Checkmark Syndrome

Why Winning Stopped Feeling Like Anything, and How High Achievers Find Their Way Back

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INTRODUCTION

The Master Coper

I was number one in my company multiple times over. Eight years at Gold's Gym, the badass master elite trainer, the one everybody pointed to when they wanted to show what discipline looked like. I had the trips, the awards, and the recognition.

One day I had a panic attack at work. My boss pulled me aside, and I still remember exactly what he said: "Ariel, you're great at coping. But there's going to come a point at which you're going to collapse."

He meant it as a warning. At the time I heard it as a compliment. Great at coping. That was my whole identity. I could take anything that happened to me, put it in a box, stack the box neatly on top of the others, and get back to work. And because I got back to work so well, everybody rewarded me for it, including me.

He was right, though. The boxes exploded.

This book is about that moment, the one where everything looks fine from the outside and feels like nothing on the inside. If you are a founder, a leader, a top producer, a parent who holds the whole house together, or anyone who has been rewarded your entire life for how well you perform, this book is for you. Through my programs and the speaking events and workshops I've been brought in for, I've worked with around 2,000 people. I work mainly with men in this place, and selectively with women too, and I can tell you the pattern doesn't care who you are. It cares how well you've been trained to succeed.

Here is the first thing I want you to hear: you are not broken. The disconnection you feel is not a defect. It is the predictable cost of a strategy that worked. The traits that built your success are the same traits that took you away from yourself. Once you can see that clearly, you get to keep the competence and come home to the person who was doing all that succeeding.

It's never about the thing. Let's go find out what it's actually about.

CHAPTER 1

Checkmark Syndrome

I have a name for what most high achievers are living in. I call it checkmark syndrome.

It goes like this. You set a goal. You hit it. You feel something for about a day, maybe an afternoon. Then the feeling is gone and you're already on to the next one. Check mark, what's next. Check mark, what's next.

I used to compete in grappling and MMA, and over a few years I collected around forty medals. I could point to them on a shelf. And I can tell you honestly that almost all of them were checkmark syndrome. Win, next. Win, next. I never sat with any of it. I never let myself feel proud, because proud would have meant stopping, and stopping meant I might have to feel everything else I'd been outrunning.

Back when I was still training clients, a podcast host asked me what makes elite performers different. I told him they see something, they want it, and they will do anything to get it. Then I said the part I didn't fully understand yet myself: that same drive can turn into a sense of never feeling good enough. You never revel in what you've done. It's just another thing you check off the list. I was very guilty of that, and so were many of the athletes I worked with. Because they never sat in it, they were always chasing the next best thing.

Checkmark syndrome lives in one sentence: "I'll be happy when." I'll be happy when I hit the number. When I make partner. When the house is paid off. When the business runs without me. The goalpost moves the second you touch it, because the goalpost was never the point.

The opposite of "I'll be happy when" is "I'm happy now." That isn't a slogan. It's a skill, and most of us were never taught it. We were taught that satisfaction makes you soft, that if you enjoy the win you'll stop winning. So we learned to hurry past every good moment we earned.

If you recognize yourself here, I want you to try something. Think of the last big win in your life. Not a small one, a real one. Now ask yourself honestly: how long did it feel good?

If your answer is "a day," or "I don't really remember feeling it at all," you're not ungrateful and you're not weird. You have checkmark syndrome. That's information, not failure. And information is where change starts.

CHAPTER 2

It's Never About the Thing

If there is one sentence I've said more than any other on podcasts, in client calls, and to myself, it's this: it's never about the thing.

It's never about the surface level. There is always something deeper underneath. And if you don't address it, you are putting a band-aid on a bullet wound, and you will end up in the same situation again and again.

Every goal you have is a feeling in disguise. You don't actually want the revenue number. You want what you believe you'll feel when you hit it: safe, respected, free, finally enough. You don't want the title. You want to stop feeling like you have to prove yourself in every room. The tangible thing is how we chase the intangible thing underneath it.

