

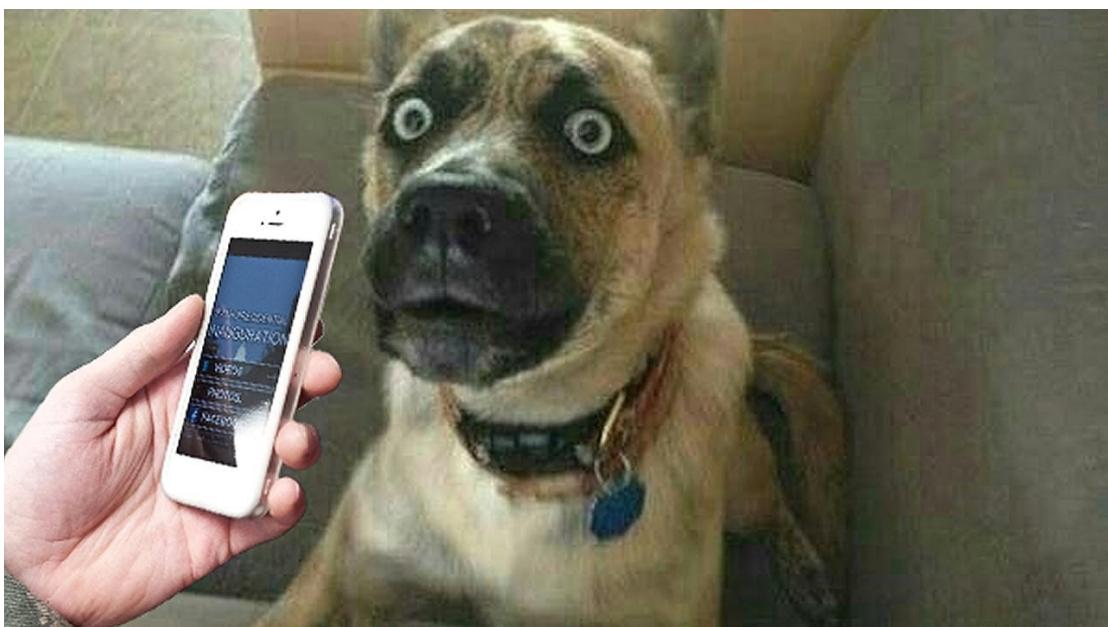
OVERRIDE AND ATTUNEMENT

Information sheet

*"Between a stimulus and the response there is a space.
And in that space is our salvation and our freedom."*

~ Viktor Frankl, via Tara Brach

Override is the state of pushing through or riding over our needs. Override can happen on many levels including those of the physical and the emotional. At its extreme it is often the result of a fundamental misattunement to our own selves and systems and easily becomes a vicious circle: the less we listen the less we know how to hear. Often there comes a point where we become too scared to tune in: there are so many unmet and unheard needs we fear to listen, in case we get overwhelmed.



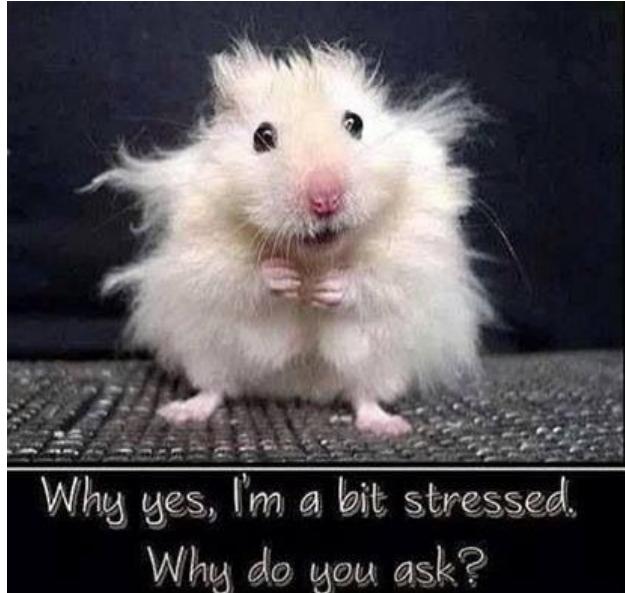
We live in a society that is largely based on override: lights that keep us in a bright, awake world long after the sun has set (to say nothing of night shift work), 9-5 work that often demands our presence whether we are tired or mildly sick, rules that dictate what feelings and thoughts are allowed to be voiced and those that 'aren't nice'.

How might we know we're in override?

- There can be a nagging sense that we're missing something, not listening in.
- We push through to get things done, we know we're running on empty, living on borrowed time.
- We regularly crash: get sick from overwork or stress or lack of sleep.
- We forget to take care of ourselves: eat well, exercise, sleep, do fun stuff.
- We think there's 'no time' to take care of ourselves so we don't.
- Everything (or everyone) else seems more important and urgent than our own needs.
- We feel anxious and harried, maybe with a sense of trying to live up to some ideal of who we should be or what our life should be.

- We are generally tired, not sleeping well, feel on edge, describe our ‘batteries as being low’, have some level of burnout in our work or relationships.
- We find that we put being ‘nice’ or ‘kind’ ahead of our own feelings, burying them or rationalising them away.
- We feel out of tune with ourselves, not quite sure who we are or what we really need or feel.

And many more such symptoms.



Sometimes override is needed or appropriate. Someone is sick and we need to care for them through the night, there is a big project on at work that we’re putting in long hours. We’re in labour, we’re sick ourselves and need to get to the doctor or make a meal.

