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FEEL LIKE ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE WHEN IT COMES TO RUNNING.'**

– Bryony Gordon

31 DAYS

**A ZERO-BULLSH*T MINDSET
MASTERCLASS FOR THE
MODERN RUNNER**



ALLIE BAILEY

31 DAYS

Also by Allie Bailey
There is No Wall

31 DAYS

A ZERO-BULLSH*T MINDSET
MASTERCLASS FOR THE
MODERN RUNNER

ALLIE BAILEY



Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield
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For all my coached athletes, past and present. You have taught me more than any book could ever do. Thank you for trusting me, educating me and being examples of what is possible.

31 DAYS
Allie Bailey

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INTRODUCTION

'Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.'

VIKTOR E. FRANKL,
MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

Regular readers will know that, to me, values are everything. They are the cornerstone of everything I do, and writing this book has been no different, which is why I think it's so important right at the start to be absolutely honest and tell you that this book isn't going to change your life in thirty-one days, nor is it going to change your life in thirty-one weeks or months or years. A book can't do that; only *you* can do that. This book is written for everyone – runners of all levels, endurance athletes and the people that surround them. If you find it helpful, please pass it on.

This book does not contain hacks, it doesn't contain quick fixes and it's not a magic pill. It's a toolkit. It's a guide that I hope you'll refer to in wobbly times, a handbook to keep on the same shelf you keep your journal on, a companion on a journey that will never actually have an end. It's a mind menu that you can either eat in its entirety or snack on when you need it. In my previous book I told

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you that running wouldn't save you; well, I'm sorry to have to tell you that this book won't either. But you've bought it now, so I can say that while sitting in my newly built home sauna in my seventeen-bedroom house – so thanks for that.

I fucking hated the idea of writing a self-help book. But that, it appears, is exactly what I have done. The last book (what do you mean, *what book?*) really, really helped people. I know it did because the people that read it told me so. The stories I was emailed and the messages sent were incredible, touching and a lot of them made me cry. I still get messages and emails each week, and I know that book will go on and on; its legacy is also mine. It's a very special thing to have achieved and makes the horror of writing it absolutely worthwhile. I told myself that if I was going to write another book, I wanted it to have the same effect, but without the process of blood-letting that was involved in writing it.

I had two options. One was to relapse and then, in the words of Alan Partridge, 'bounce back', but my editor was, sadly, not keen on that idea (still think it would be good for the film, Kirsty ...). The other was to maximise on the part of the book which people found the most helpful and supercharge it. To take that final chapter, Dear Reader (Protect Your Magic), and develop it into something relatable and tangible that people could actually take into their day-to-day lives in order to make a difference not for a training block, not for a race, not for a few weeks, but for their whole lives, forever. So that is what I have tried to do.

As well as being a coach, a runner, a podcaster etc., I am also a recovering alcoholic, a depressive and a searingly honest person. As I sit here typing this I am experiencing a heartbreak like no other – the first sober one and the most hurtful one I have been through. Just because I have written a book on how to sort your life out doesn't mean that mine is all roses, but it does mean I do the work every single day to be able to sit here and write this. I still suffer greatly, but my response to suffering is better. At the time of writing, I am also four years, two months and nineteen days sober. That's how long I have been doing *that* work, which has, in turn, led me down the path of learning and putting into practice pretty much everything you're

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going to read in *this* book. I am still not fully repaired, and whenever I have a mental health dip or get triggered by something or think an unhelpful thought or have to walk through duty free at an airport (where they think it's OK to make you parade through colourful walls of cheap, highly addictive poison but hide the cigarettes from view), I think about the day that I will start drinking again. I don't think about the day I *might* start drinking again, I think about the day I *will* start drinking again. And then I notice that thought, high five it and move on. I have to do this most days. Every day in fact. What I am saying is, for me, *that* work goes on forever and will never stop. It gets easier, but it will never stop. Whatever it is *you* want to change about your life will also take work, and that work is not short term. Expecting it to be that way or to have an end is futile. But you can change things in yourself that you currently don't think are possible to change. I know because I have done it. What you *can't* change is other people.

