on my own. What would it look like? How would this new stage of life work? There were some advantages to being single again, but I still would have preferred to be with my family again.

I tried counselling on my own, but it always felt shallow, and no one was really helping me. I started reading a lot of books and listening to podcasts and audiobooks. I started getting to the gym and eating good food that I enjoyed cooking, and it filled in the empty space of being on my own. I would only buy enough groceries for one or two days at a time as shopping was another event to distract me from my self-pity and falling back into despair.

Like most males, we don't have a lot of close friends. I have lots of friends, but I'm talking about close friends, guys you can really chat with, open up your heart and soul and you won't be judged. Women have this in spades. They can talk about stuff all day. I remember coming back from golf with a mate who had separated when I was still married, and he had just gone through a messy divorce. Sarah asked how he was doing. Did he have a girlfriend? How were the kids? I didn't ask him this stuff. I knew nothing about his personal life, and he didn't try to share it with me. But I knew he had a new driver for golf!

I've realised it makes things difficult as I have very few people to talk to. Not that that's a major issue because I talk to myself all the time, but it's just about not having people around. Now I'm sitting in a counsellor's meeting room about to unload all my shit on my own. They're so sterile and guarded. It's like the less they say and the less opinion they have, the more you need to come back.

My life is hell yet I'm surviving and starting to feel better.

I'm ticking off a lot of high-pressure points at present from this list of the top five most stressful life events which include:

- Death of a loved one
- Divorce
- Moving house
- Major illness or injury
- Job loss or starting a new job

The only one missing from my list is being sick, I guess being sick in the head doesn't count. But being spicy does tend to wear you down. Fuck, I should be bulletproof once I make it past this year. Maybe stronger and wiser too. I prefer to be weak and less wise but right now I don't have a choice as far as my partner is concerned.



I'm going to briefly go off in a different direction now, but I'll come back to the story of Sarah and me. I just feel it's necessary to flip to some background information because, while it wasn't the main reason for my marriage issues, it was still a piece of the jigsaw.

I want to tell you about my experience with conditional love. I grew up in a household where love came with conditions, though I didn't realize it at the time. How was I supposed to know? My parents, shaped by their own upbringing, built their parenting style around playing one child off against another to gain control or respect. I was being raised in an environment that lacked unconditional love, and I had no idea how damaging that could be. Not just for me, but for the whole family. Looking back, I'm sure this upbringing only added to the negative feelings I had about my own worth, especially as I

struggled with being spicy in an environment where our emotions and feelings were used like chess pieces to gain love or control.

As a child, I thought I lived in a loving home. My friends loved coming over to our place—especially the boarders from school—because there was always plenty of food and a level of freedom that seemed cool compared to other households. Looking back, my parents were great at putting on a show when guests were around, making it seem like the perfect family environment. And in those moments, it did feel great. But as soon as the guests left, everything would revert back to the same judgmental, chaotic world.

I've come to realize now that the love I was given wasn't love for who I was—it was conditional love. It wasn't free, without barriers, or given just because. In our house, love had to be earned. It was played like a reward system—if you did what your parents wanted, you'd get bits of love, but never too much. It made me feel like I was never good enough, never measuring up to my older brother and sister, who thrived in that environment. They did well in school, had lots of friends, and succeeded without major struggles. Meanwhile, I was on a completely different trajectory. Looking back now, it makes sense why I made certain choices as I got older—why I felt the need to take control of my own environment much earlier than most people around me.

It wasn't until I was about 15 or 16 that I started feeling like I didn't want to be around my family. I would constantly look for ways to escape—whether it was going into the bush to camp or volunteering for jobs that kept me away from home. The longer the trip, the better. I remember one summer when I spent the entire six weeks in the high country with my old outdoor education master. My parents never questioned it or seemed to care that I was gone for so long without any contact. The people I started surrounding myself with became great guides for me. For the first time, I felt appreciated for who I was, not for *what* I was. A kid with a spicy brain.

