

Praise for AT CAPACITY

“In At Capacity, Capt. (ret.) Reyné O’Shaughnessy brings aviation wisdom down to earth—reminding us that sustainability is not weakness; it is wisdom. This book isn’t about slowing down. It’s about flying well—with room to breathe, think, and truly live.”

–Amy Spowart Sprout

President, National Aeronautic Association

“At Capacity is an essential guide for anyone accustomed to running flat out. Reyné O’Shaughnessy clearly explains the metabolic, psychological, and emotional cost of operating without margin and offers a practical roadmap for restoring health without lowering professional or personal standards.”

–Jane Kirkland

Broadridge Executive Head of Asset Communication

Former Senior Vice President, State Street Corporation

Former Partner, McKinsey & Company

Modern medicine has mastered acute intervention but often overlooks the biology of sustainable human performance. In “At Capacity”, Reyné O’Shaughnessy offers a framework medicine urgently needs: margin is not weakness—it is safety.”

–Dr. Michelle Thompson

Lifestyle Physician, UPMC

“As a wealth advisor and mother of three balancing career, family, and health, At Capacity felt deeply personal and incredibly timely. Reyné O’Shaughnessy brilliantly connects aviation’s safety margins with the pressures women face every day. This isn’t just a book—it’s a practical guide for creating the space every high-achieving woman needs.”

–Nicole K. Szakos

Wealth Advisor, Carson Wealth

“This book refuses to romanticize overextension. It challenges the belief that competence requires depletion and reminds women that clarity - not constant endurance - is the path to living fully inside our own lives.”

–Amy Thompson

Mother of Five Boys

“At Capacity is a powerful reminder that resilience doesn’t mean carrying everything alone. Reyné O’Shaughnessy gives women permission to pause, set boundaries, and rise again with clarity and courage. This is the kind of book that makes women feel seen and heard.”

–Melanie Taylor

Co-Host, The Bubba Show, 100.7 STAR Radio

AT CAPACITY

Reclaim Your Margins and Your Life
in a World that Glorifies Overload

Reyné O' Shaughnessy

At Capacity: Reclaim Your Margins and Your Life in a World That Glorifies Overload

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Introduction

You didn't fail. You adapted. You endured. You coped the only way you knew how. Now it's time to remember: You're not a machine; you're a human being ... and being human is not the problem; it's the whole point.

—Reyné O'Shaughnessy

(inspired by authors Emily and Amelia Nagoski)

If you're here—with the book open in your hands, ready to dive into these pages—then you're likely that strong, accomplished woman who holds it all together. The one who shows up, gets things done, holds space, meets deadlines, and makes things happen—no matter what it costs physically, mentally, or emotionally. And you're probably brilliant at it. You've built a life others admire, maybe even the one you once dreamed of savoring.

Yet beneath the accomplishments and accolades, you're tired. Not just end-of-the-day weary, but rather, *soul-level* weary, the kind that sleep can't resolve. It's the resulting weight of carrying too much for too long—from performing flawlessly on the outside while quietly coming undone within; from pushing through when your body whispers—then screams—for you to stop. Can you hear it? Perhaps, in a silent moment that no one else witnesses, you've dared to ask the question that terrifies you most: *Is this what success is supposed to feel like?*

If that resonates, you've come to the right place because this book is definitely for you—not the polished, invincible version that others applaud, but the one staring at the ceiling at 2 a.m. with your heart pounding and mind racing, wondering: *How much longer can I keep going like this?*

You're not alone. More women than ever are holding leadership

roles, building businesses, raising families, and juggling an impossible load ... all the while wondering why it doesn't feel like enough. Recent studies from McKinsey¹ and Deloitte² show that women are burning out at a higher rate than men, especially in high-demand fields like healthcare, tech, aviation, academia and law. The pressure to maintain composure, perform with emotional fluency, multitask without pause, and care for others without compromise only compounds the problem, according to research by the National Academy of Medicine³, the American Psychological Association⁴ and a book on the topic published by Harvard Business Review Press⁵. It's no wonder why so many women—especially those who appear to “have it all together”—are quietly coming undone.

