

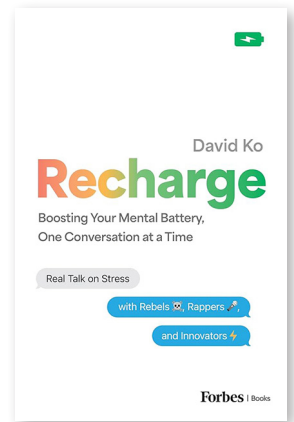


Executive Book Summaries[®]

Recharge

Boosting Your Mental Battery,
One Conversation at a Time

by **David Ko**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

We pay more attention to our phone battery than to the inner battery that powers our mind and body. And this is one of the biggest causes of the most widespread disease of our century: stress.

In his book, *Recharge: Boosting Your Mental Battery, One Conversation at a Time*, David Ko argues that if we paid as much attention to our inner energy levels as we do to our phones, we would be much better, both mentally and physically. Working for Calm, the company behind the well-known mindfulness app, Ko had the opportunity to understand how technology can be both friend and foe when it comes to our mental health.

In this book, Ko argues that we need to give up the stigma of talking about mental health issues at the workplace, and use technology to help us monitor our mental wellbeing, instead of letting it add up to our stress levels.

IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY:

- Learn to use the battery model to evaluate your level of stress.
- Discover helpful ways to recharge your battery, both at work and at home.
- Understand the dangers of being hooked on social media all the time.
- Learn how to discuss mental health with your family, friends and coworkers.

Introduction

I had my first panic attack when I was fourteen. I remember taking a shower to see if the water would help the tightness in my chest go away. I couldn't breathe, and all I could think about was trying to "power through."

But now I work for the most mindful company in the world: Calm. Our mission is to help everyone on every step of their mental health journey. I decided to write a book to share my journey to guide and encourage all of us to take care of the batteries that run our lives: our brains.

The mind is the ultimate battery. Traditionally, we think of the brain as a supercomputer, able to handle decisions, calculations, and movements in a fraction of a second. But every supercomputer needs an energy source, and the mind's battery frequently gets overlooked. We take it for granted most of the time.

Until now.

Chapter 1: Our Batteries Are Depleted

Our world today operates at a hyperkinetic, twenty-four-seven pace. We struggle with anxiety, high rates of depression, addiction, and burnout. But oftentimes, we plaster on a smile and "power through". We don't have the conversations we should be having. When someone asks, "How are you?" our usual response is "Fine."

We need to change that.

It's helpful to think of this in the universally understood context of our phones. We all have these computers in our pocket and—let's be honest—are obsessed with their battery levels. If everyone can check in on their mental health whenever they check their phone or laptop battery, we'd all be better off.

When you see your phone battery hovering around 20 percent, you start to feel a little bit anxious. Yet how often do you check your mental health battery, that battery within that is your power source, if we continue the analogy? We don't check in with ourselves nearly enough, if at all. Especially for busy people, mental health and wellness are often afterthoughts until that battery within is hovering near 5 percent.

The stigma around discussing our mental health adds to the constant cacophony of our twenty-four-seven world. I'm sure we've all heard someone say, "I don't have time for myself; I'm just too busy."

What we don't discuss enough is that mental health challenges are just as "normal" as any other medical concern. They can, and do, happen to anyone—everyone. But talking about it is easier said than done. Sometimes we don't have the vocabulary.

Sometimes it's that sense of stigma or embarrassment. However, when we have these conversations with each other, with our friends, with our families, when we simply are honest and assure ourselves and others, "It's OK to not be OK right now," we are all helping to ease that stigma.

These conversations don't have to be heavy or deep; they can start with a simple question. It's about being open and then listening in response.

Helping someone with their mental health is as easy as asking, "How can I help?" and it comes naturally to many of us. We're happy to ask peers and our families how we can lighten their load.

Keeping our own minds' batteries charged will not just help us with our mental health—it will help with our physical health.

Chapter 2: The Mind and Body

I am willing to bet that every single person reading this knows the physical manifestations that arise when their mental health is suffering. We'll discuss some of those in more detail, but physical symptoms could include:

- stomachaches and indigestion;
- headaches;
- fatigue;
- muscle tension, muscle aches, and pains;
- clenched jaw and teeth grinding;
- insomnia;
- rapid heartbeat, clammy hands, and chest tightness;
- dry mouth and inability to speak;
- frequent illnesses—colds, swollen glands, sore throat;
- cold or icy hands;
- forgetfulness.