Conditional love teaches children that they are only worthy and deserving of love if they behave in ways that please their parents. You're not loved for just being yourself. So, you learn that your true self is wrong, bad, and undeserving of love.

Being the third child in a family of four, with two older siblings who were great at school, and high achievers in academics and sports, even becoming house captains, I always felt like a big disappointment. I'd get punished at school, then come home and get another round of punishments. It was an endless cycle of failure in their eyes and in mine.

The worst example of this came before my parents died. My mum passed away first from Parkinson's Disease, and my dad died a couple of years later. I was in my 40s by then. My older brother and I were in business together and it had a disastrous collapse. Without going into the finer details, he blamed me entirely and my parents sided with him, and our relationship became strained beyond repair.

I never really got the chance to say goodbye or spend time with my parents in their final years because of this. They even cut off all contact with Sarah and the kids. As a parent of four beautiful and unique children, each with their own differences, I find this incomprehensible. I could never imagine offering anything but unconditional love to my children, no matter what. I will never play one off against another. They have my unconditional love now and always, and I will support them no matter what happens in their lives—good or bad.

I have no communication with two of my three siblings now, and I'm not sure if this will ever change. But I have forgiven them all. And that hasn't been easy. I wish them well, and I don't judge them for their decisions, no matter how painful they have been for me and my family.

I talk to my parents after I finish meditation and ask for their guidance in life. One of the biggest things I've learned from this experience is that we don't get to choose the way our family or our friends make decisions or perceive our circumstances. And sometimes, people just aren't a good fit in our lives. People change, and that's okay. I actually thank these people for showing me that it's okay to move on and respect their choices, whether they hurt you or not.

I know it might seem like there's been a lot of negative shit in my life, but that's not what I'm trying to get across. I just want to show that having a spicy brain makes life a hell of a lot more complicated than it might be for someone who's not spicy. Not that non-spicy people have it easy either, it's just that we often find ourselves in situations that could've been handled better or made a lot easier if we didn't think the way we do. Sometimes we just create rough waters when things don't necessarily need to be rough.

The important thing is to reflect on our decisions, understand why we made them, and figure out how to improve, rather than just throwing our hands up and saying, "Well, I'm spicy, and I can't control it. It's just how I think and do shit."



Back to Sarah and me.

I was hunting high and low for support. Support that was going to tell me straight, not bullshit me with open questions, like, "How does that make you feel?" I stumbled across a men's group called, 'How to save your marriage'. It was a daily event that you did on Zoom, with up to 20 guys in a room all talking about their shit. I remember my first meeting, when I started talking, I just began to cry. The reality of my whole situation came rushing to the surface. I can say that this group changed my life for the better. It was a no-bullshit conversation. The mediator took no prisoners and was very direct

but in a very caring way. I learnt to look after myself first, then the kids. I learnt simple ways to just be kind and thoughtful towards Sarah.

So, the new me began. I focused on getting fit, doing meditation every day, eating really good food, drinking healthy smoothies, and staying focused. I read books on self-help, staying positive, and being a better me. They talked about how much your wife must have loved you because she chose you to spend the rest of her life with, and how much of an asshole I must have been for her to choose a scary thing like being on her own.

The main aim was to teach us to have the heart of a servant. Being a servant meant not necessarily doing the big things. Instead, little acts of thoughtfulness such as listening to what people say or doing necessary tasks without grumbling are some of the most important forms of service. Having a servant's heart means that no job is too small or beneath us. Any way we can help is great! One of the characteristics of a servant's heart is empathy. Seeing the world through other people's eyes. We can see things that some people miss. We can tend to their hurts or needs differently because we cut to the heart of what is happening to them. It all matters. Servants help in simple ways when someone is hurting. They bring a meal. They wash dishes. They bring coffee and a listening ear. They will come and do the things that weren't asked for, but desperately needed doing.

Above all, you don't need a podium to make a difference. A servant will be there for as long as it takes. Our servant's heart matters to that person. No one else may notice, you may not get an award, it may never be known in public, but the person you helped will never forget.

I learnt not to ask for appreciation that I did something, that I should just do it because it's the right thing to do.

