

MASTERING THE ART OF BALANCED STRESS



ADRIAN KELLY

In the modern pursuit of success, stress is often seen as an unwelcome burden—an inevitable tax on our ambitions. Yet, rethinking stress as an ally rather than an adversary can transform our relationship with it and fuel exceptional performance. The story of US tennis player Mardy Fish exemplifies this perspective, illustrating that when properly managed, stress can be the engine that drives us to peak performance. Mismanaged, however, stress can also be a slippery slope to burnout.

Transformation

At first glance, Mardy Fish's career seemed typical for a professional athlete. Early on, he was a talented player rising through the ranks, yet he hadn't made a significant mark on the world stage. A decision late in his career, however, led to a transformation. He decided to defy expectations and give his tennis career

one final push. A move that was intrinsically motivated by the knowledge that he could never rest easy in retirement, knowing he hadn't truly pushed himself to the limit to see what he was capable of.

So, at the end of the 2008 season, he established a series of goals, including losing weight and reaching peak physical fitness. He reorganised his training team and began to work as hard as he could. All day, every day. He stopped drinking alcohol and went on a strict athlete's diet. He started to get more sleep, sometimes going to bed as early as 7:30 pm. He stopped seeing friends. He was obsessed; every decision in his life involved tennis. The fitter he became, the longer he trained. He slept in a hyperbaric oxygen chamber to speed up recovery from training. In two-and-half months, he lost 31lbs.

This transformation catapulted him from 123rd in world rankings to 7th in just two years; an incredible achievement. This rise wasn't just about technical skills and fitness but a psychological metamorphosis—a shift in his approach to an edgier, more aggressive style. Fish became relentless, embodying a fierce drive to prove himself. However, this greater intensity brought other challenges that would ultimately destabilise his ability to maintain this success.

The Unseen Weight of Stress

His initial performance breakthrough had led to packed schedules, high expectations, and the need to consistently perform at an elite level. As his schedule intensified, Fish found it increasingly difficult to decompress. In an attempt to manage his stress, he turned to methods like sleep aids to handle time zone adjustments. Yet, these quick fixes could only do so much. His energy began to dwindle, and mental fatigue set in. The relentless demands created a steady buildup of what psychologists

call a 'life load'—an accumulation of stress from various sources that together can lead to a tipping point.

Physical Symptoms and Mental Health Challenges

The wear and tear on Fish's mind and body manifested in anxiety attacks, which increased in intensity. In a critical moment during the 2012 US Open, Fish was set to face tennis legend Roger Federer, but he could no longer go on and withdrew from the match, effectively marking the end of his career. Fish's story shows us that we all have limits as individuals. His career serves as a reminder that without balance, any of us can find ourselves at the mercy of stress.

The Science of Balanced Stress

Our Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) plays a crucial role in regulating stress and recovery. It manages essential functions like heart rate, digestion, and breathing. The ANS has two components: the sympathetic system, which activates our 'fight or flight' response, and the parasympathetic system, which is responsible for rest and digestion. A balanced interplay between these systems is essential for managing stress. Lifestyle changes, prolonged stress, and unexpected events can disrupt this balance, pushing us into a state of chronic stress. Over time, the body's ability to respond effectively to stress weakens, making it challenging to perform at one's best.

Heart rate variability (HRV) offers valuable insights into the body's stress response to factors such as these and our recovery capabilities. HRV measures the variation between heartbeats; higher variability generally indicates a relaxed state, while lower variability can signal that the body is under stress. Monitoring HRV can provide a window into whether our bodies are in recovery mode or bracing for action. Learning from Fish's experience, athletes and those in any walk of life can benefit from integrating recovery into their training and performance cycles to prevent the detrimental effects of prolonged stress.

Maintaining Identity Beyond Achievement

Another important factor is that for many business professionals and athletes alike, identity can be closely tied to performance. This can be empowering but also creates vulnerabilities. Fish's story reveals how deeply one's sense of self can be wrapped up in achievement and how dangerous this

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BIOGRAPHY

Adrian Kelly is a former solicitor who has transitioned into business and sports-performance coaching. Adrian has been active as a business advisor and coach, assisting companies across both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. His advisory work notably includes supporting businesses impacted by Brexit through a contract with InterTradeIreland. Alongside his team, Adrian has worked individually with over 100 businesses, helping them navigate complex issues such as import/export operations. Having played and coached baseball for the last 10 years, he has a keen interest in promoting sport and wellbeing and is the current chairman of the award-winning, multimillion-euro Peace Link Sport Complex Clones, County Monaghan. Adrian's new book, *The Success Complex*, is published by Practical Inspiration Publishing.

can be if not carefully managed. His journey is a reminder that a career, no matter how passionate, should not be allowed to define one's entire identity. Being a committed professional should not mean that you become a hostage to your career. There should always be a space, however small, that allows for the possibility of retreat, recalibration and even reinvention. We should maintain a balanced perspective that allows us to manoeuvre when the landscape changes, as it invariably will.

In the world of elite sports at that time, players like Fish also competed in a culture of machoism. A culture which suppressed emotions, which were seen as a weakness. A factor which can stifle their ability to cope effectively with stress by acknowledging it and talking about it to trusted friends and trained professionals. When people ignore their emotional needs, stress intensifies and can ultimately lead to burnout. A balanced approach would recognise the value of nurturing one's emotional well-being as an integral part of the pursuit of success.

The Role of Resilience

Resilience is often touted as the secret ingredient for enduring stress; however, resilience isn't about being invulnerable but about finding ways to recharge amid challenges. Harvard professor David Eddie explains that resilience can be built through regular, meaningful recovery, such as engaging in creative or restful activities. These moments allow the mind and body to recover and grow stronger, increasing our overall capacity to manage stress. For Fish, implementing structured recovery periods could have provided a buffer against the relentless pressures he faced.

Dr Van Someren, a world-leading expert in the area, likens these restorative activities to plugging in a smartphone. While smartphone batteries tend to degrade over time, our body's batteries can grow and expand. This expansion is often a result of enduring significant stress while experiencing quality, deep physical, mental and emotional recovery. The key, it seems, lies in subjecting the body

and mind to productive stress (training, performance, demanding more of ourselves) and then following it with profound physical, mental and emotional rejuvenation.

Crafting a Sustainable Path

Mardy Fish's career serves as a powerful case study on the value of balanced stress, and he's gone on to be an inspiring beacon post-retirement, raising awareness of the subject. In the Netflix documentary 'Breaking Point' he shares his insightful and remarkable story with the world.

In summary, to reach our peak, we shouldn't necessarily avoid stress but instead manage it wisely. This requires strategic planning that includes time for rest, gratitude, and moments of genuine replenishment. Fish's journey is a reminder that success requires not only hard work but also a deep understanding of one's limits and a willingness to prioritise well-being alongside ambition.

Building resilience, mastering stress, and achieving peak performance are interconnected goals. By respecting the rhythm of our bodies and allowing for adequate recovery we can create a sustainable path to success.

