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MENTAL WELLNESS

Speakers don't have to trade wealth for well-being

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER
2022

Speaker

THE ART AND BUSINESS OF PROFESSIONAL SPEAKING



THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF MASTERMINDS

EXPLORE THE BENEFITS OF HAVING A TRUSTED GROUP
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*Finding
Success
Through*

Mental Wellness



Speakers Don't Have to Trade Wealth for Well-Being

BY DR. SALLY SPENCER-THOMAS, ANNE MOSS ROGERS & MIKE VENY

Since March 2020, many professional speakers have experienced a significant decrease in income, faced canceled and rescheduled engagements, dealt with isolation, tried to figure out virtual presentations with lighting and equipment, and has overcome other challenges that came with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Burnout, mental health struggles, and dropouts have been commonplace.

Many speakers live with mental health conditions that impact not only their general well-being, but also their ability to serve as a professional speaker—conditions such as anxiety, depression, trauma, or addiction. In addition, time zone changes can disrupt sleep, which exacerbates those issues.

In our solo or semi-solo entrepreneurial brain-based business, our emotional life gets hijacked from overwork, and the pressure to be a big-name success is common. Often, we equate our net worth with our self-worth. That can be a slippery slope into despair.

For some of us, our darker side is actually the shadow of the light we bring into the world. What is often underappreciated are the gifts that sometimes come with living with a mental health condition—superpowers like creativity, empathy, intuition, drive, charisma, and stamina, talents speakers often depend on. Yet, when they are experienced in extreme forms, they can lead to suffering.

Even prior to the pandemic, being a professional speaker came with highs and lows. Some of those highs resulted from getting speaking gigs, standing ovations, and financial success. And the lows? Those are often the result of hectic travel schedules, dealing with impostor syndrome, and cash-flow issues.

We know this all too well. The three of us are busy delivering mental health presentations throughout the world. And each of us stumbled into our speaking journey because our lives were painfully impacted by mental health challenges, the consequences of addiction and suicide. As speakers, we also know the difficulties and challenges that come with a career as a professional speaker.

Mike Veny: “Early in my speaking career, there was a time period where I felt like I was getting rejection after rejection from meeting planners. It was so frustrating, and it had a negative effect on my self-esteem. Sometimes I would spiral into a deep depression and had to call my therapist. Those days sucked.”

Sally Spencer-Thomas: “Sharing my vulnerable stories and tapping into authentic emotions about losing my brother to suicide or of living through major depression can be hard. Add to this demanding travel schedules and being away from my family, and I can start to become mentally unwell.”

Anne Moss Rogers: “For years, I struggled to get anyone to care about the subjects on which I speak, mainly youth mental health and suicide. It was like pushing a spiked ball uphill in a snowstorm. The grief would overcome me and I would get into a ‘Nobody cares’ frame of mind, which is not helpful. I created a ‘book of wins’ to help me out of that spiral.”

For Long-Term Success

PRIORITIZE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH WITH “UPSTREAM, MIDSTREAM, AND DOWNSTREAM” STRATEGIES

Mental health and well-being needs to be a top priority for the speaking industry, because emotionally healthy people can sustain the difficult and hectic schedules that come with contracts, travel, practicing, promoting, planning, managing cash flow, and more. Our best bet is staying in front of mental health emergencies or chronic and severe mental health challenges by taking what we call “upstream, midstream, and downstream” approaches.

This terminology comes from this tried-and-true parable.

You are walking along a river one day and you hear a plea for help from someone drowning. You are startled but energized as you dive into the water and save the person. Using all your strength, you pull them to shore and start administering CPR. Your adrenaline is racing as they start to regain consciousness. You feel amazing! You just saved someone's life!

Just as you are about to get back on your feet, another frantic call comes from the river. You can't believe it! You dive back in the river and pull out another person who also needs lifesaving care. Now, a bit frazzled but still thrilled that you have saved two lives in one day, you mop the sweat from your brow. When you turn around, however, you see more drowning people coming down the river.

One after another.