They also said you can't be right and be married - leave your ego at the door and when you do stupid stuff own it. But move on. Recognise it was stupid and try to do fewer stupid things each week.

It made me realize just how selfish and self-centered I had been in our relationship. I wasn't respecting Sarah's needs or desires. Over time, I came to see that she was 100% right to leave me, my behavior was the reason it all fell apart. She stuck around for so long, hoping for change, but when nothing shifted, it made more sense for her to jump ship than to stay. I was an asshole without even realizing it, blinded by my own male ego and self-importance.

Looking back now, I can only thank Sarah from the bottom of my heart for having the strength and courage to kick my ass out. I'm a better person now than I've ever been, and that rocket ship she shoved up my ass changed me for good. So, thank you, Sarah.

Another thing I've realised about my relationships, whether it's with friends, workmates, or family, is that I'm incredibly defensive. I often feel like people are attacking me when they're not. It's not about what they're saying, it's about what I'm hearing through my spicy brain.

Growing up in an environment where mistakes were met with punishment and criticism made everything feel like a personal attack. It made me believe I had to be perfect to be loved. That kind of pressure builds up, and defensiveness becomes a form of self-protection. I still struggle with it, but I now understand that it's just my nervous system reacting to years of hurt and perceived threats—threats that aren't even real anymore. I've had to teach myself that when people disagree with me or bring up an issue they want to work through, they're not saying I'm a failure or that I'm not good enough. Those negative thoughts? They're just feelings, not facts. And that's something I'm still working on.

I need to let go of the baggage and start seeing how amazing life really is—what I've achieved, not just the constant fight to survive.

Now, I see life again. I enjoy life. And every day, I try to be a better version of myself. My business has exploded, and I love what I do. I enjoy my own space, spend a lot of time reading, and work on managing my spicy thoughts in a healthier way. That's why I started writing this book, to better understand what I've been through and to learn how to navigate it in a more positive way.

It's an ongoing journey, and sometimes the old Johnny tries to claw his way back up, but now I can recognize it and steer myself in a better direction. My relationship with my kids, Sarah, and the people around me has improved. I don't lose my shit over bad drivers or the old lady in the queue taking 15 minutes to find her change. I'm more 'in the moment,' appreciating life for what it is, the good, the bad, and everything in between.

In writing this book, I've thought long and hard about what I think is my greatest achievement and how I would judge my success. I can tell you the early me would have said it was all related to money, material things, and being a big shot in business.

But now, I know my greatest achievement is my four kids and the fact that they actually want me around. I don't mean all the time, but they invite me on their adventures whether that's a surfing trip, rock climbing, playing golf with their mates, helping with travel, or asking for my help with their job. Being included in their lives is more gold than I could ever ask for.

## CHAPTER -8-

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*When I'm fixed on a goal, the harder the goal the better I am at achieving it, I'm very clear and goal orientated but once I get close and can see that it's working, I can't stay on task, it all starts to crumble around me.*

Being spicy in the business world can be challenging and demanding. The reliance on the written word in business, and having to write your scrambled thoughts down, make day-to-day life in the work environment tough. This was especially so in my early days in the workforce when we used fax machines and wrote notes by hand. It meant people would often judge me because my written work had heaps of spelling mistakes, bad grammar, and jumbled messages. Even today I will still get comments about my spelling, grammar, and documentation. It's water off a duck's back to me. I actually feel sorry for them. I automatically think that they have their own limitations and aren't someone that I would like to work with. Or would they have the skills to keep up with me? I know my strengths and weaknesses, but do they know theirs?

On the other hand, if you know how to use the power and energy of dyslexia and ADHD, the advantages can be extremely powerful in the business world. This has been proven over and over by people who are way more gifted than me to know how to manage their superpowers – just take another look at that list of successful people from all walks of life in Chapter 4.

When I wrote my first book about dyslexia as a young, determined, and at times arrogant young man, I always felt strangely dissatisfied with the fact that I had written a book, it was such a contradiction.

