



Fully Connected

How great leaders prioritise
themselves, reclaim their
energy and find joy

MEL KETTLE

Fully Connected is a timely reminder to leaders at all levels to take time out to focus on themselves. Leaders are missing a big opportunity in expending significant time and energy to support others to thrive. If their wellbeing is not in play, their risk of burnout increases. With the rapidly accelerating pace of change in today's business world, now is the time for leaders to take action and connect with themselves.

**Janelle Delaney, Partner and Executive
Sponsor for Women@IBM, IBM Australia**

In a world addicted to constant chaos and relentless hustling, *Fully Connected* is a great reminder that making time for self-care and honouring all aspects of your life makes you a better all-round human — at work and home. Let's ditch the busyness and burnout for balance. Filled with tips to transition you to a fully connected state, this book is a must-read for anyone wanting to take back their power and find out what really makes them tick.

**Sarah Smith, Chief of Staff, Office of the
Queensland Chief Entrepreneur**

If there was ever a time for a book like this, it's now. After two years of Covid lockdowns and remote working, it can feel harder than ever to be fully connected with ourselves and our people. This book is a great reminder of the importance of taking time out to be fully connected and practical ideas you can put in place to make it happen. The book draws on a collection of stories, research and personal experiences. These are combined with reflection questions to take you on a journey of discovery which Mel articulates

with humour and fun. I recommend this book if you are looking for ways to feel more *Fully Connected* with yourself and those around you.

**Michelle van Raalte, Continuous Improvement
Lead, Complaint Transformation, ANZ**

Sometimes a book comes along that is a perfect fit for the times. One with a clear and coherent message that at once diagnoses a challenge that many are confronting while at the same time prescribing practical solutions that can actually be implemented. *Fully Connected* is just such a book. It is useful for leaders, aspiring leaders, or anyone simply seeking connection, meaning or a way to find a more personally sustainable path through life. Mel's writing is easy to read, insightful, and nuanced. In short, *Fully Connected* is a pleasure to read and has the potential to help you take a step towards being your best self.

John Barton, Director and Chief Executive Officer, MGD

Part-warm hug, part-friendly push in the right direction, Mel has done a great job pulling together the best thinking on leader effectiveness into one book. A succinct, funny, and practical read for any leader who knows they need to lead themselves before they can successfully lead others.

**Steph Clarke, facilitator; host of Steph's
Business Bookshelf podcast.**

Every leader needs to read this book. Mel shares her wisdom generously and provides lots of practical tips to help everyone proactively live the life they want.

Annie Bryce, CEO, Edge Early Learning

Dear Intrepid Reader, the most truthful thing I can say about this book is that Mel has been gently persuading me to follow its ideas for the past ten years. She's been trying out this material on me and, I suspect, many others. Certainly not in a sneaky way. Rather, because she really knows what the f*^ she's talking about. So, her advice and guidance springs forth naturally and with clarity. Reading this book, I saw many of the same questions she has asked me with genuine curiosity to help me deeply connect with what I love, what I'm good at, and what really adds value to my clients.

Bravo, Mel.

**Jen Dainer, Business Owner, GDI Strategies
and Industrial Photo & Video**

Fully Connected is a warm-hearted wake-up call for leaders who feel disconnected from themselves, their team members, and their work. Mel Kettle leads the way to becoming a connected leader through her open and honest reflections. She walks us through how to put ourselves first, and how taking care of ourselves will help us to take care of and lead our teams. It is a must-read for those of us who need to stop giving too much, take a step back and focus on what's important — ourselves.

**Angela McDonald, Managing Director,
Optimum Recoveries**

This book couldn't have come at a better time! Women business owners and leaders know how to juggle, but the post-pandemic world has stretched even the most dextrous. Mel Kettle's ability to connect with those around her, and to cut through the layers of complications and challenges make *Fully Connected* a relatable and workable guide to reclaiming the joy in our lives. It's a contemporary survival guide — for women and for all leaders.

Cheryl Gray, CEO, Women's Network Australia

It can be a pressure cooker and lonely at the top. For experienced and emerging leaders, Mel's latest book is a treasure trove of practical, interesting and behaviour-changing advice on authentic leadership and how to stay fully connected. Focusing on what you can control (including yourself), and staying in the moment when things get tough, is the art of a high-achieving professional tennis player. It is also the art of great leadership, as Mel explains so eloquently in *Fully Connected*.

**Mark Woodrow, Customer Success Leader
and IABC APAC Board Member**

About the Author

Mel Kettle is an internationally recognised thought leader on fully connected leadership and communication.

She is a trusted mentor to executives and leaders, and a highly sought-after speaker and trainer. Her clients include leaders, teams and organisations that want to achieve real connection and sustained engagement.

At the heart of everything Mel does is a commitment to self-leadership. She has an over-arching belief that we need to lead ourselves first before we can lead others. This view came after she survived the debilitating effects of work-related loneliness, stress and burnout in her late twenties and was reinforced by a life-threatening melanoma in her early forties.

Mel has written *Fully Connected* for leaders who want to take back ownership of their life, reclaim their health and energise their workforce.

Recognised by the leadersHum community as one of the Top 200 Biggest Voices in Leadership to watch for in 2022, Mel is one of only seven Australians on that list.