The work, by definition, is whatever you need to be doing to stop limiting your experience of life. For me, the work involves not drinking or smoking or behaving in a way that is detrimental to my mental and physical health. It means boundaries and values. It means knowing my needs and priorities and acting accordingly, even when it's easier or hurts less to do the opposite. For me, it is mindset work that is wide reaching, varied, at times extremely difficult and sometimes excruciatingly repetitive and boring. Most of that work revolves around the thought 'you are a worthless piece of shit who doesn't deserve love'. Yours will be different. Our brains may operate the same way, but our thoughts are different. Our brains just want to protect us. Here's an example.

Whenever my running coach sets me a session, I go through the same pantomime of 'Fucking hell, I can't do that, I can't hit those numbers' while thinking of a way to get out of it. I go through the list of excuses I am going to use to justify why I haven't hit the numbers; I question whether it's sensible for me to even *attempt* it because, amongst other things, it's a Tuesday and Mercury is in retrograde. I have many good excuses. All the good thoughts. All the hits. Every time. And then I go out and I get it done. Usually, I hit the numbers

INTRODUCTION

and if I don't, it doesn't matter. Every time is the same. The same conversation in my head, noticing the same anxiety over performance. The difference now is that even though this pantomime still plays out before each and every session, there is no procrastination; I am able to think, acknowledge and run alongside these thoughts while I am going out the door and while I am warming up. I allow the thoughts to come along for the ride; I understand they are only thoughts, not facts, and they are there because I fucking care deeply about what I am doing and because I'm trying to protect myself from harm, pain and failure by thinking them. I also know that I don't need protection from harm, pain and failure. I am a big girl and there's no lion chasing me and my coach doesn't own a gun. I know these thoughts and feelings are part of the game. Every time I go out with them, my response to these thoughts gets better and so their power lessens.

Over the years, the difficulty level and timescale of getting from catastrophe to calm has reduced. It's sometimes seconds now. What a skill. Some days are harder than others, but I'm still sober and I always get my intervals done.

For me, it's the 'useless piece of shit' story; for you it might be something else. Maybe for you it's lack of confidence, resilience, kindness towards yourself, belief or consistency you want help with. Maybe for you it's an unrealistic idea of success or an obsession with comparing yourself to other people. Maybe it's imposter syndrome or even overconfidence. Whatever it is, I am sure that this book can help you to understand what the work is, how to actually start doing that work and hopefully how to maintain it. 'You cannot do this alone, but only you can do it', as one of my favourite authors, Laura McKowen, so powerfully put it in her incredible recovery memoir *We Are the Luckiest*. Only you can do it. This book won't save you, but it will enable and empower you.

The best way to use this book is the way that you think it would be most helpful. It is written so that you can dip in and out, skip chapters, go back to them or you can read it from start to finish. What I would say is consider taking it one day at a time. It was written for you to be able to do that: easy, manageable chapters, one a day, so

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you don't get overwhelmed. Thirty-one chapters for thirty-one days. Those days can be one after the other with no breaks, one at a time with breaks, or you can read this book over two, three, four months or a year. Your brain has been telling you unhelpful shit over many, many years. I know this about you. You wouldn't have picked up this book if it hadn't. You need to acknowledge this and accept that you can't rewire it in a matter of hours, weeks or months and you certainly can't expect a book alone to do that for you. Give the chapters time to sink in, think about them, apply your own experience and try to answer the questions and then do the work.

'The work' in this book comes in worksheet form. A full set of worksheets is downloadable using the link on page xiv, or you can follow the instructions *in* the book and do the work in your own journal. It's up to you, but if you don't do the exercises provided, you won't get the most out of this book. It may be helpful to do some of them more than once before you move on to the next chapter. Books don't work via osmosis.

Master the topics one by one before you start a new one – like learning a language. Get the basics right before you move on to asking a local where the nearest physiotherapist is. You don't want to end up getting directions to the local dogging car park because you've not done the basics right.