Sure, I felt a sense of achievement at seeing my words on paper, but this created a massive inconsistency with my overall negative attitude toward books, reading, and writing.

The book was never meant to be a book. The reason it became a book was because Jenny Dalton did her university thesis on learning difficulties and used me as a case study. That was pretty cool I thought. But the university failed her because they did not believe her, or what I was saying about my school and learning experiences. They thought my story was fiction, well it should have been fiction, but unfortunately, it was my reality. Jenny was sad, I was pissed off. But we knew we had a good story between her theory and my lived experiences. So, my determination and inherent hate of the education system gave me a really good reason to get back at the education system. We decided to write up her thesis as a book, got it published and it was a best seller. I even managed to do some guest speaking at universities just to rub it in their faces.

You see the fighter in me is very strong, especially when I'm told I can't do something. It fires me up and I just have to climb over that brick wall regardless of how hard, how stupid, or how illogical it is. Sometimes this works in my favour and sometimes it bites me hard on the ass and it really hurts.

I decided I wanted to turn my book into an animated film. I wanted to explain the feeling of what it's like to deal with a thousand thoughts simultaneously, all swimming around in my head and hopefully, somehow, I'd grab the right one in the right context at the right time so I could stay on track for whatever task I was completing.

It's like those crazy competitions where they have someone standing in a glass tube and all this money goes flying around and your job is to catch as much money as possible within one minute. Well, that's what it's like all the time in my head. Ideas and thoughts are like the money flying around and unless you're concentrating it's really hard to focus and grab a clear thought. Even when you do catch a clear

thought there are all these distractions of other thoughts that are taking you in another direction.

Like when I'm having a conversation with someone and I'm interested in what they are saying, I really have to focus and not get lost in my own thoughts that will take their ideas or conversation on 100 different paths all at once. So, when I do respond, it might be on point or could be a thousand steps away from what they were saying but still makes sense to me because my brain has already calculated all the steps to get to that point. Therefore, the person thinks I have no idea what they're saying or it's irrelevant. In my mind, it's just an evolution of the conversation that has jumped many steps ahead. Frustrating for both parties.

I got the opportunity to present my idea for the animated book to Richard Pratt, the famous multi-billionaire who took his dad's small recycling business and turned it into a multinational company. Before his death, he was regarded as one of Australia's most successful and wealthiest businessmen. This unique opportunity to meet him occurred around 5:00 am while Richard was on his early morning walk around the botanical gardens known as 'The Tan' in Melbourne. He was surrounded by a whole lot of hangers-on, also trying to get a piece of his valuable time.

My concept was simple. Just build an animated film detailing what it was like to live with dyslexia and give it away to all schools for free. Richard really liked the concept, but he stopped and looked me straight in the eye and said, "John, I don't give a shit about dyslexic people, but could you do it about the environment instead?" Within a second, I said, "Yes." He then asked me how much it would cost. I just made up a number, a big number. He then said, "Fine. I'll get all my competitors on board, and I'll get the government too and we'll all contribute to it. You can own 100% of it and they'll sponsor it."

One year later I built and delivered '*Ollie Recycles*' - an educational game to teach kids about the three Rs of caring for the environment – Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. This was done on a CD-ROM in an era when most schools might have had one computer per class, and they were still rolling a TV on a big stand around each classroom. I also created a website. This may not seem a big deal now, but it was cutting edge back then.

Over the years, the concept and the educational materials have been reworked but the basics of the original game are still being used in the school system to promote recycling to kids. I remember my kids coming home from school talking about it one day and when I said I'd built the original version they didn't believe me because by then, I was doing my next big business adventure which was far removed from some kind of old fashioned CD ROMs.

Unfortunately, due to my ignorance and lack of ability to focus and stay on task, I sold that business for \$120,000 two years later, probably about \$500,000 in today's terms. I now know if I had retained it, I would've been able to turn it into a massive commercial venture, but this was my first entrepreneurial experience. I'd never developed any technology nor had any experience with building games and was not very good at navigating the education system, but they were just all hurdles that I had to jump over and work out. That's how the power of dyslexia and ADHD works. Being spicy gives me room to focus on many things at once and see outside the box when others don't see what I can see. It also means I have to take those others on the journey and get their buy-in. Not always easy when a lot of the time they just see my thinking as crazy ideas with no focus or structure. I can often see it in their eyes and it reminds me that they must be feeling like I felt at school.