Mel is also the founder of the award-winning menopause blog, *Just as Juicy* (www.justasjuicy.com).

Mel loves to cook, dance around the house, and read crime thrillers in her spare time.

Fully Connected is Mel's second book.

www.melkettle.com

Acknowledgements

The ideas within this book started floating around my mind many years ago. I wasn't sure it was the right book for me to write, despite knowing that it could make a difference. It's a big departure from much of what I am known for, and it couldn't be more different from my first book, *The Social Association*.

Part way through 2019, I started to tease out some of the ideas captured in these pages with clients, friends and colleagues through social media posts, newsletters and blogs. The feedback indicated that what I was saying resonated, and there were requests for more.

This book would not have been written without those who asked for more. Those of you who liked, commented on and shared my content, subscribed to my newsletter, booked me to speak at your conferences, run workshops and training with your teams, and asked for mentoring and coaching. Thank you.

Thank you also to the people who helped me get this book out of my head and onto paper.

My friend and mentor Lisa O'Neill told me I *must* write this book because I had things to say that people needed to hear. My book coach, the fabulous Kelly Irving, held my hand as I completely re-wrote the first version and tweaked and

improved the many, many subsequent versions. My editor Jenny Magee removed 137 exclamation marks (!) and smoothed out my clunky language, so it read more easily. Sylvie Blair and her publishing team at BookPOD made self-publishing seem effortless.

An enormous thank you to my beautiful friends Louisa Coppel and Julia Steel. There aren't enough words to say how much I cherish our friendship and your loving support. You have been with me every step of the way with this book (and with life in general), helping me work through ideas and asking the hard questions (always with love). You remind me why I'm doing this. I love you both and can't wait to see you again.

Thank you also to my Book Stars crew for cheering me on – Monique Beedles, Winitha Bonney, Kate Bourke, Stephen Duns, Justine Figo, Joe Hart, Ganapathy Iyer and Karen Livey. I'm looking forward to celebrating our book-writing achievements in person.

This book wouldn't be as interesting without clients and colleagues who shared their stories. Many are included within the book. Please be assured that some names have been changed to protect the innocent (and the not-so-innocent) and where confidentiality has been required or requested. Thank you, especially to Mark Anderson, Fiona Brown, Debra Cerasa, Jason Laird, Catherine Medhurst, Aaron Newman, Kim Stockham, Sharon Tuffin, Tracy Whitelaw and Ben Vasiliou.

To my clients over the past sixteen years: it's been quite a ride, and it's nowhere near over yet. Thank you for entrusting me with your hearts, your souls and your people.

To family and friends who have been in the background: happy to distract me with a chat, a meal, a gin or cup of tea, while gently encouraging me to persevere with this book. Thank you, especially to Julian, Emma, Zoe and Sam Kettle, Jen Dainer, Jo Bargon, Anita Heiss, Collette Barton-Ross, Aisha Barton-Ross, Angela McDonald, Leanne Hughes, Susan Lambe, Sally Bagshaw, Ingrid Larkin, Kirsten Binnie, Dyan Johnson, Alisha Lynch, Mark Woodrow, Frederique Blanc, Jennifer Johnston, Bec Chappell and Michelle Scheibner. Many others are not mentioned but gratefully acknowledged.

This book was written over many cups of tea and coffee, countless gin and tonics, and numerous bottles of wine. It would be remiss not to thank the café owners in Brisbane and Caloundra who let me sit quietly and write while drinking their coffee.

Thank you to Shaun. My love. As I said in my previous book, you might roll your eyes when I say, 'I've been thinking...', but you always listen. And you have always believed in me, even when I have had doubts.

Finally, thanks to you, my readers, for choosing to read this book. For being willing to take a deeper look into who you are and what you stand for. If you want to let go of what isn't right in your life to become fully connected, then I hope this book helps you achieve that.

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Introduction

Lessons from the best

In April 2022, along with fans worldwide, I was dumbfounded to hear that the currently ranked world number one women's tennis player, Ash Barty, was retiring. At twenty-five years of age. And at the top of her game.

Unless you're a tennis fan, you may not know what makes Ash Barty so beloved. More than her tennis prowess, it's her whole attitude to life. Late in 2014, she decided to take a break from tennis so she could do 'more teenage girl things'. She was recruited to play semi-professional cricket, even with no formal training in this sport. Barty returned to tennis in early 2016 and, in June 2019, became the top women's tennis player in the world. Her reign lasted 121 weeks.

On hearing of her retirement, I felt sad because I wouldn't get to watch her play again, and then I thought, 'Wow, what a champion!'

Leaving the game on her terms. Putting *herself* first.

Barty announced her decision on Instagram in conversation with her close friend Casey Dellacqua, saying, 'I know in my heart, for me as a person, this is right'.

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We face challenging decisions every day, and our choices are often based on what works for other people and what's right for them.

Hearing a woman as loved and respected as Ash Barty announce that she is fine if people don't understand her decision because *she* is okay with it, is inspiring. She said, 'It was hard, but it's right, and that brought me comfort, knowing it's right for me'.

Ash commented that her perspective shifted after winning Wimbledon in July 2021. She realised that her happiness wasn't dependent on the results, the money, or the status that winning provided. Her metric of success was not based on whether she won or lost. It depended instead on whether she gave everything she could.

