

Addicted to Achievement? The Science of Disconnect in Type A Leaders

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Why high-performing leaders risk “checking out” and how to stay driven without driving yourself into the ground

You know the type. Up before dawn. Inbox at zero. Leading three projects while half-training for a marathon. Always moving, always achieving, always “on”. And on the surface? Thriving...

We’ve been seeing more and more of these leaders at **The Work Psychologists** lately. From senior execs to startup founders, our coaching and therapy sessions are filled with high-performing professionals who technically are doing brilliantly. But under the surface?

Exhaustion. Disconnection. A creeping sense that the very drive that once made them successful is now... hollow.

One client summed it up perfectly:

“I’m still performing — but I’m not present. It’s like I’ve mentally checked out, but I’m too busy to deal with it.”

This is the **Type A trap** and it’s more common than you might think.

What Is a Type A Personality, Really?

The term “Type A” was coined in the 1950s by cardiologists Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman, who linked certain personality traits competitiveness, urgency, high hostility with **higher rates of heart disease**.

While psychology has since moved on to more nuanced models like the **Big Five**, the term “Type A” has stuck especially in business. It’s become shorthand for people who are:

- Relentlessly driven
- Achievement-focused
- Impatient with inefficiency
- Perfectionistic
- Time-urgent
- Often uncomfortable with rest

Type A personalities are often seen as *ideal leaders*. They take charge. They deliver. They push for excellence.

But that push can quietly become unsustainable.

What We're Seeing in Practice: "High-Functioning, Checked-Out"

At The Work Psychologists, we've noticed a sharp rise in what we call "**checking out**" particularly among high-achieving leaders. These aren't people who've crashed or collapsed. They're still productive. Still showing up. Still on paper looking "fine". But inside? Something's shifted.

They describe it like this:

"I feel like I'm watching my own life on fast-forward." "I'm doing everything, but none of it feels meaningful anymore." "I'm exhausted but I can't justify stopping."

They're not burning out in the dramatic, fall-apart sense. They're **quietly disconnecting** from their work, their purpose, and sometimes even themselves. And the dangerous part? This version of checking out is easy to miss. Even harder to name. But left unaddressed, it starts to erode everything that made them effective in the first place.

The Biology Behind It: Why Type A Feels the Way It Does

This isn't just a mindset problem. There are deep **biological processes** behind why Type A personalities struggle to switch off and why they're prone to checking out when the system finally hits overload.

Let's break it down:

Hyperactive stress response

Type A individuals tend to have heightened **sympathetic nervous system activity** the "fight or flight" response. That means faster reactivity to stress and slower recovery after.

Cortisol overload

Prolonged time pressure and hyper-responsibility lead to chronically elevated **cortisol** levels. That's linked to:

- Poor sleep
- Impaired memory
- Increased inflammation
- Cardiovascular strain

Amygdala dominance

In a state of ongoing stress, the brain's emotion centre the **amygdala** hijacks the rational brain, making it harder to pause, reflect, or regulate emotional reactions.

Dopamine addiction

Type A brains often thrive on **dopamine**, the chemical reward for achievement. The problem? Dopamine isn't satisfaction it's anticipation. Which means once one goal is met, the itch starts again.

So it's no wonder that many Type A leaders get stuck in "**go mode**", long after their bodies and minds are asking them to slow down.

The Strengths of Type A And Why They're Not the Problem

Let's be clear: there is nothing wrong with being Type A.

In fact, many of the qualities we see in our most effective clients are classic Type A traits:

- Clarity of vision
- Relentless execution
- High standards
- Resilience under pressure
- A deep commitment to growth

A 2020 study in the *Journal of Leadership & Organisational Studies* found that achievement-oriented individuals are **more likely to be promoted and rated as effective leaders** especially in results-driven environments.

But when these traits go into overdrive (Hello Lumina Spark, our favourite personality psychometric which neatly points out overextensions!) we start to see issues like:

- Micromanagement
- Perfectionism paralysis
- Overworking as identity
- Irritability or withdrawal
- Difficulty trusting others

The result? Leaders who are doing everything but enjoying nothing.