As a spicy person, one of the great benefits is to be able to see and think on many different levels all at once. Sounds nuts I know, most people think in straight lines. Years ago, I read a great book by

Edward De Bono that talks about six thinking hats where he describes six different ways that we should think when we want to come up with a solution to a problem. Each hat has a distinct purpose and thought process, and he says you wear them in a specific order to nut out a problem. Well, a spicy person can do the same, but we can be all hats simultaneously. I describe it like a carpark with multiple levels and each level holds a different perspective. I find that I can travel to each level simultaneously, but the issue is sometimes I get lost dashing from one level to another. That's what you need to learn to control. Once you control it, it becomes a superpower.



Since my first job selling sports equipment, car stereos, and lawnmowers, I've worked in an array of businesses, including outdoor education, pretending to be a nurse, insurance and superannuation, banking and financial services, software development, environmental education, cryptocurrencies, and carbon credits. Some have been my start-ups, others were established enterprises.

One of my earliest jobs was working for a large insurance company that employed some rusty old guys who weren't computer savvy and had no idea that the internet was going to be huge. They communicated by email, but it was back in the day when you had a dial-up modem which took ages to fire up. Their job was to meet with prospective clients and create a quote for them based on products from ten different life insurance companies as well as health insurance, general insurance, and financial planning.

I presented the company with the idea that I could modernize their processes and create a more efficient online quoting system for their business. They liked the idea and gave me 33% of this new venture with the responsibility for raising the funds and building the model. Great deal for me and for them I thought, a win for all. I created the

business plan and started taking it to potential investors. One Sydney executive showed lots of interest and flew to Melbourne for a presentation of our concept. After the meeting, he was in. Looking great for a \$2 million investment and off to the races we go. Two weeks later, he had convinced the other owners that my input was only worth 2% of the business and that I should be happy with that. Holey shit did my spicy brain kick in!

In response, I immediately set up my own company, Inch Corp Pty Ltd. I think my first investment was only \$10,000 a massive drop from the \$2 million the VC was going to invest. But over time I started raising more and more funds, running my life and my business on a shoestring. No security for me or my family, even with a mortgage and my first kid on the way. Scary stuff I guess but I wasn't deterred because I believed I could do it and was more focused than ever on achieving my goals rather than worrying about failure.

In the end, the other guys never got their deal done and I do wonder what would have happened if I'd stayed. Inch Corp grew and grew, and after a very hard and rough start, I ended up selling 30% to Bendigo Bank, a small bank in those days, for \$1.8 million. Again, I was at the forefront of an industry I didn't know much about, yet I built the first online financial planning company in Australia and most likely the world. There was a big song and dance from the corporate regulators that you had to 'know' your client, meaning you could not just sell them something that had not been tailored to fit their needs. I worked out that 'knowing' your client did not mean you had to meet them face to face. The industry said I was nuts, coming up with an online way of meeting a prospect. This was fuel on the fire for my spicy brain. This new way of doing business was very successful and, when tested at Bendigo Bank, the marketing people said it was the largest takeup of any product they had ever launched.

However, with all that success, I again lost focus and was on to my next move. This lack of focus and being easily distracted have always

been my downfall. When I'm fixed on a goal, the harder the goal the better I am at achieving it. I'm very clear and goal orientated but once I get close and see that it's working, I can't stay on task, and it all starts to crumble around me. I ended up selling Inch Corp for next to nothing to Bendigo Bank which offered me a role with them as a senior executive.

They had no idea what to do with me because they were all so conservative and linear in their thinking. They were satisfied having the same products as all their competitors and their staff just wanted to keep their job and not stretch themselves. For me, it was hell. I was well paid but every day I just wanted to be fired.

