

Optimization Culture Is Death by 1,000 Papercuts

How to hit pause.

So there I was, feeling far from myself after a morning of things going “wrong.” The night before, I hadn’t slept well, and I’d been shaken out of my routine more abruptly than usual.

You know the kind of morning I mean — spilled coffee on yourself, missed the train, got splashed by a puddle on the street. One of those irritating little domino-effect days where your body gets thrown off, and then your mind follows. We’ve all been there.

We live in a high-output culture.

At any given time, we are working, answering messages, maintaining relationships, making decisions, managing homes, consuming information, planning what comes next, and trying to stay vaguely healthy and emotionally well while doing it.

Even rest seems to come with instructions now.

It is only a matter of time before we hit a wall.

We get tired from constant decision-making, ad bombardment, calendars, social planning, screens, and the constant pressure to keep “working” on ourselves.

So as I noticed myself getting increasingly frustrated with my almost humorously difficult main-character morning, I decided to pause. I was mentally foggy and out of capacity.

The way I saw it, I had two options: I could react to the day and push through, or I could *respond* to what was *actually* happening and try to meet myself in the present moment.

So I named what I was feeling. This alone helped but, really...I needed a break from being perceived.

And I don’t just mean off from the outside world.
I needed a break from my own MIND.

I needed a break from performing, optimizing, and having it all “together”. From house labor. From managing things. I was tired of talking, interacting, and of being available both online and in-person.

A lot of my work is inherently social as an event producer. There is always someone to respond to, something to communicate, somewhere to show up.

And after six straight days of being very “on,” I could feel how tired I was of holding it all. Even the healing and personal-growth work needed to be put down for a minute.

So I asked myself:

What would it look like to respond to myself, moment by moment, instead of just reacting to the day?

The most easeful path forward is rarely continuing to stretch a capacity that is already spent.

So, I gave myself an afternoon to simply *be human*.

I chose to be “unproductive.” To be present with what I naturally felt and come home to myself inward instead of forcing more outward effort.

No performing. No trying. Just an empty canvas, my journal, music, some delicious vegan dark chocolate, and vibes. (more about being here and tie together the question below)

I turned off my phone. Not just “do not disturb” – OFF.

There was something strangely relieving about making myself completely unavailable for a few hours. No one could reach me. Nobody could ask anything of me. I did not need to document the afternoon, *improve* myself through it, or turn it into proof that I was “doing rest” *correctly*.

I wondered: What if the answer to feeling overwhelmed is not another ritual, mindset shift, or optimization strategy, but temporarily *refusing* to work on yourself at *all*?

It can be exhausting searching for clarity while also keeping up with daily life, responsibilities, and whatever version of productivity we think we should be maintaining.

Sometimes we need an intentionally human pause.

For me, painting is a great activity because there is very little self-judgment attached to it. I am not particularly interested in being “good” at it. It is not content. It does not make me money. Nobody is waiting for the finished product.

It is just creating for creation’s sake. So I painted. Then painting led to writing in my journal.

After that, I laid down for thirty minutes and listened to music simply because I felt like it, and most of the time, I was doing nothing. Just existing.

That was the entire agenda.

Before I knew it, the irritation had dropped and clarity started to come through. Nothing external had changed, but my internal world had completely shifted.

We often forget that busy-ness is *mostly* a self-imposed choice.

Not all of it, of course. Work is real. Bills are real. Responsibilities are real.

But so is the impulse to treat every open hour like unused inventory. So before you say, “I’m too busy” to make time for myself to “*human*”...are you really?

The world did not fall apart when I disappeared for a few hours.

When I turned my phone back on, there were no urgent messages waiting for me. Just a few delightful texts that could be answered whenever I wanted.

This afternoon reminded me that even when we are committed to healing and growth, sometimes we need a break from *that* kind of work, too.

This is the part optimization and wellness culture completely misses.

Not every feeling needs to be processed immediately.

Not every loose end needs to be closed in one day.

Not every hour needs to move us forward.

Effort can only take us so far.

It needs to be balanced with moments where we are intentionally *not* productive, *not* performative, and *not* public.

Sometimes we do not need to be perceived at all and just be the humans in meat suits that we actually are, without the striving and stories that tell us our value equates to our productivity levels.

When every area of our lives becomes something to improve — our careers, bodies, habits, relationships, healing, creativity, morning routines — even taking care of ourselves can begin to feel like another assignment.

There are moments when the most supportive thing we can do is stop trying to become anything.

Turn the phone off. Paint badly.

Take the long walk. Eat the snack.

Lie on the floor and listen to the entire album.

Let something be pleasurable without asking what it is doing for you.

Call it a human afternoon. Call it an intentional pause. Call it whatever you want.

The name matters less than creating enough quiet to ask:

Am I *responding* to what I need, or am I simply *reacting* to the pressure to keep going?

Because sometimes the way through a bad day is not to *conquer* it.

It is to stop making yourself a project.