

## Ep #266: Operational Minimums and Needle Movers



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With Your Host

**Maisie Hill**

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This is episode 266, Operational Minimums and Needle Movers.

If you want to do things differently but need some help making it happen, then tune in for your weekly dose of coaching from me, Maisie Hill, Master Life Coach and author of *Period Power*. Welcome to *The Maisie Hill Experience*.

Okay, folks, welcome back to the podcast. I want to build on a recent episode where I spoke about the effort of being in winter, whether that's the winter season of your cycle, the winter season during the year, or you're just in a winter season of some kind in your life. Because whenever I talk about lower capacity seasons, what people usually ask me is, "Yeah, okay, I get that. That makes sense, but what do I actually do when I don't have much in the tank?"

So I have seasons in the year and seasons in my cycle where I can get a lot done. So a couple of weeks ago, I got to the cafe that I like to work in. I was there at two minutes to 8 in the morning, ready for when they opened. I got my coffee, I started writing, and by the time I left at 11 a.m., I had written 17 pages of really deep work. And at the end of that, I wasn't feeling exhausted by it. I just felt I'd really worked out my brain, but I felt really on point, and there was challenging moments in it, but it was just really satisfying work to be doing. So some of my days are like that. But then, fast forward a week, and I was having a very different type of day.

Now, for context, I am a morning person. I love to wake up and start work soon after that. And at the moment, it's the beginning of February, so we're getting there with sunrise. There's a bit more daylight, but my rhythms really ebb and flow with daylight. So I am waking up a bit later for me compared to spring and summer and the rest of the year, but I am still a morning gal, no matter what time I wake up.

But last week, I woke up, and I had zero inclination to do any work, none. I can't explain to you how unusual this is because usually I wake up, and the ideas start popping, and I really want to write. That's a real habit for me. And even if I'm not writing a book, I am always writing stuff for the

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membership. I'm writing stuff that I'm going to use in my emails and my podcasts. So writing is a really embedded habit for me.

So waking up and not wanting to do it is so weird, really weird. And then, even weirder, I had two naps that morning, and I'm not a napper. And I'm not against it; I just don't need to have them. So for me, having a nap is unusual. To have two naps and to have them before midday is highly irregular. So I actually spent the whole day in bed just reading and resting and taking care of myself. And that way, I was able to do the coaching call in the membership that evening.

But when I feel this, it's really important for me to go with it because I have been in this body long enough to know the consequences if I don't. So if I push through on days like that, it doesn't lead to great outcomes. It leads to autistic shutdowns, irritability, or illness later on. And for a lot of capable people, capacity dips like this are often labelled as some kind of character flaw, where you just assign a narrative about yourself when you have days like this.

So the trick is learning not to do that because that is something that I do not do. For me, it's a very neutral experience. Even though my experience of it is very intense, it's neutral in that I'm not adding unhelpful narratives to it, like telling myself that I'm lazy or lack discipline or consistency or that I'm regressing in some kind of way.

Right? I just recognise that my system is responding to what's going on internally and what's going on externally. That is it, and I just work with that.

So when I'm having a low capacity day, week, or month, or also when I've just come off a period of sustained effort on a particular project, and then I'm taking time to intentionally do less, I don't default to doing nothing. Don't get me wrong, on days like the other day where I was, "I just need to rest up," then I will do that. I still did the membership call. I'm going to get onto that in a moment. But I also don't default to trying to do everything or doing what I'm able to do when I have a full tank of gas.

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And when I say low capacity, I don't just mean tired or ill. It also includes the seasons where you're still showing up, you're still functioning, you're still doing what you do, you're still delivering, but maybe a lot of your capacity is tied up in thinking, deciding, holding responsibility for stuff, managing complex situations and projects. Because for many high-functioning people, capacity gets taken up by all of those little and large things that are just part of your day-to-day, as well as bigger projects. So this is why so many high achievers feel depleted without being able to point to anything that's "wrong."

So when I'm experiencing this, I work with two things: my operational minimum and my needle mover. And they always come as a pair. And I want to be really clear that this is not a way of squeezing output out of yourself when you are depleted. That's the caveat to all of this. Do not misinterpret what I'm saying as that.

Operational minimums and needle movers are about creating sustainable cycles rather than extracting constant demands and performance from yourself. So this is how you stay in relationship with your work and your life across seasons, instead of treating yourself like a machine that should run at the same speed all year round. Because when you don't have a framework of some kind for those low-capacity seasons, you can end up swinging between two unhelpful extremes of either pushing yourself as if nothing has changed or disengaging entirely because you don't want to half-ass things, or you've just pushed yourself too much already and you really need to do that.

So, of course, if that's where you're at, then you want to honour that. But what I'm talking about here is this middle ground of operational minimums and needle movers that hopefully then mean, sure, when you're having a higher capacity day or season, you can really go with that, but then you're not going to swing all of the other way and be really burnt out and drained. Because during other seasons, you're going to work with your operational minimum and needle movers. So now let me just explain what those things are.

