

THE OPERATING MANUAL OF YOU



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The Physics of the Mind

THE FIELD MANUAL

THE 15-MINUTE EDITION

Isaac Trevor Cohen

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The Operating Manual of You. The complete concept: all twenty-four states, the six families they belong to, the protocols each one actually asks for, and the table that ends most unnecessary misery. Fifteen minutes, honestly spent.

It is three in the morning and you are awake with a feeling you cannot name.

It is not quite fear. It is not quite sadness. It sits behind the sternum and will not answer questions. You were taught the names of clouds at school - cumulus, stratus, cirrus - and nobody ever taught you the names of your own storms.

So you do what everyone untrained does with unnamed weather: you fight it. Snap out of it. Push through it. Fix it. And it gets worse - not because the feeling is strong, but because you have just made the oldest mistake in the inner world. You ran the wrong protocol against the state you are actually in. You told grief to hurry. You told scatter to try harder. You gave boredom a phone. You prescribed a holiday for a containment breach. Every one of those is a real tool, applied to the wrong weather, and the mismatch - not the weather - is where most ordinary misery comes from.

Here is the whole book in one sentence. **Your inner states are not malfunctions to fix or moods to manage - they are the same physics that builds the universe, running at the scale of one mind. Every state is a phase doing**

its work, and most misery is running the wrong phase's protocol against the state you are actually in.

This book does not promise happiness. It promises literacy. Different products. Only one survives a hard year.

The red line, first

This is a manual of states - the ordinary weather of an ordinary mind. It is not a book about disorders. Where a state has hardened into a climate - depression that will not lift, anxiety that will not release, anything touching harm - this framework sits beside professional help, never in place of it. Every cosmic comparison in the full book carries a tag: mechanism (the physics genuinely parallels), metaphor (it illuminates but does not literally apply), or off-limits (clinical territory; the framework stops at the door and holds it open). Walking through that door is not failure. It is the strongest move in the manual.

The wheel, in one page

The universe builds everything through six phases, and Book One of this library maps a life onto them: collapse forges raw material (Forge); contraction ignites scattered matter (Gravity); mass slows time around itself (Relativity); long-lived stars burn steadily where bright ones explode (Engine); unstable configurations cross to stable ones

(Stability); and mature systems turn from taking to tending (Endgame). This book runs the same wheel at the scale of a single mind, because every state you have ever felt belongs to one of the six phases - and the phase tells you what the state is FOR. Forge states process collapse. Gravity states concentrate. Relativity states re-price time. Engine states regulate burn. Stability states hold you through the unstable middle. Endgame states point accumulated capacity at service. Twenty-four states, four per family, arranged in a ring around the wheel. Here is the entire ring.

The Forge states: what collapse feels like from inside

Shock is the held breath between the collapse and the feeling - in a supernova, the core falls before the light arrives, and the sequence is the same in you: numbness first is not denial malfunctioning, it is arrival order. The protocol is not analysis; shock does not answer questions. It is warmth, safety, and time - the container, assembled early.

Grief is heavy-element formation: loss forging things in you that nothing else can make. The research is blunt that the tidy five-stage story is folklore - real grief comes in oscillations, waves that space out over time without ever fully stopping, and the forging is real: capacities for depth, for presence with other people's pain, that the unbroken do

not carry. The protocol is a container and time, and the refusal of every deadline, including your own.

Rage is pressure without a container. The difference between detonation and fusion is never the pressure; it is always the containment. Rage's protocol is not venting (which rehearses it) and not suppression (which stores it), but walls: time, distance, movement, and the naming of the actual grievance - pressure directed becomes work.

Numbness is the cooled crust over a hot interior - lava fields crust over while the melt runs underneath. Feeling nothing after too much feeling is a phase, not a failure. The protocol is patience and gentle heat: contact, routine, small sensation. The crust is doing a job; do not jackhammer it.

The Gravity states: attention and its captors

Scatter is the diffuse cloud that cannot ignite - twenty tabs, thirty projects, nothing hot. The wrong protocol is willpower; the right one is mass: remove bodies from the system until one pull dominates. You do not focus your way out of a cloud. You contract your way out.

Obsession is gravity that overshot - contraction without a stable orbit, the thought you circle at 3am that produces nothing. The test between obsession and healthy absorption is output: absorption builds, obsession only orbits. The protocol is not "stop thinking about it" (attention cannot

subtract, only redirect) but a competing mass: one absorbing alternative, physically enforced.

Decision paralysis is a three-body problem. With three comparable pulls, physics itself finds no stable closed solution - your seizure is not weakness, it is correct maths. The protocol is ejection: remove one option by any honest means, and the remaining two resolve.

Absorption is ignition - the first sustained burn of real focus. It arrives quietly, feels suspiciously easy, and is fragile for the first weeks. The protocol is protection: do not spook it, do not audit it, do not schedule a celebration in the middle of it.