The mind and body are intrinsically linked. If your thinking brain is stressing you out, chances are it's also stressing out your breathing, or other aspects of your involuntary nervous system.

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We all need to learn to listen to our batteries, to listen to our “guts” and our bodies as well. Those signs, like chronic headaches or those dreaded panic attacks, are like the canary in the coal mine, letting you know the signals that all is not well.

Check Your Battery: Your Mind-Body Connection

How does your body react to your mind's stress? It can look different for everyone. Do you lose sleep? Feel tension in your neck or lower back? Does your stomach tie up in knots? Think about how you personally hold onto stress in your body.

The following sections will offer plenty of suggestions, but as you read, consider how you recharge to keep your mind-body connection healthy and in balance.

Sleep

Smart sleep hygiene habits include the following:

- Keeping a consistent sleep schedule
- Creating a relaxing bedtime routine
- Creating a relaxing and soothing bedroom environment
- Exercising
- Getting sunlight during the day, if possible.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness begins with being aware. Being in the now. Being in what we ubiquitously hear people call “the present.” Mindfulness can also begin with being aware of the pace you are keeping. It begins with slowing down and just being present.

Meditation

Meditation can take many forms—from an athlete listening to music to prepare for a game to someone who does yoga first thing in the morning. Meditation does not have to look a specific way or be done perfectly or according to a set of rules in order for you to experience the health benefits of mindfulness, which can include:

- stress reduction, reducing the production of stress hormones;

- improved focus/concentration;
- better sleep;
- reduced anxiety;
- lower blood pressure
- pain management;
- enhanced feelings of well-being.

Exercise

Exercising—even walking a few days a week—helps to release feel-good hormones for our brains. But it also has positive effects on cardiovascular health, can help prevent osteoporosis, and even lowers the risk of certain cancers.

But in a chapter on the mind-body connection, I wanted to be sure to bring up yoga, tai chi, qigong, and other mind-body forms of exercise and tradition.

While yoga is the most famous practice to Westerners, tai chi is a gentle form of exercise sometimes called meditation in motion. Qigong also coordinates movement and breathing.

What About the Power of Prayer?

For many people, prayer is a spiritual practice that is especially important to them for taking a moment of gratitude and calming their mind—and hence their body. When it comes to prayer and its battery-charging power, especially in terms of the mind-body connection, I think what works for you is as unique as our own backgrounds.

While I was writing this book, I had an opportunity to sit down with Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy. He shared a story about speaking to an audience of high school students. He wanted them all to pause a moment and think of someone in their lives they wanted to thank—and compose a text.

Those gratitude texts may have made a roomful of students feel great, but the science is there—gratitude helps our mental health. It is a way to move through the world that helps us recharge our batteries and face adversity.

The Care and Feeding of Your Body and Brain

Healthy nutrition is essential for our mind-body connection. We have all heard the phrase “You are what you eat.”

Studies have compared “traditional” diets, like the Mediterranean and the traditional Japanese diet, to a typical “Western” diet and have found that the risk of depression is 25 percent to 35 percent lower in those who eat a traditional diet.

Chapter 3: Mental Health and the Workplace

We are not OK. What our hustle culture created is toxic resilience. True resilience honors your boundaries, understands your human limitations, and celebrates your ability to say no when needed. Toxic resilience, on the other hand, is productivity at all costs.

Even in the busiest workday, there are ways to give your mental battery a boost. Try these quick recharge techniques:

- **Walking meetings:** Suggest a “walk and talk” for your next one-on-one meeting.
- **Tech-free lunch:** Step away from your desk and enjoy your meal without screens.
- **Desk yoga:** Try simple stretches like neck rolls, shoulder shrugs, or seated twists to release tension and increase energy.
- **Positive affirmations:** Keep a list of encouraging phrases nearby. You can go back and read one whenever you need a quick mental boost.

As a leader, I have spent years—from my time in university—thinking about what kind of leader I wanted to be. Never has it been more important to be an intentional leader.

In my opinion, leadership begins with listening. Listening is about empowering your employees, building trust, gaining insights about what’s happening on the ground of your organization. And in this era of an increased focus on mental health in the workplace, active listening is also a building block for empathy.

So what are the traits of active listening?