I once came across a man's story that I've never forgotten. He spent twenty years working toward a Lamborghini. He finally bought it, drove it off the lot, and felt a void. Twenty years for a void. Because the thing he was seeking was never the car. It was love. It was worth. It was the feeling of being enough without having to earn it.

I hear the same thing from clients in a hundred different forms. People who lost the fifty pounds and put it back on within a couple of months because they felt exactly the same. People who tell me, "I built this million-dollar business and I'm still empty and disconnected, and my family hates me."

That isn't because they did something wrong. It's because nobody told them that the thing they were chasing was never going to deliver the feeling they were chasing it for. They were conditioned to believe it would. They adopted that belief, internalized it as their own, pursued it with everything they had, and then wondered why the finish line felt hollow.

Here's the good news hidden in that. If the feeling is what you really want, you don't have to wait for the thing to have it. When I sit with clients, I often take them into what they're actually seeking. Not "what do you want," but "what do you want to feel?" And when they let themselves feel even a little of that now, something shifts. The mind starts working backward from the feeling instead of grinding forward toward the object. It starts asking, "What would create more of this in my real life?" That's aligned action. That's a completely different way to build than white-knuckling your way to the next checkmark.

So when you set your next goal, ask one more question before you start: what do I expect to feel when I get there? Write it down. That's the real goal. The rest is a route.

CHAPTER 3

The Identity You Built to Survive

Everybody thought I was a badass. I had an amazing physique that everyone aspired to. At one point I was walking around at eight percent body fat for two years, and everybody thought I looked amazing.

I felt like absolute garbage.

I still remember my own thought process. What I was known as, around town, was the trainer with the shredded legs. And I couldn't let them go. Not because I loved them, but because if I let them go, who was I?

That's the thing about identity. We build these personas because at some point they kept us safe. I created the badass trainer, the one made of iron, and then I'd go home and cry myself to sleep many nights. There was a lot of self-hate underneath that iron, a lot of grief I wouldn't look at, including running from my mother's bedside when she was dying. The persona wasn't a lie exactly. It was armor. And it worked, right up until it didn't.

You probably have your own version. The one who always closes. The one who never needs help. The provider. The fixer. The calm one in every storm. These aren't bad. Many of them are genuinely beautiful parts of you. The problem comes when you confuse the role with the person wearing it.

I like to say that an identity is like a hat or a coat that you decide to put on. You're the father, the business owner, the CEO, the hardworking mom. You can wear that hat with your whole heart. But you are not the hat. You are the awareness that is observing the hat. You can step in and out of it as you choose, and your worth and value have nothing to do with it.

When I say that on stage, I can usually feel half the room tense up. Because if you're not the hat, then what happens when the hat comes off? This is where people get scared, and honestly, they should know what they're signing up for. When you start to loosen an identity you've held for a long time, you sometimes realize that the things you thought you wanted, you never really wanted. They were a byproduct of the role.

That's not a loss. That's the beginning of choosing.

And here's what I want you to know about what comes next. When you let an old identity loosen, you don't become nobody. A new way of operating starts to come forward. It's still not the whole of you, but it's closer, and it's chosen instead of inherited. When people start to build small wins from that new place, the mind gets a little evidence that this is safe, and it relaxes its grip on the old armor. Not all at once. A little at a time, and that's exactly how it should be.

Here's a simple practice. Finish this sentence five different ways: "I am a..." Then look at the list and notice how many of those answers are things you do. Now ask, "Who is the one doing all of those things?" Don't rush to answer. Just let the question sit. That small gap between you and your roles is where your life starts to open back up.

CHAPTER 4

Hustle as a Disconnection Technique

I want to be really clear about something, because people get this wrong about me. I am not against hard work. I love my clients. I work a lot. I've been told I'm always working, and I laugh, because when you're doing what you love, it doesn't feel like work.

So this chapter is not about telling you to work less. It's about where you're coming from when you work.

A podcast host I respect once pushed back on me about hustle and grind. He works seven days a week and he loves it. And I told him what I'll tell you: you always want to ask what someone means by hustle and grind. For him, it came from alignment and passion. But for the majority of people, hustle and grind is a disconnection technique.