In my role as a retired commercial airline captain, executive consultant and founder of the Aviation Health & Wellbeing Institute, I hear real-life versions of this scenario all the time. One client who had just stepped away from a high-level role in the technology industry said it best when I asked what finally made her walk away from the coveted position that she'd worked her whole life to earn:

“I realized I had everything I ever wanted ... and I felt nothing,” she remarked, with a blank look on her face. “I felt hollow. No joy. No relief. Every day was always just about the next push.”

If that's not a signal that something is out of alignment, I don't know what is. Her words mirror the quiet confessions of countless others who have unwittingly fallen into the trap of celebrating “outer world” achievements while ignoring the cost to one's inner peace and sense of wellbeing. In fact, this mindset is part of a larger societal phenomenon that I have observed for decades. Collectively, the culmination is that we have reached *maximum capacity* and we don't know how to find our way out. The constant pace, pressure to perform, and endless noise and distractions—it's all feedback from a society wired for productivity over people. This relentless churn has left us depleted. As part of western civilization, we've been living a machine mindset for so long—ever since the Industrial Revolution turned our lives into cogs in an unyielding engine—that we've forgotten how to be human and pause without guilt or penalty. We're continuously living in our margins, and we desperately need

to learn how to “do life” another way.

At Capacity is about finding our way back to the simple things that restore us, like staying curious and rediscovering what brings us joy. Right now, we’re not accustomed to even knowing how to replenish our reserves—not because we’re incapable of doing it, but because the cultural script hasn’t taught us. That’s what we will explore in these chapters—not just the cost of pushing through, but the power of pausing and reflection; not just the cause of burnout, but restoration; and not just how to survive success, but how to redefine it on our own terms.

The premise of *At Capacity* was born at my own edge of brilliance and burnout, resulting in a personal tailspin that I barely pulled out of it. After having lived it and survived it, I feel compelled to share what I’ve learned. My career has given me the advantage of a unique perspective, having spent decades in high-stakes environments—from aviation to leadership consulting—that glorify altitude, speed and output, even at the expense of health. The hustle is real, and so is the adrenaline rush. It becomes addictive and it’s hard to stop and give our nervous systems a pause, especially if no one points this out and encourages us to do so. Having flown more than 10,000 hours as a commercial pilot over a span of 35 years, I’ve witnessed up close how performance without margins eventually leads to collapse—again, because we are not machines. Today, as a professional speaker and executive consultant, I encounter hundreds and hundreds of brilliant, capable women who are on that same collision course. Yet I’ve also seen the incredible transformation that becomes possible when women start flying with intention, grounded in recovery, with margins built into the process.

What I’ve ultimately learned through it all is that being at capacity isn’t a personal failure, but rather, a state of “no space left.” It’s a message from your body, mind and spirit pleading for a course correction. While *At Capacity* is also not a research paper, hard science is woven throughout the narrative, which blends reflection, real-life stories (including some of my own), and practical strategies to help you reset and remember who you are. Mostly, it will help you build a life that includes your health and wellbeing as a foundation,

not an afterthought.

To be clear, what I'm introducing in these chapters isn't about abandoning excellence; it's about making it sustainable. In **Part One**, we delve into the hidden mechanics of overload, exhaustion and burnout, and examine psychological traps such as Imposter Syndrome and the Dunning-Kruger Effect that drive self-destructive overperformance. We'll break down the biology and how chronic stress reshapes the brain, spikes cortisol, and disrupts the stress cycle. Then I'll share why I believe women are especially vulnerable, due to systemic issues like Human Giver Syndrome and hormonal shifts in midlife that amplify the strain.

Part Two traces the roots of our overload culture, revealing how historical and societal forces have conditioned us to praise constant productivity. We'll time-travel back to the early 19th century (when this mindset was born) and dismantle common burnout myths to help us rewrite the narrative and reclaim a human-centered approach to high performance.