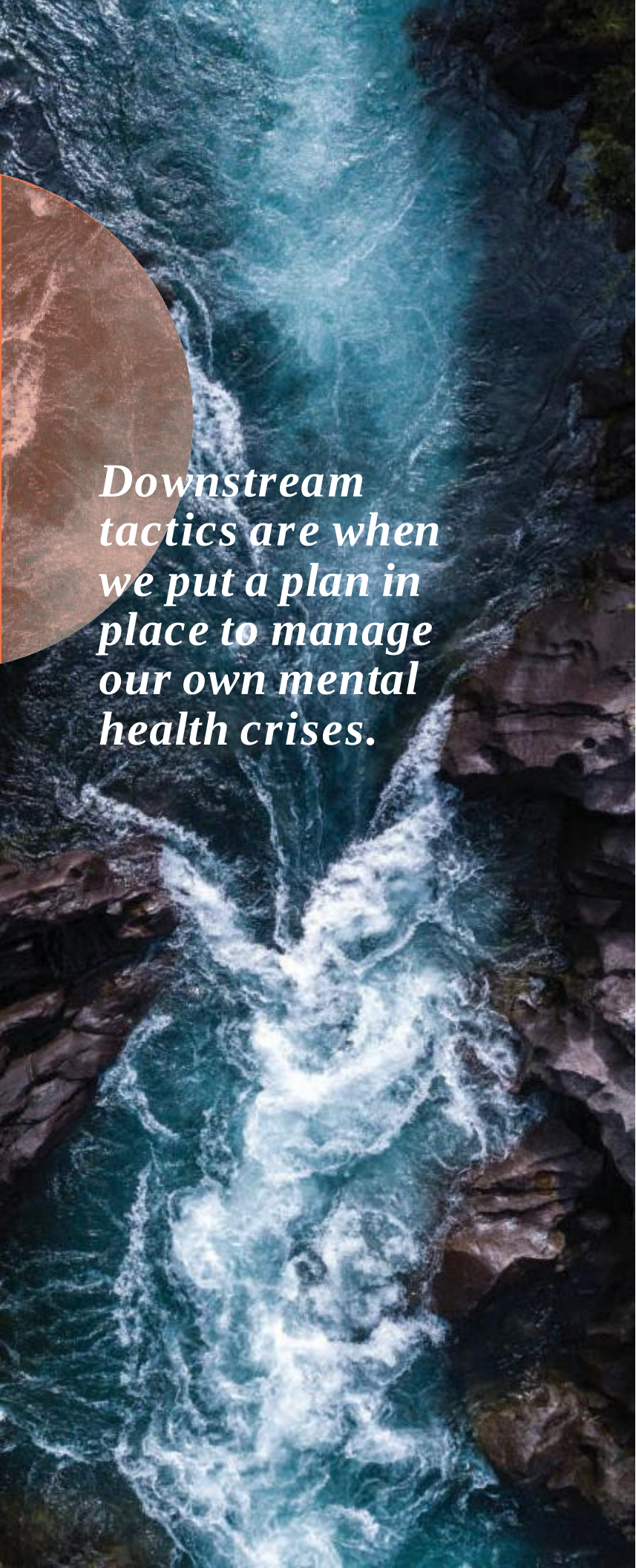
You shout out to all the other people around you to help. Now there are several people in the river with you—they are pulling drowning people out left and right. One of the rescuers swims out to the drowning group and tries to start teaching them how to tread water. This strategy helps some, but not all, because it turns out it's hard to learn how to tread water when you are drowning.

Everyone looks at each other, completely overwhelmed, wondering when this will stop. Finally, you stand up and start running upstream. Another rescuer glares at you and shouts, “Where are you going? There are so many drowning people; we need everyone here to help!” To which you reply, “I'm going upstream to find out who is pushing all of these people into the river.”

Upstream strategies, in other words, are things we do to build protective factors that can mitigate risk, such as creating a sense of belonging, eliminating stigmatizing language and discriminating actions related to mental health, building resilience through life skills and mental hardiness, and enhancing mental health literacy. Upstream strategies also tackle root causes in our communities—things like social injustice and psychosocial hazards (bullying, hazing, harassment, prejudice, discrimination, toxic work demands, and so on).