One last thing: this book has been written from my own lived experience. I am not a qualified therapist, a psychologist, a scientist or a doctor, and nor do I pretend to be one. I am a human being that has, at times, really messed up her life but has managed to survive and surface, sometimes gasping for air but with a fuckload of experience and some really good stories to tell. The advice and exercises held within these pages have worked for me, and have, over the years, also worked for my coached athletes, so I am hoping some of them will work for you. This book really does stand on the shoulders of giants. I have read hundreds of books on sports psychology, addiction, recovery and mindset. I have spoken to elite athletes and many, many 'normal' runners who I coach on a daily basis, and have used what I have learned from them to help you. This book is a kind of pick and mix with added reality slaps here and there and some

INTRODUCTION

real-life examples thrown in too. This book has come from my running, my recovery and an ongoing process in which I try to be an example of what is possible. I still get sick and I still get sad, but I know now how to deal with these things in a way more helpful way than I used to. It's never too late to change, it's never too late to live that life less ordinary. It's never too late to tell that doubting voice you have lived with for decades to kindly go fuck itself.

You will need a nice new journal, a load of coloured Post-it notes and a pen.

Shall we begin?

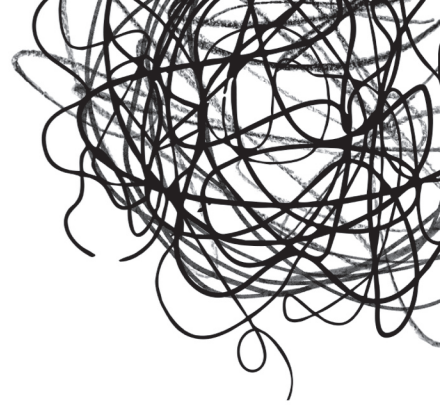
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I
DO THE BASICS WELL





DAY 1 BORING IS BUILDING

FOCUS

I suppose the big question here is: what are the basics? They tend to be all the boring shit we don't want to do; the stuff that generally keeps us alive and the stuff we tend to start skipping when life gets a bit hard. They're different for everyone, but let's start with a typical 'eat three meals a day, drink water, exercise four times a week, sleep at least seven hours a night'. Those *are* the basics, right? Easy – except most of us can't manage or don't manage to get even two of them right. We skip them because we either can't be bothered or don't have time; other excuses are available.

It seems mad to me that we are constantly looking for hacks, shortcuts and ways of supercharging our lives; paying for therapists, pills and supplements when we can't even do the basic shit right. I imagine one of the reasons you are reading this book is an attempt to, in some way, make your life better. Are *you* doing the basics right? Have I just saved you in the first flipping chapter?! Most of us are skipping on the basics. The basics form the blueprint. They're the things that lay the foundation for us to build a life on. They're the stabilisers on our first bike, the seatbelt in our car. If we're not getting them right, we're fucked from the start.

Your basics might be slightly different to the list above, and later

on we will look at how you can identify them, but if you don't get them right, you'll be operating on a very wobbly foundation.

EXAMPLE

In my life pre-sobriety, my daily priorities checklist included:

- using anything I could to stop the thoughts and feelings that told me I was a worthless piece of shit
- putting on loads of make-up (yes, it was a mask)
- pretending to people I worked with that I was OK
- running at least sixty miles a week
- making sure nobody found out I was an alcoholic
- not killing myself.

These were my basics for years, and I didn't even do them very well. I'd gone too far down the tunnel. I wondered why I felt so shit, even when I went through periods of trying to help myself, and part of it was that I was tired, hungry and dehydrated all the fucking time. I was lacking any sort of self-care routine. I was living on a panicked edge. I didn't realise this until doomsday arrived in 2021 and my entire life fell to bits in front of me. It wasn't until I started my addiction recovery that I realised how vital it is to get the basics right. The basics are the bedrock of everything, in running and in life, so you'd better start respecting them and seeing them as badass rather than boring.