Part Three offers a compassionate roadmap for recovery and renewal, with a focus on rest, decluttering our mental/emotional spaces, reconnecting with our purpose and joy, redefining success to include wellbeing, and building support networks. Also scattered through the chapters are practical tools and action items that serve to help us reset, recover capacity and ensure long-term resilience.

You won't find quick fixes here. This isn't a "drink more water" pep talk, or a "just do a bubble bath and face mask" survival guide while Rome burns. Yes, we'll talk about self-care, but not as trendy wellness hacks. We'll go deeper into what it truly takes to recalibrate your reserves—emotionally, physically, and spiritually. We'll focus on rebuilding trust with yourself so you can come home to your humanity.

This book contains the wisdom that I wish someone had imparted to me before I dangerously hit my limit. So, as you lift off into these chapters and practices, I want you to know up front: You are not broken. You are not weak. You don't need to crash to earn your soft landing. You no longer need to prove your worth through exhaustion.

AT CAPACITY

Sit back, relax into these pages, and allow yourself to reset, refuel, breathe, and begin again. After all, your journey is far from over, and the sky is waiting for you to reclaim it—lighter, stronger, and fully alive. Welcome aboard. I'm so glad you're here.

PART I

UNDERSTANDING THE
ANATOMY OF BURNOUT



CHAPTER ONE

The Psychology Behind Pushing Limits: When High Performance Becomes Self-Destruction

I didn't see the warning light. It was supposed to be a routine wellness check and just another mundane box to tick off my never-ending "to do" list. I had just flown an all-night domestic route—one of many dark-to-dawn hauls I flew each month—and was on my final leg back into Pittsburgh International Airport, landing the jet just as the first rays of sunrise spilled across the tarmac. After handling post-flight checks and pushing through the fog of fatigue, I'd driven home and napped for a few hours before squeezing in a doctor's appointment then racing straight to retrieve my boys from school. That was my normal back then, just another high-wire act between sky and ground, balancing altitude with everyday life.

Once in the doctor's office, the intake nurse wrapped a digital blood pressure cuff around my arm, the kind with the old-school gauge and rubber balloon. I wasn't paying much attention ... until she frowned and moved to grab my other arm.

"Let's try this side," she said, forcing a casual tone. "Hold on ... I'll be right back."

She left the room then reappeared a few minutes later with the doctor. The small talk lasted just long enough for him to reach for the manual cuff that was still on my arm. That's when I sensed something was wrong. The doctor rewrapped it tightly, pumped the balloon, and watched the numbers climb. With a flashlight in hand, he looked into my eyes.

"How do you feel?" His tone was solemn.

“Fine,” I replied nonchalantly. “I feel fine.”

Then he spoke the words that changed everything.

“You are sick, Reyné. Your blood pressure is 180/120. You’re at risk of a stroke. You need to get to the hospital now.”

I sat there, stunned and motionless. As many women could similarly confess, my mind didn’t go to concerns about my health. It went to denial first, then straight to my responsibilities. *Who would handle everything when I couldn’t? Who would pick up the slack if I was unavailable?* I had spent so much time pushing forward that I never considered until that moment what would happen if I had to stop. That’s what women who give everything ... Type-A women ... do. We keep going ... until we can’t.

Next, another realization hit me: If I went to the hospital and was officially diagnosed with something, I could lose my ability to fly due to the strict medical standards that aviators have to meet to stay airborne, which are set by the Federal Aviation Administration. Yes, this career that I had built over decades was my livelihood, yet flying was more than a job. It was the one thing holding my whole world together. I wasn’t a single mother, but it often felt like I was. My husband and I both earned well, yet he believed that meant we should keep our incomes separate and split the household bills down the middle. On paper, it made sense, but in real life, it felt like I was carrying more than my share—financially, emotionally, and logistically. I felt like no one had my back.