Midstream approaches help us identify when mental health issues are emerging and the problems are relatively small. Just like other health issues, small concerns are much easier to turn around than catastrophic ones. When we are self-empowered to prioritize our own and our loved ones' mental health, we can seek or offer appropriate support and resources. Midstream strategies include things like anonymous screening for mental health conditions, promoting and normalizing many types of help-seeking/help-giving behavior, and training on how to have difficult mental health conversations.

Downstream tactics are when we put a plan in place to manage our own mental health crises. The time to figure out how to get out of a burning building is not when it's engulfed in flames. Similarly, our healing from our darkest days will go much smoother when we have a well-thought-out response and contingency plan for how to get back on our feet.



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Take Action and Protect Your Gifts

UPSTREAM

1. Develop an “A team.” Who are the people you trust deeply and who love you unconditionally? People who know the REAL you with all of your warts and woes. Who would come across town or pick up the phone in the middle of the night, even if it was highly inconvenient for them? We all need an “A team” of confidants to have our back when we fall into a deep, dark hole of despair. And yet, paradoxically, our true social networks have been shrinking ever since the onset of the digital age. Loneliness, as U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy warns, is the public health epidemic of our times. Ward off this risk by regularly connecting with and confiding in your closest circle of support.

2. Practice self-care and soul care on the road. We’ve developed many well-being hacks for the road warrior lifestyle. Try some of these:

- Use a night mask with Bluetooth capability to channel music or white noise to help your brain fall asleep.
- Put exercise clothes by the hotel room door and make a commitment work out when you see them first thing in the morning.
- Try Insight Timer or one of the many free meditation apps.
- Pack your favorite relaxing herbal tea or travel-sized essential oils in the form of roll-ons and mini-diffusers.
- Bring a travel-sized yoga mat with you.
- Carry healthy, protein-rich snacks to prevent the “hangry” (hungry and angry) state.
- Journal about three things you are grateful for (big and simple things) and three things you are excited about.
- Keep a “book of wins” or a “page of wins” on your phone memo pad for times when you feel defeated.
- Serve others without expectation of reciprocity.
- Generate awareness for, volunteer for, or donate to non-profit organizations as part of your speaking mission.
- Be proactive about going to therapy. If you aren’t in therapy, we encourage you to find a therapist or a support group. If you are resistant to this idea, ask yourself why. We all have life issues we are working on that could benefit from feedback. If you are attending something therapeutic, we encourage you to make the most of it by scheduling time to reflect on what you discuss in between your sessions.



We can learn ways to improve our emotional intelligence by understanding and managing our emotions.

MIDSTREAM

1. Practice the P.I.E.S. check-in. You can do this with yourself or with others. In two minutes or less, ask yourself:

- How am I PHYSICALLY today?
- How am I INTELLECTUALLY today?
- How am I EMOTIONALLY?
- How am I SPIRITUALLY?
- Then ask What is one action step I can take to improve the moment?

2. Know the signs of mental health conditions. Self-screening tools (like those on Mental Health America; Help Yourself, Help Others; or [Mantherapy.org](https://www.mantherapy.org)) can help you do a “checkup from the neck up” and give you a quick indication of how you are doing. Ask:

- Am I drinking too much?
- Is this change in productivity from a depressed mood or am I just being lazy?
- Is this excitement or anxiety?

DOWNSTREAM

1. Learn emotional regulation skills. Sometimes our emotions can get out of control. Anger can turn into rage. Anxiety can escalate to a panic attack. Stress can transform into overwhelm. Disappointment can fester into hopelessness. The good news: We can learn ways to improve our emotional intelligence by understanding and managing our emotions. One evidence-based approach is called dialectical behavior therapy, or DBT. In the past, it was only accessible in clinical settings; we now know people can effectively learn these skills on their own. See the “Resources” section for a workbook.