If Ash Barty can connect to put herself first, prioritise her needs, and not be fussed about whether the general public understands her decision, then why can't we?

Leaders today are exhausted and frustrated. They know there is more to life than the treadmill on which they find themselves, but they aren't quite sure how to get it.

Too many leaders don't look after themselves. They exist in survival mode, struggling with unnecessary stress, overwhelm and burnout – but unfortunately, many don't realise this until it's too late. Add to this the past two years of Covid, which have left people scared, anxious and often disconnected. Despite endless Zoom meetings!

Great leaders value their people. They want to know how to encourage them to turn up ready to do a good day's work while being happy and healthy.

Leaders know they need to lead by example but aren't always sure what that looks like. In many cases, they don't believe they have the time to prioritise themselves.

I wrote this book because life is really bloody short. I see far too many people squander opportunities and trivialise what they have and who they are because they don't believe in themselves. They don't recognise they have choices and don't feel they are good enough to make them.

I want you to understand that:

- you are worth it
- you can back yourself
- you should prioritise yourself.

I want you to know:

- what lights you up
- when and how to say no to what doesn't bring you joy (or lead to something that will)
- when to say yes to what scares you
- how to set boundaries so you can live your best life.

Connecting with yourself

What does connection mean to you?

I put this question to every guest on my podcast, *This Connected Life*.¹

While everyone has a different answer, there are common themes.

Connection is a two-way relationship between people.

Connection is a willingness or a shared agreement to be vulnerable.

Connection is not about what you're doing, it's about who you are being.

Connection starts with you. If you're not connected to yourself, how can you be connected to others?

Before we can be connected to others, we need to be connected to ourselves. We need to know what makes *us* tick. We need to put ourselves first.

I believe human connection is the single most important element of life. It is vital for our physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, providing us with happiness, a sense of security and support.

Being connected doesn't mean having the most connections on LinkedIn, the most friends on Facebook, or the most

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Twitter followers. It means having real, deep, human relationships.

This book will help you become fully connected, to take back ownership of your life, reclaim your health, and find joy.

As you read, reflect on what you want from life and think seriously about how you can take action to achieve it.

Life is short. You only get one chance. Please live it.

Mel x

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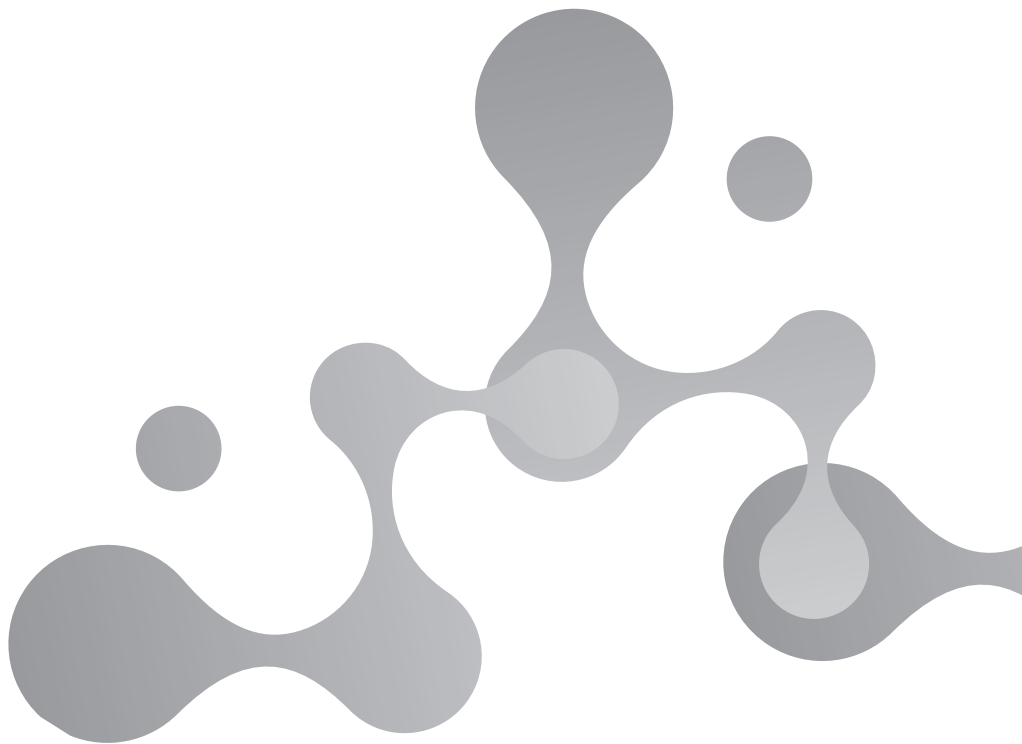
Fully Connected is written in two parts.

In Part One, we'll look at why you need to connect with yourself and lead yourself first. How can you bring your best when looking after or serving others if you don't look after yourself? Unless we connect first with ourselves, we risk unnecessary stress, overwhelm and burnout. Part One explores the reasons and benefits of becoming fully connected.

Part Two is all about prioritising yourself. It's not always easy to put yourself first, but it's worth it. This section identifies the three essential steps to prioritise you, find joy, and reclaim your energy. It's full of practical tools and suggestions to help you believe in yourself, take the necessary actions and thrive.