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So first, we've got the operational minimum. Your operational minimum is the set of actions that keep the structure of your life or work intact. So these aren't going to be aspirational tasks. They're not about growth or optimisation in some way; they're about continuity and being able to maintain things.

So I think of the operational minimum as caring for the soil. We're not forcing growth all year round, but we are keeping the ground nourished so that when energy and light return, things can grow again without you having to rebuild everything from scratch, or when those seasons are happening, you're still tending to the soil because it's so depleted because you're so depleted.

And remember that there's always way more going on underground than you realise, right? So even in those seasons where there isn't rapid growth above the soil, like there is in spring, but there's still loads going on under the soil in winter. So it's important to recognise that in yourself as well.

So when you do this, this protects your self-concept because you'll be someone who stays in relationship with their commitments when conditions aren't ideal. And it's also a great act of self-respect because you're responding to reality rather than punishing yourself for not behaving in the same way you would in a different season. For example, for me, my operational minimum looks like showing up for my coaching calls inside the membership, recording the podcast, and coaching my clients.

Now, you might think that your operational minimum is going to involve lowering standards, and it's not. This is how you continue to show up during times that are objectively challenging in a way that doesn't result in you handing your power over to those circumstances. And those standards that you have do also include how you take care of yourself, by the way. That is a really important standard to have. So we're not excluding that element; it includes that element.

So the operational minimum is about staying in relationship with your life even when capacity is low and just doing the minimum things that need to

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be done to keep ticking over. Then in comes the second part of this, which is the needle movers. So a needle mover is one action. One. Please hear me on this. It is one action that meaningfully moves something forward. It is not five actions. It is not a fully detailed plan. It is one simple action that will make a difference.

Sometimes that might be something that requires a block of a few hours to work on, but most of the time, it is not something that requires a lot of time. We have a huge tendency to think that the actions that will make the most difference will require a lot of time. And when you tell yourself that, what you're actually doing is giving yourself a very convenient logistical reason not to do them. You don't have the time. You need a clear day, or things have got to calm down first before you can do these things. When actually, more often than not, the needle moving tasks rarely require large amounts of time, but they do require other things.

And it's these things that the logistical reasons are hiding. Because needle movers require things like courage to confront fears about how you'll be perceived or for you to risk potential rejection and to take emotional risks. For example, sending that email or text that you've been avoiding, following up instead of telling yourself a story about why the situation is awkward, or publishing something imperfect, or addressing something that's bothering you instead of brushing it under the carpet.

So all of these things are two to 10-minute actions, I'm going to say. But what they cost is something internal, but they require something of you that isn't to do with time. Because these needle movers tend to touch your edges. They require things like visibility, honesty, self-trust, or the risk of what you say or do not being received in the way that you hope it is going to be.

So when your capacity is lower, the idea here is that you maintain your operational minimum so that what you've already created stays intact. And then you choose one needle mover so that you remain in relationship with what matters to you even when you're not operating at full capacity, and

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actually do something that does make a difference but doesn't require a lot of your capacity in terms of time and decision-making and things like that.

And this is where the idea of compounding interest is useful as a way of understanding how effort behaves over time. Because compounding interest doesn't work when you make just one deposit. It works because you keep contributing to it, even when the gains look negligible, especially when the gains look negligible.

So when you hold your operational minimum, you're protecting the principle. You're not letting the whole thing collapse just because conditions aren't ideal. And then when you add one needle mover, you're making a deposit into the future version of your life or your business or your self-trust. So on its own, that deposit may not seem particularly impressive, but over time, those deposits accumulate in ways that aren't linear.

This is why disappearing entirely during low capacity seasons is so costly. It's not just that you lose momentum; it's that you interrupt that compounding. You stop earning interest on the effort that you've already made. And that's often what people are really contending with, grieving the feeling that you've disconnected with yourself. And remember that disconnect happens when you're in stress responses too. So add those into the mix, and that is going to impact how you feel as well as your capacity.

Whereas staying engaged, finding a way to be in connection, even at a lower level, keeps things working in your favor. And if these financial metaphors don't land for you, that's okay. Let's return to the idea of seasons and how ecosystems work. Right? You don't harvest all year round. You don't plant and reap at exactly the same time. There are seasons where you're tending to things, where the soil is resting, where you're maintaining the soil, fertilizing it, and then growth happens when those conditions support it.

And a lot of what we've been taught about effort assumes constant availability and linear output. But these were models that were never

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designed around real human bodies, let alone ones that had cycles. So this way of working is a refusal of that model.

So if you're in a winter season or a low capacity phase or you're having a low capacity day, I don't want you asking yourself what you should be doing. I want you to ask what you can do. How can you lead yourself well when the conditions aren't ideal?

So on that note, your mission this week, should you choose to accept it, is to determine what your operational minimum is right now and what is one needle mover that you can take responsibility for and make happen. Keep it small enough that you could do it on a low day, not your best day. That is what's important with this.

Okay, folks, that is it for this week. I hope you have a fantastic day, a cracking week, and I'll see you next time.

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