It's never what we're doing. It's always where we're coming from in doing it. Are you using this as an avoidance mechanism, or are you doing it because you enjoy it and you know it's part of your path? The calendar can look exactly the same. The motive changes everything.

Here's how to tell the difference. When you stop, what happens? If you take a quiet Sunday and feel restful, curious, maybe a little bored in a good way, your work is probably coming from a healthy place. If you take a quiet Sunday and feel anxious, guilty, restless, or like something terrible is about to catch up with you, that's a sign your work has become a place to hide.

I've noticed that even good things can become hiding places. Gratitude, for example. I love gratitude. But I've seen it become a coping mechanism too. People who came from hard places sometimes say, "This is good enough compared to where I came from," and they settle. They use gratitude to avoid wanting more, because wanting more means risking more, and feeling more.

The same is true of fitness, of family, of service, of faith. Any of them can be a way home or a way to avoid home. It depends on the intention behind it.

I've also watched how often hustle is really about noise. Some of us, especially those who grew up in chaotic homes, don't feel safe in stillness. The mind says, "I have to keep doing things, or something bad will happen." So we keep the volume up: the podcast in the car, the phone at dinner, the extra project nobody asked for. But the stillness is where the magic is. It's where you finally hear what you actually think, and what you actually want.

So I'm not going to ask you to quit anything. I'm going to ask you to audit one thing. Pick one recurring commitment in your week, a standing meeting, a nightly habit, the way you answer email at 10 p.m. Then ask yourself honestly: am I doing this from alignment, or from avoidance? If the answer is avoidance, you don't have to burn it down today. Just notice it. Noticing is the first crack of light.

CHAPTER 5

The Invoice Arrives

Burnout is a hot, trendy word right now. People use it to mean "I'm tired" or "I'm stressed." But what I see in high performers goes deeper than a bad week, and a vacation won't fix it.

Here's what I believe happened to most of us. We were validated for how we showed up. Top of the class. Honor roll. Number one on the team. None of that is bad. But somewhere along the way, a child learned that love, worth, acceptance, and the freedom to be themselves came from outside, from performing. And a child who learns that will chase it until they die, because it feels like survival.

So we keep chasing. And eventually the body sends an invoice.

For me, the invoice came in 2019. I collapsed to the floor like a stone. I was taken to the ER and couldn't move my body for hours. I was what I'd later call "the yes girl." I had sacrificed myself for the better part of a decade, saying yes to everyone but me, and my body finally said no for me.

I'm not a clinician, and I'm not going to diagnose anybody. But I can tell you what I've watched over and over, in myself and in the people I work with. The invoice tends to show up quietly at first. Your mood swings more than it used to. You're tired in a way sleep doesn't touch. You get sick more often. Your back goes out. Your patience with the people you love gets shorter. You plan to go to the gym at four, and somehow it's 3:30 and then it's 4:30 and you never went, and you can't explain where the hour went.

I'd also say that almost everyone today has some sort of low-grade addiction. The phone. The scroll. The extra drink. The constant busyness. Not because people are weak, but because we all seek comfort, and when we can't create a good feeling inside ourselves, we go looking for it outside.

People can say anything they want about their priorities. But they vote with their screen time and their bank statement. When a client tells me they want something, I sometimes ask where their money and their attention actually went this week. It's not an accusation. It's a mirror.

These signals are not proof that you are failing. They are your system telling you something it has been trying to tell you for a while. The body is wise. We've been conditioned to believe it doesn't know what it's doing, when it's giving us information every single day.

So this week, instead of overriding the signal, get curious about it. When the restlessness or the craving or the exhaustion shows up, ask: what am I not dealing with right now? You don't need to fix it in the moment. Just ask the question, and listen.

CHAPTER 6

Non-Essential

A note before you read: this chapter talks about a time I seriously considered ending my life. If you are in that place right now, please reach out today. In the US you can call or text 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. Outside the US, please contact your local emergency number or crisis line. You don't have to face it alone.