Before you start reading, I encourage you to download the accompanying workbook from www.melkettle.com/fullyconnected.

The workbook includes checklists, questions and practical exercises for each chapter that will help you apply what you learn.



Part One

Connect With Yourself

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It is more important than ever to connect with ourselves. Leadership – and life – is getting harder, making it increasingly difficult to find the time and energy to put ourselves first. We must look after our health and wellbeing to bring our best selves to work.

Self-care isn't selfish. Yet when we face increased pressures with work and life, it can be hard to put ourselves first.

Too often, we are afraid of others' reactions to our vulnerability. Add to this the growing epidemic of loneliness negatively impacting our health and increasing the risk of anxiety and depression. Is it any wonder we so often struggle to connect with ourselves?

The noise and pressure of technology and social media also challenge our ability to filter out the unwanted and unhelpful. And then, of course, we are dealing with the ongoing impact of Covid-19. All of which contribute to our lack of connection with ourselves and others.

Fully connected leaders thrive.

They take back ownership of their lives, reclaim their health and have stronger relationships. They energise their workforce, communicate with conviction and create cultures of belonging.

Part One explores how you can do this in detail.

Chapter One

It's Time To Lead Yourself First

*To live is the rarest thing in the world.
Most people exist, that is all.*

– Oscar Wilde

A few years ago, I went overseas for a seven-week holiday. On my own.

I would love to have shared at least part of it with my husband, Shaun, as was our initial plan, but that didn't end up happening – for a lot of boring reasons. When we realised Shaun couldn't come, I thought (for a nano-second) about cancelling. My clients had been alerted months earlier, and my schedule was clear.

It was one of the best experiences of my life. Although not for the reasons you might expect.

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This trip was planned so that every second week I would catch up with family and friends – ten days in Paris, ten days in the UK and a week in San Francisco. In the middle of this holiday, I had a week on my own in Istanbul – a city I had long wanted to visit.

My excitement about visiting Istanbul should have been off the charts, and, on one level, it was. However, I also felt despondent and unsettled, and I couldn't understand why. In theory, I had it all – a loving partner, a beautiful home, a successful business with many fabulous clients.

In hindsight (always wonderfully clear), I was struggling with anxiety and probably bordering on depression. I was still grieving the unexpected deaths of my parents a few years earlier, and a values misalignment with my biggest client was causing significant inner conflict.

To top it all off, I was in the throes of perimenopause, which I didn't realise because no one had ever talked about it.

For those who are unsure, perimenopause is the time before a woman goes through menopause. It's a hormonal change that happens to all women who reach fifty-ish. It usually starts in our forties (or even thirties) and can last more than fifteen years. Yep, that's right. Fifteen years of symptoms that include: anxiety, depression, panic attacks, weight gain, short-term memory loss, hot flashes, night sweats, difficulty sleeping, lack of self-esteem, crankiness, and joint pain. Most women don't have all these symptoms, but most of us have some. Please be kind to us during this time. And

more importantly, if you're going through this now, be kind to yourself.

Okay, back to my story.

Given all that, it's not surprising I was so perturbed. It was also the first time in twenty years that I'd had a significant amount of time to stop and focus only on myself. I had been busy starting and quickly building a meaningful career, doing two post-graduate degrees, moving to a new city (twice), meeting Shaun, setting up our home together, and quitting my job to launch my business.

This holiday came at precisely the right time. It was a chance to put myself first. To do what I loved. To reconnect with myself.

So much of my life until then had been spent prioritising other people, doing what they wanted and expected. I had forgotten who I was, what I wanted and what made me happy.

Connecting with strangers

One of the greatest opportunities when travelling alone is our conversations with strangers. It's especially so when we open ourselves up to deeper conversations than we might have with people who already know us. There's a beautiful sense of freedom in making a meaningful connection with someone you know you will never see again.

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One such random conversation helped me understand why I was feeling so discombobulated.

My day of revelation started with sunshine, which was a welcome change after a few cold, wet and miserable days. It was time to explore Istanbul properly.

I jumped on a bus heading north of the city, following the Bosphorus, the strait that separates the European from the Asian part of Turkey. Also on the bus were two young American Jehovah's Witnesses who had recently moved to Istanbul to be missionaries for a year. We started chatting, and they mentioned they were heading to the annual Istanbul Tulip Festival. Never one to miss a good festival, I invited myself to tag along.

We spent most of the day together, with incredibly thought-provoking conversations about religion, belief and connection. Without getting too woo-woo, I genuinely believe the universe provides what you need when you need it. Sometimes, you need to stop and look, but your answer will always be there.

This day was the universe providing for me. This chance meeting and our conversations about life and prioritising what you love helped me better understand the importance of putting myself first. It made me rethink meeting my needs, looking after my health, and taking time to recharge my body, soul and mind. And the importance of doing this regularly and frequently.

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When reflecting later, I realised that while I had great connections with others, I wasn't at all connected to myself. This young couple helped me understand that continually putting other people's needs and priorities ahead of mine tells me that I don't matter. And if I don't believe I matter, then why should anyone else?

I returned home from this holiday with a renewed sense of self.

The changes made me a better person and a better leader. I had more energy, my relationships with my clients improved, and I became more focused.

When we connect with ourselves first, we are happier, healthier and more human.

You first

As leaders, we have a responsibility to care for ourselves first. A lot of livelihoods rely on us.