2. Know your mental health and crisis resources. Because most of us are solopreneurs, we do not have access to the mental health benefits that major companies offer their employees. Nevertheless, there are many free and low-cost resources we can use:

12-step groups: They are not just for alcohol and drugs anymore, but a whole host of compulsive behaviors that disrupt our lives (eating programs, money programs, sexual programs, programs for families living with a person who has a mental health condition). During the pandemic, many of these meetings went online or switched to phone meetings, so you can find a meeting just about any time of the day. And did we mention ...they are free and universally accessible.

988: In July, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline system transformed into 988, making our mental health emergencies on equal par with other types of emergencies. Anyone can reach out to this network 24/7. And, it's also free.

Warm lines: Most states have warm lines answered by real people, supported by those who've lived with a behavioral health issue. Visit [warmline.org](https://www.warmline.org) to find a list by state.

Crisis text line: Another option for people who prefer anonymous and confidential support during difficult moments. You can text HOME to 741741 to reach a volunteer crisis counselor.

3. Make a crisis response plan. At one time or another, we all will be brought to our knees by hardship. It's best to have a plan in place before that happens to give yourself viable coping options. Write down the answers to these questions on your phone memo or even an index card. The first one is the most important.

- What are your reasons for living? And/or what are some words that will remind you of past events that trigger wonderful memories? List two to five things (my spouse, my children, that 2003 dinner in Vienna castle).
- What are the situations that activate me the most (transitions to the unknown, too much coming at me at once, social situations)?
- What are my best coping strategies (writing, exercising, playing music)?
- Who are three people I can call?
- What mental health resources would I be willing to access (call my sponsor, reach out to support group members, call my best friend, call a warm line, text 741741)?

Emotions are powerful. For the past few years, you may have been dealing with more difficult emotions than you ever have before. It may be that this time has just been bad for you. Or it might be that the challenges you've experienced in your speaking career are just one more difficult thing on top of all the others in your life.

From now on, you have a choice at every moment. We encourage you to choose your mental wellness. ■

Resources

BOOKS

The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook (Self-Help) (2019) by McKay, Wood and Brantley
The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma (2014) by Bessel van der Kolk

FREE MENTAL HEALTH AND CRISIS RESOURCES

12-step groups: 12step.org/social/meetings

988: 988lifeline.org

Crisis text line: crisistextline.org

Warm lines: [warmline.org](https://www.warmline.org) (listed by state)



SALLY SPENCER-THOMAS

is a mom, clinical psychologist and award-winning mental health advocate with her own personal experience of losing her beloved brother to suicide. Her mission

is to give voice to people who've lived through depression, addiction, and even suicidal despair. Sally is the lead author on the National Guidelines for Workplace Suicide Prevention, president of United Suicide Survivors International, and has Fortune 100 companies and an invited address at the White House among her speaking credits. She is the editor of the Guts, Grit & The Grind book series on men's mental health (gutsgritgrind.com). Connect with her at sallyspencerthomas.com.



ANNE MOSS ROGERS

is an Emotionally Naked® mental health and suicide prevention speaker/trainer who helps schools, parents, and companies foster a culture of connection to prevent suicide, reduce substance misuse, and find

life after loss. It was after her son Charles' tragic death by suicide at age 20 that she sold her digital marketing firm to focus on speaking. Her award-winning books include *Diary of a Broken Mind*, a memoir, and *Emotionally Naked: A Teacher's Guide to Preventing Suicide and Recognizing Students at Risk*, with co-writer Dr. Kim O'Brien. Anne Moss has been featured in the NYT and Variety magazine and was the first non-clinician invited to speak at the National Institute of Mental Health on suicide. annemossrogers.com



MIKE VENY is the winner of Corporate LiveWire's 2022 Innovation & Excellence Award for his work as a Certified Corporate Wellness Specialist®. The mission of his organization, Mike Veny, Inc., is to support you in receiving

the gift of emotional wellness through unique learning experiences designed to empower your personal and professional growth. Determined to overcome a lifetime of serious mental health challenges, Mike began as a professional drummer and evolved into a changemaker in the workplace wellness industry. His path to eventually becoming a motivational speaker became evident at an early age when he learned how to convince the staff in mental hospitals to discharge him multiple times.