In my twenties, I watched half my family die. That included taking my mom off life support. I watched a friend get shot. I lost another friend to an overdose. I was homeless for a time. And I did what so many high achievers do with pain: I ran from it. For years.

I ran straight into work. That job at Gold's, the one where I was number one in the company multiple times, was my coping mechanism and my identity. It was the one thing that gave me stability, or at least the illusion of it, for eight years.

Then 2020 came, and I was labeled non-essential.

Not only was I out of that job, I was forced to sit with over a decade of everything I'd been running from. There was nowhere left to go. No sessions to fill, no team to lead, no awards to chase. Just me and all of it.

On a rainy day, three days before my birthday, I sat with a decision. I owned a gun, and I had a plan to end my life if facing what I'd been running from didn't work. For forty-eight hours I was in heavy contemplation.

What made me try was my sister. Our mom had already passed, and I could not leave her alone.

So I chose to face it. It was the hardest thing I have ever done, and it was the best decision I have ever made.

Afterward, I hired my business mentors, and my life turned 180 degrees. I found people who taught me how to sit with what I'd been avoiding and move through it instead of around it. In that same season I built my business. I went from the physical side of training into the deeper work, the emotional and behavioral side, because that is where I saw lasting change actually happen.

And I healed it. I want to be clear about that, because it matters. I haven't had any issues since 2020. My entire behavioral profile changed: how I respond to stress, how I handle

pressure, what I reach for when things get hard. The person who sat with that decision on a rainy day doesn't run my life anymore. What I did to heal is exactly the work I do now, and it's built into everything in my business.

I tell this story carefully, and I tell it because I know some of you reading this are closer to that edge than anyone around you knows. High performers are very good at looking fine. We were the ones nobody worried about.

I also tell it because "non-essential" turned out to be one of the most important labels I was ever given. The death of that identity was the birth of my real life. I often say the first death is the hardest. Every identity you let go of after that gets a little easier, until eventually it stops being suffocating and starts being interesting.

You don't have to wait for a pandemic, a collapse, or a crisis to begin. That's the whole reason I do this work. I want you to hear the whisper before it has to become a shout.

CHAPTER 7

Whose Life Are You Living?

One of my favorite questions to ask a high achiever is this: whose goals are you following?

People carry so many preconceived notions, standards, and ideas about what success has to look like. And when I ask where those came from, a lot of the time they're borrowed. A parent's dream. A coach's expectation. A culture that says the bigger number is always the better number. Then people wonder why the things they pursue have no fulfillment when they finally get there.

Here is something I see over and over. Someone tells me they want to change something, and they really mean it. But either they don't understand the real commitment involved, or the thing they say they want is actually someone else's thing. It has nothing to do with the feeling or experience they actually want to be in. They just assumed that achieving it would deliver the feeling.

So I ask questions that cut through the noise. Two of my favorites:

First: how would you show up for yourself, and what would your life look like six months from now, if judgment, rejection, expectation, money, and time didn't exist? I let people simmer on that, and some really beautiful things come out that they didn't even know were in there, because they'd been looking outside themselves for so long.

Second: what would you do if money was no object? You'd be surprised by the answers. And we don't have to make that the main income stream overnight. We just ask, how could we start doing something around that, even a little, and see where it goes? I've seen entrepreneurs completely change direction from that one conversation.

Notice that neither of those questions asks you to quit your job or blow up your life. They ask you to remember what's yours.

Your goals are allowed to change. You are not the same person you were when you set them. Holding yourself chained to an old version of success, one you set at twenty-five or that someone set for you, will keep you from becoming who you actually are now.

So take five minutes this week with that first question. Write down what you'd do in the next six months if judgment, rejection, expectation, money, and time didn't exist. Then circle the one thing on that list you could start, in a small way, this month. That's not a

fantasy. That's a direction.

CHAPTER 8

Keep the Competence, Lose the Chase

When people realize they've been living with checkmark syndrome, the first instinct is often to swing to the opposite extreme. Burn it all down. Quit the job, sell the business, move to the mountains.