Putting yourself first is so important. If you don't look after yourself, you can't be your best self for others. That includes your kids, partner, other family members, friends, employees, colleagues, boss and anyone else who is important in your world.

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Too many leaders don't look after themselves, which means they struggle with unnecessary stress, overwhelm and burnout. Many don't realise this is happening until they take a break from work (as I did), or worse, they find out too late.

Of course, it's hard to have downtime if you work in an organisation that subscribes to what Anne-Marie Slaughter calls our time macho culture: 'A relentless competition to work harder, stay later, pull more all-nighters, travel around the world and bill the extra hours that the international date line affords you'.²

Is it any wonder that so many of us are struggling?

I speak with many CEOs and other senior executives who say:

'It's really lonely at the top. I didn't expect that.'

'I sometimes feel that change is the only constant, and it's overwhelming.'

'I'm being pulled in so many directions that I can't remember which way is up.'

'Everyone wants a piece of me – my staff, my board, our customers, my wife, my kids. I don't have any time for myself.'

'I feel like I'm on a never-ending cycle of stress, alcohol, not sleeping and anxiety meds, and I don't know how to stop it.'

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‘I cry in the car on my way home from work at least once a week.’

‘Am I really cut out for this? The pressure is so much more than I ever expected, and I don’t know if I want to be the boss anymore.’

‘I dread Mondays.’

‘How do I structure my life so that work doesn’t crowd everything out? How can I find time for hobbies again?’

‘I feel an overwhelming commitment to being dutiful and keeping others happy, and this is like a constant ball and chain around me.’

‘I don’t know how to say no, even to things I really don’t want to do.’

‘I’m so tired I can’t think, which means I’m no longer confident that I’m making the right decisions.’

Sound familiar?

If we don’t make time to connect with ourselves, look after our health and wellbeing, and work towards achieving our goals and priorities, how can we bring our best selves to work?

Better for each other

As leaders, we want our people to turn up to work, ready to do their jobs to the best of their ability. We want them to gain satisfaction from a good day's work. We want them to be happy and healthy, and feel they can come to us when things aren't quite right – at work and home.

And they can't, or won't, do that if they don't know or understand what's expected or what they need to do or what's in it for them. Or if they don't like, respect or understand their manager, CEO or other leaders in your organisation. Or if they are exhausted, overwhelmed or stressed, and feel excluded or marginalised.

We can't expect our people to turn up and do their best if we aren't.

I know there are times when I have been a great leader and times when I have been shockingly awful. Looking back, I see that the terrible times were when my values or my purpose were not clear. I allowed other people's priorities to be the basis of my decisions, and I certainly didn't maintain any sort of self-care routine.

My first leadership role at work came in my late twenties. The headiness of being headhunted and winning the role over far more senior candidates meant I didn't do the necessary due diligence. I didn't even negotiate my salary because I didn't know I could! (That needs to be taught in high school. Seriously.)

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I was well and truly thrown into the deep end, with no idea what I was getting into. My newly formed and enthusiastic team were all younger than me, and we learned the job together.

While I had the skills and capability to do the basics, I had no idea how to manage the people. I didn't want to ask for help because I didn't want my employer to realise I didn't know what I was doing. There was no training, so I muddled along. As time went by, we all became exhausted from the stress of the job, the long hours and the diverse and often difficult personalities of the many people we needed to work with.

Work kept piling up, and I realised I couldn't say no without risking my job. My boss was under even more pressure to perform, so there was little support at work, and no support at home, as I lived alone.

Given that I was not, in any way, bringing my best self to work, it's no surprise that relationships and communication with my team suffered. The lack of any real breaks (including proper sleep), poor nutrition and increasing anxiety meant I retreated into myself to survive.

It was a horrible time, and when I finally resigned, I vowed I would do better the next time I was given a leadership opportunity. While I know I wasn't the first bad leader, I definitely won't be the last. Part of the leadership experience is learning from past mistakes and doing better the next time.

I asked Sharon Tuffin, CEO of Karralika Programs, what she wished she had done differently as a younger leader. Her response was, ‘I felt that I needed to prove myself, and so, wrongly, I didn’t seek help. I believed that I needed to prove why I got this job, and why I had this level of responsibility. However, by assuming I could do it all myself, I didn’t take advantage of the really great insights and experience of others in the organisation. I

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lost opportunities to learn and be challenged because I wasn’t being true to myself.’

As we progress through our careers, we must become better versions of ourselves to be better leaders, at home, at work and within our communities.

Why is it so hard to put ourselves first?

It’s totally understandable that we put others first. After all, you want to invest in your people and help them feel safe and valued. Good leaders *want* to serve others. They *want* to create an organisational culture that is uplifting, motivating and instils confidence in their workforce.

We know that leaders have always faced challenges; however, they seem bigger and bolder these days. It feels like we have even more to do and less time than ever to do

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it. Add the increasing integration between work and life (not only because of Covid), and we must wonder whether we are working from home or living at work.

When I started my career in the mid-1990s, work-life balance was an ideology that many, including me, struggled to achieve. Computer technology had advanced to a point where we could more easily take our work out of the office. I remember how privileged I felt when my employer gave me my first laptop in 1999. Little did I know that it was the beginning of the end of my work-life separation. I worked, on average, seventy hours a week in that job, with barely a weekend when I didn't dial in from my home internet connection. (Do you remember that dial-up sound too?)