- **Focus.** Pay attention to the speaker. Try to be present. Eliminate as many distractions as possible. Put down your phone.
- **Make sure your nonverbal clues reflect listening.** Don’t cross your arms over your chest or appear “closed.” Nod. Make eye contact.

- **Reflect or mirror.** “What I hear you saying is xyz ...” Repeating back or mirroring what the other person says (or what you think they said) affords the opportunity to clear up any mis-communications right away.
- **Empathize.** Try to acknowledge the feelings and perspective of the other person.
- **Do not interrupt.** Very often leaders are “bottom-line” people. Avoid the temptation to interrupt or finish the other person’s sentences.
- **Ask appropriate questions.** Asking follow-up questions that demonstrate a thoughtful approach to the discussion builds trust.
- **Recap.** In the workplace especially, it’s essential to finish with a recap of what was discussed and next steps.

Over the last few years (and even before that), I started thinking about that question of work-life balance, of mental health, and I started to make some intentional changes as both a leader and a person.

However, outside the pandemic bubble, I’ve been finding myself wondering if work-life balance is actually achievable. The world has resumed operations, and I can feel the extra travel days creeping back into my calendar. One thing that has helped me bring balance to my postpandemic life is having the vocabulary to talk about where I am and what I need.

What’s so interesting to me is once I started talking to people about recharging and the battery, somehow it seemed easier to understand. I am hoping, then, that helps with our next workplace issue—what happens in business when leaders don’t address mental health.

In certain professions (medical school residents, Wall Street, hospitality), the long hours and stress are almost the point. They’re almost like professional hazing.

However, we are increasingly seeing executives embrace the fact that caring for their employees’ mental health and well-being is not only just the good thing to do, but is actually also good for the bottom line. According to Population Health Management, mental health costs US companies \$200 billion a year in healthcare utilization and lost productivity.

By ignoring mental health in the workplace, we’re essentially trying to run high-performance machines on low power. It’s not sustainable, and ultimately, it’s not good for anyone—employees or employers.

As diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs gain trac-

By ignoring mental health in the workplace, we're essentially trying to run high-performance machines on low power.

tion, employers are seeking not only a diverse workforce, including people who literally think differently. There is probably not a person reading this book who does not know someone who is neurodivergent.

The challenge is to make sure that management and employees have empathy and realize that two people will never share the exact same thought process. It's our job as leaders to create empathy throughout the entire organization for one another, rather than trying to choose rigid qualifications and fit square pegs into round holes.

Chapter 4: Technology and Mental Health

Today, everything from watches to rings to fitness and mental health apps can provide real-time data that measure how we're doing. I see unprecedented potential in what technology can tell us about our health and in what ways it can support us in our mental health journeys.

When I was young, I used to travel to South Korea to visit family, including my grandmother. On one of my visits, I was struck by my grandmother's dining room table. My grandmother's table had become a sea of paper and Post-it notes. They were reminders—what time to take what medication, notes of things to remember to tell the doctor, blood pressure readings.

The sight of the table and the problem it represented rolled around in my head for a while—there had to be a better way. Technology could help; I was certain of it. Why couldn't an app make our healthcare portable and trackable?

When we use tech to gamify healthier habits, then we're making tech work for our lives, and not the other way around.

One of the things technology does is make a service that was hard to come by easier to access. We take for granted if we have a heart problem, we will be able to access a cardiologist relatively quickly. Yet somehow, when it comes to mental health, we see a very broken system.

Overall, financial barriers pose a considerable obstacle to accessing mental healthcare. This often forces individuals to forgo or delay seeking treatment, worsening their mental health conditions over time.

Our latest venture at Calm, a product called Calm Health, takes aim at systemic barriers within the healthcare system. Tools like Calm Health are a first line of defense. More than just making you feel better because it helps you check in on yourself and monitor how you are doing, Calm Health will also let you know if you may need to get professional help.

I always tell my kids to aspire being comfortable enough with yourself that you do not need social validation of who you are and your choices. When we do not do that, technology veers toward toxicity.

