

THE BIG IDEAS

Passion

Handle with care.

The “Fit Mind-set” vs.

The Mastery Mind-set.

Obsessive Passion vs.

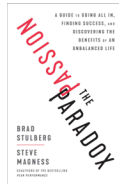
Harmonious Passion.

The Mastery Mind-set

= Passion’s secret sauce #1.

Self-Awareness

= Passion’s secret sauce #2.



The Passion Paradox

A Guide to Going All In, Finding Success, and Discovering the Benefits of an Unbalanced Life

BY BRAD STULBERG AND STEVE MAGNESS · RODALE BOOKS © 2019 · 192 PAGES

“This book began as an intimate exploration to better understand how we, Brad and Steve, could live with passion in a constructive, healthy, and sustainable way. We scoured the literature, reading texts from biology, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy; interviewed cutting-edge researchers from across disciplines all over the world; met with and studied not only individuals whose passion built them up, but also those whose passion broke them down; and looked deep inside ourselves, discovering the good, the bad, and the ugly about our own respective relationships with passion.

Perhaps you have an idea of where you fall on the passion spectrum. Maybe you have an inkling of a career path or business idea you want to pursue, but you have doubts or fears. Or perhaps you’re contemplating going all-in on an idea, whether that means starting a company or training to become an elite athlete. Maybe you’re already following your passion but you’re feeling the beginning of burnout, or you’re neglecting other aspects of your life, such as your friends, family, or just experiencing joy outside your chosen pursuit. Or maybe you’re feeling all out of a passion that once fueled you. No matter where you are in the passion process, this book will help get you on track. You’ll learn how to manage your relationship with passion and cultivate the kind of passion that lights you up rather than burns you out or sets your life on fire.”

~ Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness from *The Passion Paradox*

“Passion, when approached the right way, is an ongoing practice. A practice that leads to not only a wonderful experience of working, but also a wonderful experience of living.”

~ Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness

Brad Stulberg writes, coaches, and speaks on health and human performance.

Steve Magness coaches some of the world’s top distance runners and has propelled numerous athletes to Olympic trials, world championship teams, and the Olympics.

This is the second book they’ve written together.

We featured the first one *Peak Performance*. I created a [Note](#) and one of my PhilosophersNotes TV episodes on it. And... When this book came out, Brad reached out to let me know I might enjoy it. I immediately got it, immediately read it and, well, here we are.

He was right.

I loved their take on *Peak Performance* (remember the importance of training recovery!) and I also loved their take on *The Passion Paradox*. (Get a copy of the book [here](#).)

As always, the book is packed with Big Ideas. I’m excited to share a few of my favorites so let’s jump straight in!

PASSION: HANDLE WITH CARE

“By now, a more comprehensive picture of passion is beginning to emerge. At first, the word

"When you're under passion's spell, the reward you think you're chasing—usually some sort of contentment or satiation—is merely an illusion. We don't get hooked on the feeling associated with achievement, we get hooked on the feeling associated with the chase."

~ Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness

passion—at the time *passio*—implied suffering. Only more recently did it take on positive connotations. Yet depending on the circumstances, both definitions are still apt. The *feeling* of passion comes from both our evolutionary ancestors (nature) and our lived experiences (nurture). When we throw ourselves into an obsession, we attack deep-seated insecurities, fill voids from our past, and escape from things we may not want to face in our present. Our biology, and in particular a neurochemical called dopamine, fuels the pursuit. It keeps us coming back for more and prevents us from becoming content. Some of us may be born with a biological profile that makes us more likely to fall under passion's spell, but with enough repetition of an activity we view as meaningful, anyone can get hooked."

That passage wraps up the introductory first two chapters in which we learn the fact that "1. *Passion Must Be Handled with Care*" while exploring "2. *The Origins of Passion: A Brief History of Suffering and Love*."

Passion.

It's awesome!

Except when it isn't.

That's the paradox of passion and that's pretty much the theme of the book.

Of course, the book is all about HOW to manage that paradox. As per the sub-title, it's "*A Guide to Going All In, Finding Success, and Discovering the Benefits of an Unbalanced Life*."

So... Let's take a look at some of my favorite practical tips on how to go about doing that...

THE "FIT MIND-SET" (VS. THE MASTERY MIND-SET)

"In the small but growing world of passion research, this is called a 'fit mind-set' of passion, and it very much parallels the destiny belief system of love. According to the latest research, 78 percent of individuals hold a fit mind-set, meaning they believe happiness comes from finding an activity or job about which they are immediately passionate, something that feels intuitively right from the get-go.