Today, working for myself gives me the flexibility to choose how, where and when I work. However, it also means I frequently find it hard to switch off. And yes, I'm writing this late on a Sunday afternoon, after a restorative yoga class and before starting to cook dinner and plopping on the couch to watch MasterChef.

I'm highly conscious that employees have fewer choices. A colleague recently told me she has senior executives call her at 2am, expecting to have a work-related conversation. She marvelled when I said that my phone is usually on silent from 8pm–8am. Her employer expects her to be available 24/7, which is simply not sustainable.

There are so many reasons it can be hard to take the time and effort to put ourselves first. I believe the following six are the main explanations.

We have increased pressures with work and life

Even before Covid, leaders had been feeling increased pressure. We are so often over-scheduled and over-committed. Life is often further complicated by the notion that we need to be seen to be busy. When you ask someone how they are, how often is the reply 'I'm busy'?

We glorify
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We glorify 'busy' far too often. It's not something to be proud of, yet so many are.

At work, we are expected to be available 24/7 and do more with less while motivating a frequently disengaged, multigenerational workforce. Changing customer expectations place greater demands on our workforce and our business models. Yet, we must maintain or increase organisational growth while staying competitive in increasingly disruptive markets.

I feel exhausted just writing this!

And let's not forget our responsibilities at home. We often juggle children and ageing parents while trying to find time for romance. Women, in particular, struggle with the mental

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load of endless tasks. It's the list-making, the planning and the organising that must occur every day to ensure you, the kids and your partner can get out the door in the morning. It's the decisions about what to have for dinner, where to go on the weekend, which movie to watch, who will look after your pets when you're away, who will make sure the bills get paid on time, buying birthday gifts, booking the plumber, the pest control, the car maintenance....

Coordinating these logistics to ensure life runs smoothly means we have less time to do things for ourselves and do what we love. It creates friction that saps our energy and can tip us into overwhelm.

We mistake self-care for selfishness

It's so easy to put others' needs first and ignore your own – especially when the only person you're accountable to is yourself. This can be even truer for women, as we are often taught that it's inconsiderate or rude to put our needs before those of our partners, children and other family members.

Focusing time and energy on looking after yourself is often considered selfish.

Let me tell you: it is not.

Putting yourself first isn't only about caring for yourself. It's about understanding your most important priorities, and managing accordingly. Putting yourself first is often the best way to support everyone else.

You need
to be
responsible
for you.

It also recognises that *you* need to be responsible for *you*.

If you're going through perimenopause, it's even more important to focus on self-care. This stage of life can be incredibly isolating, not to mention frustrating. We all have different menopause experiences, so taking time to understand your specific needs will help you better manage this stage of life. Be gentle *and* patient with yourself as your body changes. And yes, this is often easier said than done....

If you don't look after yourself, why should anyone else?

In 2011, Michelle Obama was First Lady of the United States. In an interview, she told Barbara Walters that putting herself highest on her priority list wasn't selfish – it was practical. She said, '[Putting myself first is] something that I found I needed to do for quite some time, even before the presidency. And I found other women in similar situations, balancing career and family, trying to do it all. A lot of times, we just slip pretty low on our own priority list because we're so busy caring for everyone else. And one of the things that I want to model for my girls is investing in themselves as much as they invest in others.'³

We're afraid of the reaction to our vulnerability

I'm sure I'm not the only one who has pushed through a bad situation at work because we don't want to show any sign of weakness for fear of being seen as incapable or worse. Sometimes, however, it just comes out. Like when my boss called to check in while I was running a huge project at a fancy hotel during Melbourne Cup Week.

I'm fairly sure he didn't expect me to burst into tears and sob until I hyperventilated. I know he cared – he called my colleague who was also in Melbourne and asked her to find me and make sure I was okay. However, he also expected me to pick myself up and complete the project, so I didn't let the client down. Back in the office the following week, he asked if I felt better, but nothing changed.

Then there was the time I told another boss I had too much on my plate at work, was getting extremely stressed about deadlines and couldn't get everything done. A promotion meant that sixty per cent of my time was spent with the new role (and a new boss) and forty per cent on my old role (and old boss). My old boss didn't like this, despite agreeing to the change. He told me that he expected me to still do all my former duties to the high standard he was used to. When I said there weren't enough hours in the week, he told me (and anyone who would listen) that I was lazy and useless.

I know I can't be the only person who has received a negative response to showing vulnerability or asking for help.

Showing
vulnerability
can seem
even more
difficult.

When you're in charge, showing vulnerability can seem even more difficult. We can't expect our staff and colleagues to open up to us if we don't open up to them.

A few years ago, one of my CEO clients, Anna (not her real name), talked about a staff member whose performance was rapidly declining. She felt there was a problem with Brett's (not his real name either) home life, but numerous conversations had elicited nothing. I asked whether Brett was aware of the enormous personal challenges she was currently facing, and Anna said, 'No, of course not. I keep my personal life private'.