Life happens. It’s not always ideal. Humans are hardy. We’re built to withstand a lot. But we’re not built to tolerate long periods of ongoing stress and override. That’s when we feel depleted, run down, burnt out. And we know we need to take a break, to regroup.

But much of the override most of us live with is more subtle.



As in the list above. We may not get sick, we may be relatively ok, but we’re not really attuned to ourselves, either. This is where override is habitual and ongoing and quietly whittles away at our feeling of vitality and aliveness.

When override becomes more deeply habitual it can result in chronic illness, or psychological issues of anxiety and depression or even breakdowns. It is deeply stressful for our bodies and beings to be out of step with the rhythms and truths of who we are. When we are trying to ‘keep up’ with who we think we have to be we are suppressing our own truth and keeping a break on our own impulses and internal wisdom. We are, in effect, denying our true selves. This comes at great cost.

Where we are riding over the top of our physical needs: drinking coffee to keep going, not resting and really relaxing, not having enough physical pleasure, not having enough experiences where our systems really let go of what's built up through the days and weeks our nervous systems hit overwhelm. This is often where the crash happens: the flu, the chronic or severe illness, the breakdown.



So how do we learn to not override? Or to know when we are overriding and make a more discerning choice around it? How can we be more nuanced in our approach to life such that we can keep commitments, be part of a world with expectations and demands that do at times need to be met, with rules of etiquette or social games to play?

The first step is learning to slow down enough that we can actually be more aware of what our body is telling us, what we are feeling and thinking.

The second step is to turn towards our needs and feelings and allow all that is here so that we can make room for all of it.

The third is to try following what we sense we need and see what happens.

All of this can feel scary. It is often unfamiliar. We can feel scared that we will lose control, not keep up with who we think we should be, not meet the tasks that are before us. By not doing this we are cutting ourselves off from our own aliveness of our own being, from the subtle (and overt) cues our life and body and mind are giving us.

It takes courage to slow down, to break old habits, to risk not being what we think we need to be, to trust our bodies and beings enough that we can attune. It also means that we start to feel into the conflicts we feel. And these need to be teased out a little.



For example: Someone does something that upsets us and as we settle in we might notice that our first impulse is to strike out – to hit them or to say something withering. Then we notice how we override and say, ‘Oh well, they didn’t mean to, they were just upset.’ Now. This could be useful information. This may actually be helping us put our own reaction in a wider context. But have we ridden over our own upset, our own impulse to defend ourselves? If so then we have put a lid on, or swept under the carpet, the vital energy of our own defences, our own healthy aggression.

It is often helpful in such a case to see these as two different parts of the whole story and allow both to have their full expression. By which I mean: we may need to go away and let ourselves really hit something or shout what we really feel when they do this to us. And once that’s out of our system then we can also allow ourselves to feel into what is also true here.



Often these two processes get mixed up. We do them simultaneously. We do a small snarl and then smile and say something nice that we ‘know’ to be helpful to the situation or mostly true, but that we don’t yet feel. And this can be necessary. But if we don’t untangle these later both can sit in our systems as tension, frustration, resentment, tiredness, edginess. When we can allow our anger to really be present, to feel the impulse to strike, to really give it a little room in ourselves, we allow our system to settle a little and that broader perspective to come online *by itself*. Whether we can process something in the moment or need to return to it later, the important thing is to get honest, and ensure that our whole being gets its time for expression.

But when this is habit, is ‘just who we are’, how do we work with that? We don’t even notice. We’re on autopilot, its how we drive the car of our life. By becoming more present to our felt sense of being here: our thoughts, and emotions, to the sensations and impulses we feel.

It is by more conscious and willing to be surprised by life and ourselves. Instead of being one of those people who always drives at 80kmph even though it’s a 60 zone, or one of those people who can’t change lanes unless they have 500mtrs notice because it’s too hair-raising to negotiate a tricky bit of traffic, we become more flexible, more adept and responsive to the rich panoply of internal experience, external input, and the rather tangled relationship that can develop between.

We learn to slow down, to pause, to tolerate the discomfort of being here, to start to see the different pieces of us at work. We become more adept at tracking our own systems: noticing when we feel agitated or jumpy, when we feel anxious or jittery, when we feel scared and want to contract, when we feel overwhelmed and like we are being barraged. And we learn to slow down and listen, to trust that amidst what at first feels like a chaotic band of noisy and incoherent drunks in our bodies and beings we actually have a lot of wisdom in that internal barroom. It takes slowing down, becoming more familiar with the sounds and impulses, more adept at knowing how to respond.

And we become more nuanced. We know how to be at work and allow ourselves to be tired. We know how to soften with our stories about what and who we should be and just show up as we are. We learn to do half the dishes and live with a little mess. We learn to listen to the part of us that wants to go to the party instead of crawling into bed as we usually do. Life, as Pema Chodron, an American Buddhist nun says, becomes more workable.

Perhaps this sounds simple. And in theory it is. But the practice is tough. It can be a lifetime's work; it is never something we get pinned down. We still have to pay attention on the road of our life. Having a therapist can be of great benefit. They can help you begin to tease apart the patterns that have formed, to trust that by listening you can hear without (always) getting overwhelmed, that it is safe (enough) to be you. And the gift for this challenge? It's not just about avoiding illness. It's so that you can discover more of who you really are and see how your life will unfold in all manner of surprising ways that you will manage to handle. So that you can feel part of a grand adventure, not just doing laps on the hamster wheel of life.