There's a really famous YouTube video of a Navy SEAL called William McRaven addressing the University of Texas class of 2014. 'If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed,' he says. 'If you make your bed every morning, you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride, and it will encourage you to do another task, and another and another.' He goes on to add: 'If you can't do the little things right, you will never do the big things right,' and *that* is what I am talking about here.

When I hit my quite unglamorous and extremely distressing rock bottom, I lost everything – my job, my relationship, my mind, my

house. I felt like I had lost my personality. I was in a state of anhedonia – a complete inability to feel any pleasure whatsoever – and while that *can* be handy, I had to deal with the feelings I *did* have without alcohol – and they were *not* good feelings. I had nothing left. Life was milky. I had to start again, and it was extremely overwhelming. The only things I *could* do were the things in my control – the basics. So, I started by making my bed when I got up; it stopped me getting back in it. I drank two litres of water a day from a huge Evian bottle I walked around the house with. I started having first two, then three meals of actual food a day and going to bed at 10 p.m., even when I wasn't tired. And I did this every day. And I still do.

At the start, even if these basic things were the only things I achieved in a day, they gave me a foundation to move forward. Almost four years later, I still have Post-it notes all over my house reminding me to 'do the basics well', and I still mean eat, sleep, drink water, not 'coach, write a book, do a podcast, be fucking cool, take some photos of Pickle'. All that stuff comes much later. You need to master the basics first.

The same principle applies to running. So many people jump into it all guns blazing, even if they're starting on a couch to 5K. How many of you are hydrating or eating properly before a run – *every* run, not just the big ones? How many of you are eating enough protein? How many of you are actually doing your strength and conditioning, and do you know the best exercises to do for your running, or are you just copying some bellend you've seen on YouTube? Are you doing the basics well, or are you snorting bicarb and ramming the latest Spring Energy gels up your arse before you've sorted out having a regular bedtime and factoring in squats to your week?

It took a seismic mental health crisis for me to understand the importance of doing the basics; luckily for you, you have this book. Learning to do the boring bits, day in, day out, and to enjoy doing them is a life skill, and it's the only fast-track there is. It's about mindset rather than gritting your teeth and getting on with it. I fucking love the basics now. They're an easy win for me. They're going to change your life, so see them that way.

THE WORK

Work out what your basics are and write them down. If you find this hard, you could start with things like:

- make the bed
- eat three meals a day
- drink two to three litres of water a day
- go outside for one hour a day (walk or run)
- sleep for at least seven hours a night
- be grateful.

We'll get to gratitude later, but just being grateful to yourself that you have ticked things off a list has a massive effect on your mindset. If you're depressed or lacking motivation, and these things are the only things you do every day for thirty-one days, that's fucking great. Motivation follows action and more will start happening, I promise you.

Do your basics well. Do well the things that are the bare essentials to keep you going as a human. Take pride in them. Don't skip them. Don't add in hard stuff. As you're doing your basics, pay attention and say to yourself, 'This really matters', or whatever mantra works for you.

Get a set-up that makes it easy for you to start your basic day in the morning. I have one in my kitchen that's now so slick I sometimes execute it like a time trial. I actually look forward to it. Everything I need to start the day is within reach in one spot. I make my bed then go downstairs, kettle on, open the fridge, get dog food and oat milk out, put my porridge in the microwave for three minutes, feed the dog, take my vitamins (stored above the kettle), fill a two-litre water bottle with squash, make coffee, take the porridge out, let the dog out and there you have it. Five minutes every morning to set myself up to be a super basics bitch. Make it easy on yourself. If I'm totally honest, I have been known not to eat the porridge for three hours due to coaching, but nobody's perfect and it does eventually get eaten, even if it is a bit prisony by 11 a.m.

BORING IS BUILDING

The best way to remind yourself to do your basics is to put Post-it notes around the house where you can see them, for example on the fridge or on your bathroom mirror. Don't get sucked into micro-hacks, don't get distracted, don't skip the basics. Practise them. Do them every day. This is for life. They underpin everything else in this book.

Cue: Be a basics bitch.