I asked her why Brett should be open with her when she was a closed book with him. I wasn't suggesting that Anna divulge all the nitty-gritty of her dramas, but that she gave her team a broad overview of what she was going through. I reminded her that disclosure breeds disclosure, and that if she shared some confidences, it might encourage Brett to open up. It would also help her team understand why she was occasionally distracted and abrupt – two behaviours that were not her normal but becoming more common as she grappled with major personal issues.

There's a growing epidemic of loneliness

Loneliness has been at epidemic levels for a long time, with one in two Australians saying they are lonely at least once a week.⁴

Cigna's 2020 Loneliness Index shows a clear connection between work and loneliness, with sixty-one per cent of the study's respondents reporting they were lonely. Interestingly, the research shows that men were slightly more lonely than women, and younger people (aged 18–22) were lonelier than older people (72+).⁵

Many senior executives I've worked with have shared how lonely they've been at work. I certainly recall this from when I was in a senior role. I couldn't talk to my boss about it, in case she thought I wasn't up to the role. I couldn't discuss it with my team, as they expected me to have the answers. And my husband didn't understand as, at that stage, he hadn't been in a senior role. It wasn't a great time in my life.

Research by RHR International found that more than half of the CEOs studied reported feeling lonely in their job, with the majority believing it hindered their performance. This was particularly true for first-time CEOs.⁶

Leaders must understand that loneliness can have a considerable impact on health, ours and our staff, and the bottom line of our organisations.

If you have been in the workforce for a while, it will be no surprise to learn that we are twice as likely to say we are

The impacts of loneliness are far- reaching.

always exhausted than we were twenty years ago. Almost half of us say this is due to work. There is also a significant correlation between work exhaustion and feeling lonely – the more you're exhausted, the more alone you feel. It's a vicious cycle that can be hard to stop.

The impacts of loneliness are far-reaching. Our cognitive performance and executive functions diminish. We have difficulty staying focused, listening and paying attention, planning and prioritising, recalling instructions, multitasking, and controlling our impulses. We also struggle to learn, think, reason, remember, problem solve and make decisions.

Loneliness also makes us more prone to anxiety and depression, which correlate directly with workforce engagement, productivity, and profit. When it comes to absence from work, depression and anxiety are now the leading causes of long-term sickness absence and a major cause of presenteeism.⁷

For many of my clients, friends and colleagues, the last two years have increased feelings of loneliness. Many who combined living alone with working from home often found the loneliness debilitating. As leaders, we need to carefully consider the impact of a hybrid workforce, especially on

those who crave the return to the office and the company of others.

We can't easily filter out the noise

Screen time isn't inherently bad. However, what is concerning is the amount of time we spend living our lives through the screen and not with people.

We need to be more deliberate about how and when we use technology.

One of the reasons we are disconnected is our love of screens. And yes, I mean that in the plural. The average Australian household has 6.4 screens,⁸ including TVs, mobile phones, tablets and computers. Even my Thermomix is connected to the internet, although I can't yet use it to watch Netflix.

We check our phones around 340 times a day, which equates to once every four minutes. And each time we check, we are priming our brain for distraction for the rest of the day. That means we are hit with information overload and are unable to prioritise tasks. Reading a text message, which takes less than three seconds, can double error rates on basic tasks.^{9 10}

Our increase in screen time – toggling between apps, mindlessly scrolling, binge-watching the latest show on our streaming service of choice, and constantly checking social media and our inbox for updates – leads us to have shorter attention spans.¹¹

It is also causing insomnia, worry and fatigue, which are precursors to burnout, anxiety and depression. Literacy and the ability to spell, be creative and think critically are declining. Cyberbullying and trolling are increasing.

Then there's the increase in physical ailments, such as text-neck, cyber-sickness, text-claw, phantom vibe, hearing loss, RSI and eye strain. The artificial blue light emanating from screens can lead to poor sleep and mood disorders, including depression and anxiety, and increase the risk of cancer, obesity, diabetes, and reproductive problems.

Many of us joke about being addicted to our phones, yet we carry them around as though they are EpiPens, and we all have a fatal illness. Despite the joking, it's a serious matter. Smartphone addiction is a definite thing, and it's becoming more and more prevalent as we choose phones over humans. A study from the University of Derby indicated that one in eight people are addicted to their phones.¹² It's hardly surprising, given the average Aussie spends 5.5 hours *every day* on their phone.

And it's not only our phones. We're increasingly addicted to streaming services, such as Netflix, Stan, Hulu, Apple TV+, Disney+ and Amazon Prime – not to mention the TV stations with their online services, such as SBS Online, ABC's iView and the rest.

Reed Hastings, CEO of Netflix, has said that the biggest competitor of Netflix is sleep. He said, 'When you watch a show from Netflix, and you get addicted to it, you stay up

late at night. We're competing with sleep.¹³

Think about that for a moment. And then consider your TV viewing habits.

And what about technology at work?

The biggest competitor of Netflix is sleep.

We have email, which is the bane of many an office worker's life, with the average office worker receiving 121 emails *per day*.¹⁴ And we have Zoom fatigue, born of the hours and hours we spend in online meetings. One of the reasons video calls are so exhausting is because we need to focus far more intently than in-person or talking on the phone. Ironically, the extra attention required to focus on the other faces takes energy we don't use face-to-face. If we turn away on a video call, look down while taking notes, read through the meeting agenda, or glance at an incoming message on our phone, it seems as though we are no longer paying attention. So, we focus harder.