When I look back, if I'd stayed there, I would have had a different story to tell and I'm sure my marriage would not have been thrown in the toilet. Life would have been simpler, and I can tell you I have wished many times that I was still there at the bank, doing nothing and just cruising along like they all did. But that's 95% of the problem. My thoughts and spicy brain just won't let me do that. This is the risk component that has caused so much joy but also so much pain for me. Finding a balance is key and that's what I'm starting to learn after all these ups and downs. But it's still a struggle, it's not easy for me. That's why I recommend doing baby steps. Being spicy is fantastic, it's a superpower, but it's also fucken dangerous if you don't control it.



My current business profile says it like this:

*I am a driven, enthusiastic person with a passion for building sustainable businesses, developing sales, business development and social media management platforms and strategies, and delivering value. I am currently seeking management and strategy opportunities in these areas, so I may continue growing in these fields and encouraging change for good. As a strategic thinker with over 25 years of business experience, I love to investigate new innovations. Where there is an*

*advanced, solutions focussed path, you will be sure to find me on it – helping businesses meet revenue targets and prosper from exceptional business growth. I love to extract more value from business operations simply by changing the strategic focus.*

The reality though, is that I've lived along the slippery slope of business success and business failure. This has meant that I've had plenty of opportunities to reflect on what I do these days so that I have better business outcomes, which also means a better personal and family life as well. What has helped me to become a better version of myself? What are my ADHD hacks? Here's my list.

- I go to bed early.
- I get up early like 6 am.
- I'm not a big breakfast person.
- I drink a daily mixed cocktail of nutrients - garlic, lemon, oil, turmeric, honey, ginger, and coconut water.
- Then I ride my bike to the gym, sit on the beach or a grassy spot, and do a 20-minute (Transcendental) meditation.
- At the gym, I don't get a sweat-up, just do some weights, sometimes swimming and sometimes the steam room.
- When I'm bike riding, I might listen to music or an audiobook for self-improvement.
- Then I start my day catching up with family and getting into my business.

My business hacks:

- I don't leave anything to chance when it comes to my memory. If I have a thought or something to do, I always make a quick note. This is either an appointment in my diary, a note in Notes on my phone or I send myself a text message.
- Each has a specific purpose. Long-term needs like passwords and travel itineraries will go into Notes.

If there's something I need to do in the next 2 to 3 days it goes into my calendar. If it's more to do with ideas such as what shares are a good buy, some health tips, etc. I'll text them to myself. It's amazing how I then don't have to think about anything. I've stored the message details somewhere and it will pop up and remind me when I need it.

- I use Chat GPT to check my work before I send emails. I see all technology as my silent friend.

I have looked at the many researchers, therapists, and experts who give internet advice to people like me with their 50 or 100 tips to follow to manage their dyslexia and ADHD. I look at their lists and have a laugh because they've often been done by people who don't have ADHD or dyslexia and although they mean well, most of their ideas aren't practical and require a linear brain to follow their rules.

What I suggest is choosing just five things that you think will help you in your world. What is it that you find you keep fucking up? You know, late to meetings, forgotten tasks, being rude when someone annoys you, or just saying stupid stuff. Begin your self-improvement by focusing on fixing just one of those things.

If you're always late to meetings, set your meeting time 10 minutes earlier than you're required. If you're forever forgetting things, use a diary as a personal assistant. Try putting everything in your calendar, regardless of the task, breakfast, lunch, travel, everything. If you want to improve the way you interact with people or how you communicate, check out the huge variety of audiobooks that can help you.

One thing I can say is, don't try and do too much all at once. If you want to change your diet, then just focus on the diet first, then add getting fit once your diet issues are all squared away. Then add something else. If you try and do everything at once, you're going to end up back where you started, too much happening at once, too

much to keep track of, too much frustration, and then nothing gets done. Forget about following someone's 100 tips and writing stuff on whiteboards and all this other crazy shit, you're just not gonna do it!