Sometimes that's right. Most of the time, it isn't necessary. I never tell people to change their lives. I help them create real awareness, and then they decide. Some realign. Some rebuild. A few do burn it down, and a year later they're happier than they've ever been. But the point isn't the outcome. The point is that it's finally their choice.

You don't have to give up being excellent. Your drive, your discipline, your ability to perform under pressure: those are gifts. What changes is the fuel. Instead of running from something, you start moving toward something. Instead of earning your worth, you bring your worth with you into the work.

When that happens, something surprising occurs. The work gets easier. Not because it's less demanding, but because you're not fighting yourself the whole way. If you're coming from an aligned place, it doesn't even feel like work.

I want to leave you with something I said years ago, back when I was still mostly a trainer and didn't fully understand my own words. When people fail at something again and again, they start to believe they're broken. We're not broken. We're trying to do something that isn't inherent to who we are.

That's still true. You are not broken. You were well trained. You learned to win, to cope, to keep going. Now you get to learn the next skill: feeling the life you built.

Here's what that looks like in practice for the people I work with:

- They still set big goals, but they write down the feeling they're after before they write down the number.
- They notice when they're working from avoidance, and they stop long enough to ask what they're avoiding.
- They let wins land, out loud, with the people who helped them get there.
- They take one quiet block of time each day where nothing is being produced, and they don't apologize for it.

None of that makes them less effective. In my experience, it makes them far more effective, because they're no longer spending half their energy outrunning themselves.

Start small. Notice your next win and let yourself stay in it for one full minute before you move on. Feel it in your body. Let it count. That one minute is where checkmark syndrome begins to loosen its grip.

CLOSING

Come Home to the One Doing the Winning

If you've read this far, I'll guess that something in here landed a little close to home. That's a good sign. Discomfort is usually the first thing you feel right before you feel anything real.

Here is what I hope you take with you. Your success was never the problem. The disconnection was the cost of a strategy that kept you safe and productive for a long time. You can honor that strategy and still set it down. You can keep the competence and lose the chase.

You don't need a crisis to start. You need one honest question, asked in a quiet moment, and the willingness to listen to the answer.

Bring this talk to your team. *Checkmark Syndrome* is also a keynote for leadership teams, sales organizations, founder communities, and wellbeing events. If your people are high performers who are winning on paper and running on empty, I'd love to talk with you about bringing this message to them. Reach out through arielzeigler.com or call 661-400-8672.

If you want to go deeper. At Heart N Sole Wellness, home of Rewired mentorship, I work one-on-one and in small groups with high performers who are ready to come back to themselves. **Wellness From Within** is where many people begin: building the foundation to feel steady in your own body and life again. **Rewired** is my mentorship for high achievers who want to untangle the patterns underneath the success and lead their lives from the inside out. There's no pressure and no hard sell. If something in this book stirred you, you're welcome to reach out and have a conversation.

With love,

Ariel

FOR EVENT PLANNERS

Keynote Summary

Talk title: Checkmark Syndrome: The Hidden Cost of Being Great at Coping

The big idea: The traits that make high performers successful (coping, achieving, checking the box and moving on) are the same traits that disconnect them from themselves. Burnout and numbness aren't signs of being broken. They're the predictable cost of a strategy that worked, and you can keep the competence while getting your life back.

Three takeaways

1. **Name your checkmark.** Recall your last big win and ask how long it felt good. If the answer is "a day," that's checkmark syndrome, and it's information, not failure.
2. **Find the feeling under the goal.** For every target, ask what you expect to feel when you hit it. That feeling is the real goal, and you can start building it now.
3. **Audit where you're coming from, not what you're doing.** Pick one recurring commitment and ask: alignment or avoidance? Same calendar, different fuel.

Ideal audiences: Leadership teams and executive offsites; sales organizations and top-producer events; founder and entrepreneur communities; corporate wellbeing and burnout-prevention programs; ERG and professional association events for high-achieving men and women.

Format: 45 to 60 minute keynote, or a 90 minute interactive workshop with guided reflection.

Booking: arielzeigler.com | 661-400-8672