When it came to care and childcare for my three sons, especially when I was flying, the responsibility fell squarely on me. As the “default parent,” I was the one who made their doctor appointments, helped with homework, coordinated pickups, found backups, set alarms and carried the weight of “just in case.” I couldn’t afford to fall and break because no one was standing there to catch me.

So that day in the doctor’s office, I did what I had always done: push through. I stood up, looked the doctor squarely in the eyes, and announced:

“I don’t have time for this. I’m a very busy woman, you know!”

THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND PUSHING LIMITS

An expression of disbelief came upon his face as he asked if I had someone who could come and pick me up. “I don’t think you should be driving a car.”

“No!” I snapped. “Didn’t you hear me? I don’t have time for this!”

The doctor insisted that I lie down while they called an ambulance to transport me directly to the hospital. He turned off the light in the exam room and closed the door behind him, hoping that I would relax. Can you guess what I did next? Only a few minutes later, I got up and bolted out of the office, ran to my car, and started for home. I don’t remember the drive, but I do recall the fear that I felt; the sheer, unshakable terror of knowing that the life I had built—the career I had fought for, the routine I had mastered—was possibly about to come apart at the seams.

That night, lying in bed, my body screamed for rest, but my mind raced. *What happens now? How did I get here? Have I been ignoring this all along?* Something had to change, because I wasn’t just burned out. I was “hard down,” as we say in the aviation industry, referring to the fact that an aircraft cannot be operated until it is repaired; and more serious repairs, like a crack in the engine, can take months, in some cases. I didn’t go to the hospital the next day, though I should have.

In hindsight, the doctor was absolutely right. Even though that routine wellness check didn’t turn out to be a dramatic medical event like a stroke or heart attack at that moment in time, it was a turning point. I honestly wasn’t feeling well and knew I had to see a cardiologist or other health specialist. At the same time, I knew that in my line of work, I had to be careful who I consulted with, as a medical paper trail could have professional consequences.

It just so happened that a few days after that doctor visit, I was scheduled for a routine cleaning at the dentist. As I made myself comfortable in the dentist’s chair, the hygienist asked how I’d been. I surprised both of us by spilling the whole can of beans: the fatigue, the sleepless nights, the sense that something just wasn’t right. I even confided in her about what had happened in my doctor’s office.

She listened carefully then said, “You need to meet Dr. Frannie

Berez. She's a board-certified functional medicine physician. She can help you."

I soon scheduled an appointment with Dr. Berez, who ordered a series of blood tests that were not covered by insurance, yet told the full story of my health. She confirmed what the first doctor had warned me about: I was very sick (I'd had a mild stroke) and was lucky it wasn't worse. That was the moment when my denial ended. It was no longer a vague warning that I could tuck away and ignore; this was a hard line in the sand between the life I'd been living and the one I needed to start building. With her guidance, I made lifestyle changes that stuck.

Her recommendations may sound simplistic, like when doctors advise "eat your vegetables," but here's what I did: I stopped flying at night, got serious about sleep, learned what "real" food is, exercised, practiced mindfulness, and began saying no (something I had rarely done). Most importantly, I began to ask deeper questions about what I truly valued and what my success had cost me. I began a new life chapter, one that eventually led to being inspired to write my first book, *This is Your Captain Speaking: What You Should Know About Your Pilot's Mental Health*, then my second, *Navigating the Skies of Success: A Collegiate Aviator's Guide to Mental Wellness*, and now my third (this one). It took time and a lot of honesty to name what had really been going on.

As I began to piece things together, I realized that my state of relentless overdrive wasn't just about ambition or survival instinct. I was trying to outrun something I hadn't yet named. I'd been pushing so hard for so long due to deeper forces I hadn't yet understood. Later, as I began researching the psychological and biological underpinnings of burnout, what I discovered was both validating and eye opening: I wasn't alone. In fact, two well-documented cognitive patterns helped to explain exactly why I (and so many other women who carry it all) end up on the edge of collapse: Imposter Syndrome and the Dunning-Kruger Effect.

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