Another way to help yourself is to think about all the things you're good at and why is it that you're good at those things. Maybe that's how you learn. If you've been able to learn to put your shoes and socks on, get dressed, and then make your bed, then you can add other challenges like how to be on time for a meeting as well.

Build it slowly, don't rush, and be proud of those little things that you start to learn whether it's using your diary like a personal assistant, using Chat GPT to help you write coherent messages, or whether it's getting fit, or learning how to meditate. All these little wins will build a better you. Under no circumstances should you think that being dyslexic or ADHD is anything but a gift. You just need to know how to unwrap that gift and how to manage that gift and the more you understand it and the more you learn about it, the more powerful the gift is.

I find setting goals is another useful way to stay focused. I carry my goals with me and every now and then will look at them and maybe add something. It's also a great way to look back on your year and think that's not a bad effort getting over 50% on most shit. It's OK to remind yourself that you're still a work in progress. It's a lot better than throwing a dart at the end of the year and then painting the target around it and then kidding yourself that you had an alright year. It's harder to lie to yourself if you set your goals at the start of the year.

Here's an example for you – the goals that I set for 2024 both personally and for business.

PERSONAL GOALS	% ACHIEVED	COMMENTS
Meditate 20 - 30 mins each day	40%	This is the best for people like me yet it's still hard to do it. The best is to do it as soon as you wake up, no phone, email, or food, just do it.
Visualization of my future self	40%	Done at the end of meditation
Go to the gym or exercise	70%	Walking, bike, running, gym, swimming, steam room
Eat healthy	70%	Eating at home is very healthy but love chocolate and soft drinks
Give up marijuana	100%	This was a form of self-medication, which I no longer need
Manage money, set budgets, reduce expenses	60%	Still losses with money but getting better
Pay school fees on time	80%	4 kids in private school have been hard over the years.
Pay off overdue income tax	20%	Hate tax and hate the government.
Pay back any outstanding loans	100%	This made me feel great.
Enjoy life and what it has to offer	80%	It's hard to be in the moment and enjoy life, there are so many distractions.

Be present and take each day as it comes	60%	Remind myself not to rush to get things done. It's hard, it's a struggle to stay calm and be patient.
Be thankful for what I have	60%	I'm always trying to climb a mountain. It's important that I am grateful for what I have.
Take the family out on the Christmas holiday as a group	100%	This is my heaven. All our family birthdays occur in January so Xmas /January are family holiday times going on a trip, sailing, surfing, camping, maybe heading overseas. Whatever it is, I'm keen on it. Harder now kids are grown up, it's like herding cats.
Encourage each kid to do their best.	90%	I'm 100% supportive even when I don't agree with their choices.

### BUSINESS GOALS

Get a full-time job that pays a salary.	20%	I had a few consultancy gigs during the year, but I really struggle working for others.
Don't overspend	100%	Got on top of this with work, but privately I'm not as good.
Focus on building shareholder value for my company	80%	It's now my key aim not to focus on my wealth but shareholders' value - and my wealth will come.

Protect the business and don't make wild decisions	80%	Getting better but still have work to do. I need to focus more on the details and not rush.
Don't take business partners' occasionally negative personalities to heart	70%	This has been great for both of us and we are really acting as a team now. Leaving my ego at the door.
Purchase a solid business to add to my company	100%	Not only one business but have found two.
Stop looking for quick wins	80%	Getting better at this but lots more work to do.



Dyslexia comes from the Greek roots dys, 'difficult', and lexis, 'word'. Although dyslexia literally means, "difficulty with words," someone who has dyslexia may also have trouble in other areas like math, telling time, or even telling left from right.

So, we're labelled because we struggle with these tasks but are amazing at other tasks which often goes unnoticed. Could we not be called something like Super Lateral Thinkers (SLTs) instead? I'm laughing at this because I'm just trying to prove a point that the existing system of negative labelling doesn't help us. We should be seeing the strengths. You see, if we were known as SLTs or some other positive acronym it would be more beneficial for our self-esteem, especially while we're young.