The Relativity states: the felt speed of time

Boredom is flat spacetime - nothing massive enough nearby to bend your minutes, which is why they stretch enormous. The wrong protocol is stimulation, which is why the phone makes boredom worse at scale. The right protocol is mass: one dense thing, not fifty light ones.

Nostalgia is old light. Some of the stars you can see tonight have changed beyond recognition or died since their light left; you are seeing what was, not what is. Nostalgia works the same: the place, the era, the person you long for has moved on or gone, and what reaches you is old light. The protocol is to love the light without mistaking

it for the source - honour it, and turn back to the sky you are actually under.

Dread is time dilation before an event - the horizon that slows everything as you hover at its edge. The protocol is almost embarrassing: approach. Horizons only dilate time for those who hover. The meeting requested today, the test booked, the conversation had - dread deflates on contact with its object.

Flow is the gravity well from inside - hours collapsing into minutes because you finally got close to something dense. Decades of research, built on tens of thousands of experience samples, mapped its conditions: clear goals, immediate feedback, a challenge at the edge of skill. The protocol is architectural: you cannot summon flow, but you can build the room it reliably visits - and defend the room.

The Engine states: energy and its debts

Burnout is a containment breach, felt from inside. The fuel is present; the walls are gone. This is why rest alone so often fails - rest without rebuilt walls refills a leaking bucket. The protocol is walls first: the sleep window re-fenced, the workday re-bounded, the phone exiled from the bedroom - then rest, which suddenly works again. I met the breach at twenty, nine or ten months into a cold-calling job, when a panic attack arrived carrying the news that the headset and the whiteboard felt like the rest of my life. The fuel was fine. The walls were gone. What fixed it was not a

holiday and not more hustle; it was rebuilt containment and a redirected burn.

Momentum is the well-fed engine. It feels suspiciously easy, and capable people routinely spook it by auditing it mid-run. The protocol: keep feeding it, stop interrogating it, and bank the surplus - momentum is when you build the reserves the next winter will spend.

Rest-guilt is the star apologising for not being a supernova - mistaking your own recovery cycle for theft. The physics is unambiguous: recovery is not the pause between work; it is a phase of the work. A red dwarf meters its burn to what it can radiate, and that metering is why it outlives everything. The protocol is reclassification: rest goes in the engine column, not the indulgence column, and it stops requiring an excuse.

Envy is radiative loss - your energy leaking toward someone else's light. It is also the most useful state in this family: a compass wearing an insult as a coat. Envy points, with embarrassing precision, at what you actually want. The protocol is to read the bearing, drop the resentment, and redirect the leaked wattage into your own build.

The Stability states: the unstable middle from inside

Stuckness is usually a shell filling. In nuclear physics, stability arrives when shells complete - and from inside, the

filling feels like nothing happening. The plateau where practice seems wasted is often structure completing beneath the surface. The protocol is continued reps plus honest measurement over a longer window; quitting at the plateau is abandoning a shell at ninety percent.

Threshold fear is the wall before the island - the last step that outweighs the previous thousand. Its signature is that it spikes precisely when the goal comes into view. The protocol is to expect it (fear at the threshold is confirmation, not warning) and to shrink the step: the smallest possible crossing, taken this week.

The imposter state is a stable nucleus that believes it is unstable - a measurement error, not a material one. The protocol is recalibration, not accumulation: no new credential fixes a broken gauge. Outcomes on paper, witnesses consulted, the instrument checked instead of the self attacked.

Restlessness is stability arriving before your story says it should - the itch that mistakes peace for stalling. Sometimes the itch is real signal (a next phase calling); often it is just the nervous system missing its old chaos. The protocol is the ninety-day test: hold the stability deliberately for a season, and see whether the itch matures into direction or dissolves into comfort.

The Endgame states: capacity looking for a direction

Purposelessness is the extractor's flat curve felt from inside - the asymptote as an emotion. The thousandth win landing duller than the first is not depression; it is data. The wrong protocol is a bigger target. The right one is a different curve: from taking to tending. The state is not saying you are broken. It is saying a phase is finished, and phases are supposed to finish.

Legacy hunger is the pull to scatter what you forged - enrichment as instinct. It often arrives disguised as restlessness in the successful. The protocol is to obey it concretely: one mentee, one institution, one handoff document begun.

Awe is the state that recalibrates scale - the night sky doing in one glance what no productivity system can do in a year. The research finding is consistent: awe shrinks the self's felt size and grows generosity. The protocol is dosage: put yourself under something enormous - sky, ocean, cathedral, mathematics - on purpose, regularly.

Contentment is the long peace as a daily state: enough, held without apology. It is the hardest state on the ring for ambitious people to tolerate, which is why the final book of this library exists. The protocol here is simply recognition: contentment is not the absence of drive. It is drive, finally arriving home.

The wrong-protocol table

The manual's most useful page, compressed. The state: what people usually run - what the phase actually asks.