While this mind-set may be the most prevalent one, it's not necessarily best. Individuals who adopt a fit mind-set of passion tend to overemphasize their initial feelings. They are more likely to choose pursuits (and especially professions) based on preliminary assessments, not potential for growth—even though the latter is generally more important than the former for lasting fulfillment and satisfaction. People with fit mind-sets for passion are also more likely to give up on new pursuits at the first sign of disappointment, shrugging their shoulders and thinking, *I guess this isn't for me*. Furthermore, studies show that individuals with fit mind-sets actually expect their passions to dwindle over time, setting themselves up for midlife crises once their initial enthusiasm for an activity has diminished. Put all this together, and a compelling story emerges: A fit mind-set for passion is constraining; it inherently limits one to activities that feel good immediately and makes one fragile to challenge or change."

Welcome to Chapter 3: "Find and Grow Your Passion."

Brad and Steve kick this chapter off by telling us about research on love. Did you know that the whole idea of a "soul mate" didn't even exist until the 20th century? Yep.

Yet... In one recent survey, 73% of people said they believe in it.

Apparently, "Social scientists refer to this mind-set as 'the destiny belief of love,'" and that it is the prevailing one today. All of which would be awesome if this type of belief was helpful in creating great, sustainable relationships.

But... As you might've guessed, there are negative consequences to this mindset.

"The line between what we consider a destructive addiction and a productive passion is a fine one, if such a line exists at all."

~ Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness

"A better approach to finding your passion is to lower the bar from perfect to interesting, then give yourself permission to pursue your interests with an open mind."

~ Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness

Specifically: "For starters, researchers have found that those who subscribe to a destiny belief system of love are more likely to end relationships when the first hint of conflict occurs; in essence, they decide, 'This person must not be the one,' and move on in search of someone who is the one."

All of which leads us to the parallel idea in the field of passion research.

Take the "destiny belief of love" and drop it into finding your passion in work and what do we get? What researchers call the "fit mind-set."

Guess what? The same (exact!) negative tendencies show up in this domain as well. We give up easier and jump from "relationship" to relationship.

As I read that, I thought of the idea that we can "fall in love" OR we can "grow in love." Most of us want to fall in love (with our soul mate!) but... The moment things inevitably get challenging, we see those struggles as signs something's WRONG and then immediately bail. RIGHT when we could've invested in the beautiful opportunities for growth. (<- Says the guy who mastered the former practice and has been having fun leaning into the latter! :)

I also thought of Cal Newport's distinctions on "Passion" vs. "Craftsman" mindsets.

In [So Good They Can't Ignore You](#), he tells us: "To summarize, I've presented two different ways people think about their working life. The first is the craftsman mindset, which focuses on what you can offer the world. The second is the passion mindset, which instead focuses on what the world can offer you. The craftsman mindset offers clarity, while the passion mindset offers a swamp of ambiguous and unanswerable questions... there's something liberating about the craftsman mindset: It asks you to leave behind self-centered concerns about whether your job is 'just right,' and instead put your head down and plug away at getting really damn good. No one owes you a great career, it argues; you need to earn it—and the process won't be easy."

P.S. One of the tips Brad and Steve give to help us find our own passions is to simply follow our curiosity. They say: "Take the decision to create one of history's highest-grossing movies of all time, Titanic. As director James Cameron told Men's Journal, he didn't set out with the knowledge or goal of creating one of the biggest blockbuster films to date. He had simpler ambitions: 'I don't think the studio executives believed it, but I wanted to make Titanic because I wanted to dive the wreck. I thought: How can I dive the Titanic and get somebody to pay for it? I'll make a movie.' Cameron was simply pursuing his interest; the end product, perhaps the most popular movie of all time, was an afterthought. As Cameron told Men's Journal, it was a side effect of a 'personal quest.'"

P.P.S. Brad and Steve have a great section on approaching our passion with Nassim Taleb's Barbell Strategy in mind. I've never seen anyone (other than us) apply his wisdom to self-development.

They tell us that if we go ALL IN on our passion too quickly (without a strong financial base, etc.) we run the risk of being fragile.

Much more antifragile-wise? Be simultaneously super conservative (by keeping your day job) AND super aggressive (by pursuing your passions in your spare time).

As they say, "Those who go big or go home often end up going home. Those who go incrementally over a long period of time often end up with something big. The best route for making your passion a bigger part of your life is to do so gradually."

"Don't judge yourself against others. Judge yourself against prior versions of yourself and the effort you are exerting in the present moment. This is about as healthy a form of competition as there is."

~ Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness

OBSESSIVE PASSION VS. HARMONIOUS PASSION

"Enter harmonious passion: a feeling that emerges when you are wrapped up in something primarily for the joy of the activity, when your engagement is not merely a means to an end"

"Doing the work has a special way of putting both success and failure in their respective places. After a massive achievement or a devastating failure, getting back to work serves as an embodied reminder that external results aren't why you are in this."

~ Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness

but rather an end in itself. Harmonious passion manifests mainly from activities that are freely chosen without contingencies; when you do something because you enjoy it, not because it offers potential rewards, and not to avoid negative repercussions. Not every moment of harmonious passion is necessarily pleasing, but overall, it is deeply fulfilling. It aligns closely with the ancient Greek notion of *eudaimonia*, or a kind of happiness that results not from overwhelming pleasure but from striving to meet one's full potential by engaging in activities that one considers meaningful. In the 1970s, the late psychologist and humanist philosopher Erich Fromm wrote of something similar, which he called productive activity, where happiness isn't related to the attainment of possession or rewards but rather to 'the process of ever growing aliveness . . . for living as fully as one can is so satisfactory that concern for what one might or might not attain has little chance to develop.' The great paradox, however, is that although external achievement is never a primary goal of harmonious passion, when you become completely immersed in what you're doing for the joy of the activity itself, it is often a by-product. Those who focus most on success are least likely to achieve it. Those who focus least on success, and focus on the process of engaging in their craft instead, are most likely to achieve it."

That's from a chapter called "The Best Kind of Passion." It's the chapter right after one called "When Passion Goes Awry" (aka: The Worst Kind of Passion).

Psychologists differentiate the two types of passion by calling the unhealthy kind "Obsessive Passion" and the healthy kind "Harmonious Passion."

Obsessive Passion is toxic. It has two primary facets: 1. Focusing too much on extrinsic results (like fame, wealth, achievement, etc.); 2. Being too worried about failure.

Harmonious Passion, on the other hand, gives us a deep sense of joy. Whereas the toxic passion is focused on the pursuit of extrinsic rewards, the healthy passion is focused on intrinsic drivers. (Six factors, in fact, that we'll discuss in a moment.)

First: Shout out for *eudaimonia*. :)

As we discuss (all! the!! time!!!), *eudaimonia* is the summum bonum or highest of all goods. When our primary passion is all about high fiving our inner daimon and more consistently expressing the best within ourselves? We won't *always* feel awesome, but... odds are that a) we're going to feel great more often than not; and b) the outcomes most people obsess about will more easily come as a by-product of our primary focus on simply showing up and getting better.

Makes me think of Carol Dweck.

She echoes this wisdom in [Mindset](#): "*The growth-minded athletes, CEOs, musicians, or scientists all loved what they did, whereas many of the fixed-minded ones did not. Many growth-minded people didn't even plan to go to the top. They got there as a result of doing what they love. It's ironic: The top is where the fixed-mindset people hunger to be, but it's where many growth-minded people arrive as a by-product of their enthusiasm for what they do. This point is also crucial. In the fixed-mindset, everything is about the outcome. If you fail—or if you're not the best—it's all been wasted. The growth mindset allows people to value what they're doing regardless of the outcome.*"

How's YOUR passion? Leaning toward the Obsessive or the Harmonious side of the spectrum?!

PASSION'S SECRET SAUCE #1: THE MASTERY MIND-SET

"Mastery is a mind-set and also a path. It leads to continual improvement and development. It values acute (in the moment) and chronic (over a lifetime) engagement and devalues most of the transient stuff in between (point-in-time successes or failures). Mastery is not a new-age self-help concept. It is rooted in principles that are central to psychology and biology, and it is an ever-present theme in the lives of people who embody harmonious passion.

"Focusing on the process creates daily opportunities for little victories. These little victories serve as waypoints on the path of mastery, helping to sustain your motivation over the long haul. Process spurs progress, and progress, on a deep neurochemical level, primes us to persist."

~ Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness

Individuals who are on the path of mastery not only accomplish great things, but do so in a healthy and sustainable manner. They exude a Zen-like aura, are resistant to burnout, and produce work that is of a special kind of quality—a quality that is born of love. And yet perhaps their greatest accomplishment is an even more cherished one: continual growth and development, a fulfilling life. Just about every great performer who embodies and sustains the best kind of passion also adheres to what we call the mastery mind-set. The good news is that this mind-set and all its benefits are available to anyone who is willing to put in the work necessary to adopt it. The following subsections describe the six individual components of the mastery mind-set and offer insights on how you can bring each to life."

That's from our chapter on "The Best Kind of Passion." It might just be my favorite part of the book. There are six components to their Mastery Mind-set. Let's take a quick look at each.