The same negativity exists around the label ADHD. Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder is one of the most common mental disorders affecting children. Symptoms of ADHD include inattention (not being able to keep focus), hyperactivity (excess

movement that is not fitting to the setting), and impulsivity (hasty acts that occur in the moment without thought).

This pisses me off. I see dyslexia as a superpower and ADHD as an endless source of energy. So, like Superman, Spiderman, and The Hulk, we have superpowers too, just how do we describe them, so they don't stereotype us as being stupid?

You see, the letters AD in ADHD are so wrong. It's the complete opposite of the truth. We don't have an 'attention deficit', we have an overload of information coming at us at lightning speed, and it's all wanting our attention. Yes, it's true we can't sit still in the classroom but it's not because we can't concentrate, it's because there are a thousand things going on in our brain. And the HD at the end is also very wrong. We're seen as hyperactive because of the environment we're put in for learning – the traditional classroom. It's a nuts environment for people like us. The Green School in Bali worked it out. No walls. And if you had to stretch or go for a walk it was OK. They understood.



You might think it's strange that I'm going to finish this book with a poem, after all the problems I've had with reading, writing, and learning. This is Rudyard Kipling's famous poem, believed to be written around the 1890s. The poem is often seen as a father's advice to his son on how to navigate the thick and thin of life. It's inspired people for hundreds of years and it inspires me. By the way, his son's name was John!

If – By Rudyard Kipling

If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowance for their doubting too;

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,  
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,  
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think – and not make thoughts your aim;  
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two impostors just the same;

If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken  
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,  
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,  
And stoop and build 'em up with worn out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
And lose, and start again at your beginnings  
And never breathe a word about your loss;

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
Or walk with kings – nor lose the common touch,  
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,  
If all men count with you, but none too much;

If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run –  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And – which is more – you'll be a Man my son!

# MY RECOMMENDED AUDIO BOOKS

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**Letting Go: The Pathway of Surrender** - David R. Hawkins MD Ph.D.

This book is basically about learning to forgive. I have struggled with so much shame, failure, and pain, it's like a trauma that I've never really understood.

Through this book, I have got to a point where I have forgiven myself for what has transpired in my life and that has greatly helped me to learn to forgive others for the hurt and damage they have caused me, be it international or not. It's released an enormous amount of weight from my shoulders.

**The Psychology of Success** - Brian Tracy

I have listened to this book so many times I feel I know it really well, but every time I listen to it I get something more. This is my go-to book when I'm feeling the world is on top of me and I need some clear and simple guidance to get back on track. I can't say I have done everything he suggests but it's great to get you focused and it's easy on the ear.

**Can't Hurt Me** - David Goggins

Through this book, David is now a well-known author and podcaster. This book is described as 'a powerful memoir that inspires readers to push beyond their limits, embrace discomfort, and master their minds.' Through his personal story and practical insights, Goggins demonstrates the transformative power of resilience, mental toughness, and unwavering determination. It will stop you feeling

sorry for yourself and give you a kick in the ass and inspire you to just go do it. This is a great book, I love the way he talks at the end of each chapter and shares more of his perspectives.

### **The Rise Of Superman** - Steven Kotler

This is an amazing book. He explains how extreme athletes break the limits of ultimate human performance and what we can learn from their mastery of the state of consciousness known as "flow". You can apply the flow state to achieving any task - it seems effortless, everything slows down, or just seems to be perfect and you achieve the impossible. I believe I've been in the flow many times in my outdoor adventures, but how to find the follow with work or business and its something I'm still working on. This will help you understand your spicy brain but from a different perspective.

### **Meditations** - Marcus Aurelius

This is not for everyone. Marcus Aurelius, the Roman Emperor, was one of the most powerful people in the world of his time. When I read this, I was imagining him having access to anything he wanted, all the riches of the world at his fingertips. I imagine him sitting at his desk, writing by candlelight with a feathered quill and ink.

Our world is so judged by what we have, what school we go to, who we know, and how many followers we have on social media. This book will teach you that all of this is irrelevant. So why not live the best life you can and forget about all the noises around you prescribing fake ideas of what makes a person successful?