Every year, people around the world participate in a "Screen-Free Week." A few benefits of a digital detox include the following:

- **Reduced FOMO.** For many of us, we've gotten so used to being on top of the news, work, social media, that we have the fear of missing out. A digital detox can slow this down and offer a respite or cure for FOMO.
- **Better sleep.** Most of us know the blue lights from our cell phones are not conducive to restful slumber. This is why it's wise, even if you think you cannot do a digital detox for a day or week, to certainly do a digital detox for the hour or two before bed.
- **Increased productivity.** A digital detox can give you back uninterrupted time for better focus and productivity.
- **Improved mental health.** Relentless scrolling can increase anxiety and depression. A digital detox gives mental health a break from the impacts of blue light, doomscrolling, and the like.

Chapter 5: Our Biggest Mental Health Challenges

I want to examine some of the big mental health challenges

of our times, common to many of us. To the we.

Some of us thrive on stress. I do know there are different kinds of stress—and not all stress is bad.

There is the stress that wreaks havoc with our bodies. But there is also eustress. It is the “good stress.” Think of a new job you are excited to start—you feel a little anxious, elated, stressed, but it’s a motivating kind of stress that pushes you forward. Eustress keeps us motivated and working toward goals.

It’s when stress becomes chronic that it becomes unhealthy and can have an impact on your mental and physical health. It is the real drain on our mental health battery—like having way too many apps open all at once for a long time.

Burnout is that next level of stress. It is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged and excessive stress.

Just like some stress can be good, sadness is a healthy emotion. It’s OK to feel sad. Depression is different. It feels constant. You feel hopeless and worthless.

Recharging from depression requires a multipronged approach that may include medication, talk therapy, or even hospitalization. However, starting the conversation is the first step—remember the “we,” not the “they.” You do not need to be alone.

Anxiety is a natural response to stress, characterized by feelings of worry, nervousness, or fear about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome. While occasional anxiety is a part of life, persistent and excessive anxiety can interfere with daily activities and might indicate an anxiety disorder.

The symptoms of anxiety can be both psychological and physical. In terms of recharging, when you suffer from anxiety, you want a go-to technique that can help those feelings to subside.

When we’re stressed, we cope. Or at least, we try to. There are good ways of coping, and you already know there are some pretty bad ways too. Consider your coping skills. Some that work against us include the following:

- Substance use or abuse
- Denial (pretending the problem will go away is never helpful)
- Overeating or undereating
- Self-harm
- Isolating and withdrawing from friends and support
- Workaholism
- One of the problems with unhealthy coping skills is they can actually make problems worse. Ways to recharge that can improve your mental health include these:
 - Exercise (and it can be as simple as a thirty-minute walk three or four times a week)
 - Mindfulness
 - Meditation
 - Good sleep
 - Healthy eating (yes, I will advocate for eating a pint of ice cream to nurse a broken heart—but not every night for a month)
 - Connections—friends, family, group therapy, support or twelve-step groups, places of worship, etc.
 - Pursuing hobbies and other positive outlets for stress
 - Therapy
 - Talking with trusted friends

Chapter 6: The Difficult Conversations

Why are the conversations about our mental health so difficult?

We fear offending others. We fear not having the right words. We fear we are unequipped to say the right things.

We’ve all been on both sides of this equation: not wanting to speak up, for fear of others’ reactions, and avoiding the conversation for fear of saying the “wrong” thing.

Another reason we may avoid the conversation is that we may not have the words in terms of our own feelings. For people raised to be stoic, for example, they may not even realize when they are sad because they have been taught not to recognize or acknowledge those feelings. This can be especially common in people who have experienced trauma.

We say to each other, “You good?” We expect the answer to be, “Yeah, I’m good.” And then we move on.

What if we offered that space to the person we asked, “How are you?” What if their answer was “good”—and we followed up with “Great, how’s your battery level?” Now we may get a different answer. Now we have an obligation. We

might have to engage. We might have to problem-solve. We might simply have to offer compassion. But the conversation now requires something of us.

Conclusion: The Journey

It is my hope that this book has encouraged you to check your internal battery whenever you check your phone battery.

I hope you have conversations with those you love and care about, or those you lead at work, on how they are doing. Not the “You good?” variety, but with space and grace to truly listen.

And then it is my hope that you encourage those you have conversations with to continue their conversation with others.



David Ko is the CEO of Calm, a leading company in mental health and mindfulness. His extensive background in healthcare and technology has equipped him with a unique perspective on mental wellness. David's personal experiences with panic attacks and his professional journey from Wall Street to Silicon Valley have shaped his understanding of mental health challenges. At Calm, he leads a team dedicated to helping individuals improve their mental well-being.

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