Signs You May Be “Checking Out”

So how do you know if your high-functioning drive is tipping into dangerous territory? Here’s what we look for in our work with leaders:

- You’ve lost your spark, even if you’re still achieving
- You feel detached from your team, your goals, or even your own emotions
- You’re constantly tired, but wired
- You resent work you used to enjoy
- You feel like you’re performing a role, not living your life

It’s subtle. And it often creeps in over time. But it matters because **disconnection kills effectiveness** long before it impacts performance metrics.

Can a Type A Change Without Losing Their Edge?

Yes and no.

You don't need to become a Type B leader (whatever that means). You *do* need to develop **range, recovery, and reflection**.

In our work, we support Type A leaders to build new internal operating systems ones that still honour their ambition, but don't require them to sacrifice wellbeing or presence.

Here's what actually works:

Mindful micro-pauses

Forget 60-minute meditations. Try **60-second resets**. Body-based mindfulness has been shown to reduce cortisol and boost executive functioning even in high-stress environments.

Cognitive behavioural coaching

We work with leaders to challenge the scripts driving overwork:

"If I slow down, everything will fall apart" ... becomes... "My best decisions come when I'm not rushing."

Transactional Analysis (TA)

TA helps uncover unconscious drivers like "Be Perfect" or "Don't Feel" common among Type A leaders. Once identified, these patterns can be reprogrammed.

Somatic work

We help clients tune back into the body signals they've learned to override. That might sound fluffy, but it's deeply practical. Emotional clarity starts with physical awareness.

We've seen hundreds of leaders reclaim their energy, presence, and decision-making power by learning how to **shift from overdrive into intentional momentum**.

If You're Leading Others: Your Patterns Are Contagious

One reason we focus on this work? Because Type A habits don't stay personal they set the tone for entire teams.

We've worked with leaders whose teams showed high output but low innovation.

Why? Because the culture rewarded **urgency, perfectionism, and performance at all costs**.

When leaders learn to model boundaries, calm, and reflective decision-making, something incredible happens: **people feel safe enough to take real ownership** not just execute under pressure. Your pace becomes their pace. Your emotional presence becomes permission for theirs.

The Type A Reframe: Ambition with Self-Respect

Being Type A isn't the issue. Being **disconnected from yourself** is.

You can keep the drive. Keep the high standards. Keep the edge.

Just don't lose touch with:

- Why you started
- What matters now
- And what it costs to keep pretending you're "fine" when you're not

So here's a question we often ask our clients — and one we'll leave with you:

Is your drive still serving you or are you just serving the drive? Over to You
Have you ever experienced that quiet slide into disconnection while still performing at a high level?

We'd love to hear what helped you course-correct. Or what you're still figuring out.

Tag someone who might need to read this. Or share a moment that helped you stop, reset, and re-engage fully.

Tag someone who would benefit from reading this for themselves or someone they work with!

Further Reading & Resources

- Friedman, M. & Rosenman, R. (1974). *Type A Behavior and Your Heart*
- Sapolsky, R. (2004). *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*
- Maslach, C. & Leiter, M. (2016). *Understanding Emotional Exhaustion at Work*
- Harvard Business Review: "The Case for Doing Less as a Leader"

Five Key takeaways

- High-performing leaders can look successful on the outside while quietly disconnecting on the inside — still delivering, but no longer fully present.
- Type A drive isn't the problem; the danger comes when relentless achievement replaces recovery, reflection, and meaning.
- “Checking out” often shows up before burnout — as emotional detachment, loss of purpose, and constant tired-but-wired energy rather than collapse.
- Biology plays a role: chronic stress, dopamine-driven achievement cycles, and an overactive threat response make it hard for high achievers to slow down without support.
- Sustainable leadership isn't about losing your edge — it's about building ambition that includes self-respect, recovery, and presence.