During one of the early Covid lockdowns, I was thrilled to see Heritage Bank announce boundaries around when their staff could have online meetings.

CEO Peter Lock said that as seventy per cent of their workforce were now working from home, they decided to introduce guidelines around Zoom, which included no meetings before 9.30am, between 12.30-1.30pm, after 4.30pm, or on Fridays. The purpose was to support people's

mental health and ensure they could get work done, rather than always being 'on'. He hoped that by limiting meeting hours, staff would have time to walk the dog, exercise, have a proper lunch break and take some time each day to temporarily switch off.¹⁵

Covid-19 has an ongoing impact

As we head into a new post-pandemic reality, we need to rethink our understanding of mental health and wellbeing.

You might be reading this in 2022 as we move through the pandemic or a few years later. Perhaps another event, personal or professional, has caused a significant change in your life. It might be an unexpected job loss, the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, or a serious health challenge. Regardless of what life throws at you, remember that it's okay not to be okay.

The first episode of Brené Brown's podcast, *Unlocking Us*,¹⁶ was released soon after the coronavirus was declared a global pandemic. She talked about the FFTs, 'the Fucking First Time' (sorry, not sorry, for swearing), reminding us that the first time of any new experience can be horribly difficult. First dates, the first time we get behind the steering wheel of a car, the first time we go through a global pandemic. And the first time we start thinking about a post-pandemic reality.

As leaders, we sometimes need to remind ourselves that first times can be hard. So, let's treat ourselves gently.

In a 2021 *New York Times* article, Adam Grant wrote that so many of us are languishing, referring to the joylessness and aimlessness we feel. It's that grey area between burnout and bouncing, between depression and flourishing. 'It feels as if you're muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield,' said Grant.¹⁷

One of the problems with languishing is that you're 'indifferent to your indifference', which means you don't tend to seek help or try to help yourself.

There are plenty of ways to cope with languishing, including taking time out, doing things that bring joy and having a change of scene, which can be as simple as briefly stepping away from the office to get some fresh air.

As we connect with our colleagues, customers and others, it's important to remember that it's not just a significant event that can take its toll; it's the surrounding anxiety and the lack of joy and purpose.

You only get one life

My unexpected favourite movie of the year a few years ago was *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle*. I was still laughing a week later. I recently watched it again and was reminded of how many positive messages about life it contains.

Without any spoilers, *Jumanji* is a video game (in the original movie with Robin Williams, it's a board game) that sucks its players into an alternate world to play a survival

game. The only escape is by working together. The game is described as ‘A game for those who seek to find a way to leave their world behind’.

At the start of the movie, the four main protagonists are sent to detention. Principal Bentley tells them: ‘This is what you should be thinking about: Who you are ... in this moment of time ... and who you want to be. You get one life. You decide how you’re gonna spend it. Fortunately ... there is no better place for self-reflection ... than detention.’

While in detention, they play *Jumanji* and find themselves in the jungle, where, as in all good video games, they have multiple lives.

Towards the end of the movie, Dr Smolder Bravestone comments, ‘It’s a lot easier to be brave when you’ve got lives to spare. It’s a lot harder when you only have one life.’ Moose Finbar replies, ‘We always only have one life, man. That’s how it is.’

What about you?

My question is this. Are you living the life you want?

And if not, when will you make time for self-reflection?

Connecting with yourself is a conscious choice. We make decisions around this every day, about what we think, what we eat and drink, when we go to bed, who we associate with, and how we bring joy to our lives.

FULLY CONNECTED

The only person who can work out what you want is *you*.

And the only person who can make the necessary change is – you guessed it – *you*.

Are you
living the life
you want?

It's so easy to get caught up in our problems, forgetting we have choices in life. Every day we have the power to change our world. To make decisions that improve our quality of life in small and significant ways.

You now have a choice. Will you be a fully connected leader?

Reflection questions

When did you last put yourself first?

How did that make you feel?

MEL KETTLE

What is stopping you from putting yourself first more often?

Are you living the life you want?

What changes could you make?

Are you feeling exhausted and overwhelmed?
Do you feel like you have no time for yourself?
Are you wondering how to regain your energy and find joy?

Being a leader today is hard. We are pulled in so many directions, with big responsibilities and many livelihoods reliant on us.

It may surprise you that our first responsibility is to care for ourselves. To make choices that are right for us, instead of right for others. With blurred boundaries between work and life, it can be difficult to find time for this. We've glorified being busy to become over-scheduled and over-committed and feel guilty about taking time for ourselves.

Fully Connected is for leaders who want to take back ownership of their lives and reclaim their health and energy. On their terms.

When you figure out what lights you up and how to say no to what doesn't bring you joy, you become a better leader as you energise your co-workers, communicate with conviction and create a culture of belonging.

In these pages Mel Kettle shares practical, simple and actionable ideas for you to increase your self-awareness, understand what motivates you and prioritise self-care so you can become a fully connected leader.



Author photo: Jen Dainer

Mel Kettle is an internationally recognised coach, mentor, speaker, facilitator and author. She works at the intersection of communication and leadership to help senior executives, boards, business owners and leaders create real connection and sustained engagement, so they can lead themselves, lead aligned teams and lead cultures of belonging. Mel is also committed to helping women and organisations better understand the impact of menopause in the workplace.

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