Shock: questions - warmth and time. Grief: deadlines - a container. Rage: venting or suppression - walls and a named grievance. Numbness: forced feeling - patience and gentle heat. Scatter: willpower - fewer bodies. Obsession: thought-stopping - a competing mass. Paralysis: more analysis - ejection of one option. Boredom: stimulation - one dense thing. Nostalgia: return trips - love the light, face the sky. Dread: avoidance - approach. Burnout: a holiday - walls first, then rest. Rest-guilt: pushing on - reclassify rest as engine. Envy: shame - read the compass. Stuckness: quitting - reps plus longer measurement. Threshold fear: retreat - the smallest crossing now. Imposter: more credentials - recalibrate the gauge. Restlessness: blowing it up - the ninety-day hold. Purposelessness: a bigger goal - a changed curve.

Misery, most of the time, is not the state. It is the mismatch.

Two people in the weather

Theory is cheap at 3am. Watch the manual work on the public record.

Nick Cave lost his fifteen-year-old son in 2015, and instead of disappearing, he eventually began answering fans'

letters in public, writing about grief with a precision almost nobody manages from inside it. What his letters describe, again and again, is Forge physics run properly: he did not rush the state or perform recovery on a schedule; he let grief do its forging inside a container built of work, marriage, and correspondence - and what it forged is visible. His writing about loss now steadies strangers by the thousand. The grief did not shrink back to nothing; it was pressed into capacity, exactly as heavy elements are pressed into being. That is what a Forge state produces when nobody tells it to hurry.

And for the Gravity family, recall the plague year: Isaac Newton, sent home from Cambridge in 1665, was a scattered undergraduate with a notebook full of borrowed questions. Enforced isolation removed every competing body from his system - no colleagues, no curriculum, no city - and the diffuse cloud contracted into the most productive eighteen months in the history of thought. He did not find focus. Focus is what happens when the other masses leave. The protocol was written into the quarantine.

A day inside the manual

Here is what literacy looks like on an ordinary Tuesday, the only test that matters.

You wake at 6am with dread about a 2pm meeting. Old protocol: avoid thinking about it, which hands the horizon seven hours to dilate. New protocol: approach - you send

the agenda question at 6:40am, and by 7am the dread has deflated to a task. Mid-morning brings scatter: nine tabs, three half-tasks. Old protocol: try harder. New protocol: fewer bodies - two tabs survive, the phone goes to another room, and by 11am the first pull of absorption arrives, which you protect by refusing a “quick call”. At 3pm, after the meeting went fine, envy pricks: a peer announced something shiny. Old protocol: an hour of resentful scrolling. New protocol: read the compass - the envy points at public speaking, which you actually want, so the leaked wattage becomes an email volunteering for next month’s forum. At 9pm, rest-guilt arrives on schedule. Old protocol: open the laptop to feel virtuous. New protocol: reclassify - rest is the engine’s intake stroke, and you take it without apology.

Nothing dramatic happened. That is the point. Weather arrived all day, was named, placed, and answered with the right protocol each time - and the day belonged to you instead of to the storms. Multiply that Tuesday by a decade and you have most of what people mean when they call someone steady.

The steelman

The serious objection: *this is astrology for people who read popular science - pattern-matching feelings onto physics they superficially resemble, and re-labelling emotions does not change them.*

Three answers. First, the tags exist precisely because the objection is partly right: every comparison in the full book is marked mechanism, metaphor, or off-limits, and the metaphors never pretend to be mechanisms. Second, naming is not nothing - affect labelling is one of the sturdier findings in emotion research: putting accurate words to a state measurably reduces its grip. A field manual is a naming technology. Third, the protocols are not derived from the stars; they are drawn from the human evidence - grief research, attention research, recovery research - and the wheel is the filing system that makes them findable at 3am, which is the only time that matters. If a comparison ever stretches past its evidence, the tag says so in the margin. Test the protocols against your own weather. Keep what holds.

The fifteen-minute practice

Tonight, when a state arrives - one will - run the three moves.

Name it. Not “bad” or “off”. The actual state, from the ring: dread, scatter, rest-guilt, old light. The nervous system settles when weather gets a name.

Place it. Which family - Forge, Gravity, Relativity, Engine, Stability, Endgame? The family tells you what the state is for, and a state with a purpose is already half its former size.

Run the phase's protocol, not your default. Container for Forge. Mass for Gravity. Density or approach for Relativity. Walls and metering for Engine. Recalibration and small crossings for Stability. A changed curve for Endgame.

Then, once this week, the full audit: write down the three states you visit most often. Place each on the ring. Beside each, write what you usually run against it, and what its phase actually asks. Those three substitutions, practised for a season, are the whole literacy - and literacy compounds for the rest of your life.

The last word

You will never control the weather. That was never the offer. But there is an enormous difference between a sailor who reads the sky and one who curses it - and the difference is not the storm.

Your states are not the enemy of the life you are building. They are the physics of it, arriving one phase at a time, each carrying instructions. The storm was never a malfunction. It was a phase doing its work.

Now you know which one. And now you know what it asks.

Book Two of the Protocol Library. The full volume gives each of the twenty-four states its own chapter, with the

research, the case files, and the complete wrong-protocol table.