1. **Driven from Within.** Remember one of our core differentiations between Obsessive vs. Harmonious Passion? We want our drive to be (primarily!) INTRINSIC rather than (predominantly) extrinsic. One more time: Go for things like mastering your craft rather than fame or external measures of success. Note: We're not talking about 0% extrinsic motivation. But... As my Coach Phil Stutz puts it, make sure your ratio is *at least* 51% to 49% in favor of the intrinsic goodness. (How's yours?)
2. **Focus on the Process.** "Don't spend too much time reflecting on whether you achieved specific goals. Spend time reflecting on how well you adhered to a process that gives you the best chance of progressing in your chosen pursuit. A goal is a direction, not a destination. Process keeps you present on your journey."
3. **Don't Worry About Being the Best; Worry About Being the Best at Getting Better.** Want to win all the time? Make your ultimate goal simple: to get better. Then we win or learn and all those mis-takes are properly capitalized in our never-ending pursuit of our unknowable potential. Which leads us to the next point...
4. **Embrace Acute Failure for Chronic Gains.** "There's an old Eastern proverb that says, 'The master has failed more times than the student even tried.' We'd all be wise to take it to heart." (<- Can you hear the angels singing? :)
5. **Be Patient.** As I was reading this section, I thought of George Leonard's wisdom about hanging out on the plateau in our pursuit of *Mastery*. Then, lo and behold, they quoted our dear sage: "To learn anything significant, to make any lasting change in yourself, you must be willing to spend **most** of your time on the plateau."
6. **Be Here Now.** Mastery requires intense, FOCUSED ATTENTION. How's yours?

SECRET SAUCE #2: SELF-AWARENESS AND THE POWER TO CHOOSE

"This chapter began by making the point that the art of living with the best kind of passion over a lifetime relies heavily on self-awareness. When you are in the throes of a passion, your ability to see beyond it often deteriorates. As a result, you lose the power to *choose* how you want to spend your time and energy. Your passion controls you, rather than you controlling it. The key to protecting yourself from the intense inertia of passion lies in cultivating self-awareness. Ironically, the best way to do that is to step back from yourself. Regularly self-distancing (thinking about a situation as if a friend is experiencing it, rather than yourself, or thinking/journaling in third person) and deliberately gaining perspective (by exposing yourself to awe, meditating, or reflecting on mortality) are two of the most effective ways to remain self-aware and maintain your ability to choose, even in the midst of pursuing a passion."

That's from a chapter called "Self-Awareness and the Power to Choose." It follows a chapter called "The Illusion of Balance."

"When it comes to living with passion, it's not about balance. It's about marrying strong harmonious passion with an equally strong self-awareness. Doing so trumps balance any day."

~ Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness

" Mindlessly living with a passion can be extremely harmful and destructive. Mindfully living with a passion can be the key to a life well lived."

~ Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness

So... We have a passion. We work hard to make it harmonious via employing a mastery mindset, etc. Then what? Then we live a balanced life?

Well... Not so much. The lives of the greatest achievers among us—even those who dedicated their lives to a harmonious passion like a Mahatma Gandhi or a Warren Buffett—weren't "balanced" per se. In fact, they were quite often OFF balance. (btw: We have [a Note on a book by that name.](#))

But... The great souls we most admire had a deep level of self-awareness to make sure they remained in control of how they chose to spend their time and energy.

Brad and Steve give us a number of practical tools we can use to cultivate our self-awareness to help us remain in control of our super-charged passionate lives.

We talk about meditation a lot. That's powerful. So is experiencing "awe" in the form of a beautiful natural environment (go hikes/sunrises/sunsets/etc.) and watching a craftsman at work (like LeBron James playing basketball). And... Reflecting on death (Memento Mori!) is actually their #1 tip.

Perhaps my favorite new idea was the astonishing research showing how much wiser we become when we give ourselves advice as if we were helping a friend. (I imagined my daimon advising this guy named "Brian." :)

All of which leads us to the most primary point of the book: *"Mindlessly living with a passion can be extremely harmful and destructive. Mindfully living with a passion can be the key to a life well lived."*

Here's to embracing the paradox of passion as we most authentically give life all we've got!

B

Brian Johnson,
Optimize, Founder + Leader

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[Mastery - Leonard](#)

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[So Good They Can't Ignore You](#)

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About the Author of "The Passion Paradox"

BRAD STULBERG + STEVE MAGNESS



Brad Stulberg is a researcher, writer, speaker, and coach on health and the science of human performance. He's a columnist for New York and Outside magazines and have written for the *New York Times*, *Wired*, *Sports Illustrated*, and more.



Steve Magness is a performance coach, author, and lecturer. He currently serves as a coach to almost 20 professional runners, is the Head Cross Country coach at the University of Houston and a Lecturer of Strength and Conditioning at St. Mary's University, UK. In addition, he has served a consultant or executive coach to high performers in a variety of business fields.

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at [optimize.me](#).