Hands on the Wheel

A nervous-system guide for real estate agents, from The Autonomic Wheel

ROBERT FUGE

4:52 p.m., Friday. The inspection report lands in your inbox. Forty-one pages. You skim it in the parking lot with the engine running: *possible foundation movement, evaluate by structural engineer.* Your buyer's name lights up on the screen before you've finished the paragraph. Your chest is tight. Your thumb is already typing a reply. Somewhere in the back of your head, a voice has done the math on the commission, the closing date and the review they might leave.

Nothing has actually happened yet. One sentence in a PDF. And your whole body has gone to war.

I'm a broker. I've watched good agents burn out, and I've felt the version of that Friday that follows you home and sits at the dinner table with you. This guide is for that. It's free, and it isn't a teaser. Everything here works on its own, whether or not you ever read the book it comes from.

The tools take seconds to a few minutes. None of them are another thing to be good at. Use the ones that help and leave the rest.

Why this job hits so hard

Your brain isn't mainly a thinking machine. It's a prediction machine. Every second, it guesses what's about to happen and gets your body ready for it: heart rate, blood sugar, muscle tension, attention. When the guess is right, life costs very little. When it's wrong, your body pays for the miss. Your brain is about 2% of your body weight and uses about 20% of your energy, and a lot of that goes into predicting and correcting.

Your alarm system is built like a smoke detector. Psychiatrist Randolph Nesse pointed out that a smoke detector that sometimes goes off for burnt toast is a good design, because missing one real fire costs everything. Your nervous system made the same trade, 300,000 years ago. It would rather jolt you for a hundred rocks than miss one snake.

Now look at the job. Real estate is a road full of potholes. Appraisals, inspections, lenders, the other agent, the seller who changes their mind, the buyer who goes quiet. Your income arrives in lumps, on dates you don't fully control. Your phone can deliver a five-figure problem at any hour.

And the worst part isn't the bad news. It's the not knowing. In one study by Archy de Berker and colleagues, people played a game where turning over a rock sometimes meant a brief, painful shock. Their stress peaked not when a shock was certain, but when it was a coin flip. It was one lab study,

but every agent who has ever had a deal pending knows the feeling. A deal in escrow is a coin flip that lasts thirty days.

Every pothole is a bump you didn't see coming, and this job hands you a rough road, a heavy load and nowhere to pull over. So if you're tense, short with people, wired at 11 p.m. or flat on Sunday, here's the line from the book:

You're not broken. You've been running over capacity.

Your alarm is doing its job on a road that sets it off all day. You can't fill every pothole. You can learn to steer through them.

The wheel, in two minutes

The book uses one picture: a wheel.

The **hub** is your state, how your nervous system is running right now. The **ten spokes** are the things that hold you up. The **rim** is your daily life. The **road** is your environment: your phone, your calendar, your car, your office. A wheel can take a lot of bumps when the hub is steady and the spokes are strong. With a few loose spokes, even a small pothole knocks it out of true.

There's a small crew on board. The **Animal** is your body's alarm system, fast and loyal and not very subtle. **Autopilot** runs your habits. The **Narrator** is the voice on the GPS, explaining everything that happens, often wrongly. And there's you, the **Driver**: the part that can notice all of this and choose the next move. The goal isn't to get rid of the Animal. It's to keep your hands on the wheel while it's scared.

Four states, and the agent versions you'll recognize

When your hub wobbles, it tends to go one of four ways. The book calls them Overdrive, Underdrive, False Okay and Safe Enough. Agents have their own names for them.

Overdrive: Grind Culture Mode. Gas pedal down. Racing heart, fast talk, answering every text in ten seconds, three showings back to back with no buffer, fighting with the listing agent in your head while you shower. Grind Culture whispers, "If I slow down, someone else takes my business. Rest is for later." Clients love how responsive you are. Your body is keeping score. When you catch it, try: *"If I slowed down five percent, what would actually break? I'm allowed to land this day."*

Underdrive: Conditional Withdrawal. The brake. Heavy, foggy, numb. You stare at the CRM and can't make the call. You scroll. You cancel the open house prep "until tomorrow". It's conditional because you still show up for clients and emergencies, but inside you've pulled back from effort, risk and hope. Lots of agents run Grind Culture all week and crash into Withdrawal on Sunday. That isn't

a character flaw. It's the system hitting the brakes because the gas stopped working. Try: *"I'm overwhelmed, not useless. What's the smallest piece of progress I'm willing to make in the next ten minutes?"* One CRM entry. One text. One name.

False Okay: The Flipper's Special. You become your own renovation project. Polished floors, new appliances, gorgeous staging: the numbers, the reviews, the office award. Behind the walls, the same old wiring and a crack in the foundation. You're smiling at the closing table and clenching your jaw in the car. Agents are very good at this one, because the job rewards it, and it's the most dangerous of the three because nobody, sometimes including you, can see it. Try: *"On the outside I look fine. On the inside I'm tired. Both can be true."*

Safe Enough: Move-In Ready. Not a showpiece and not perfect. A few scuffs, a drawer that sticks, but the wiring is sound and you can live in it. You can hear bad news and still choose your words. This is the state you're driving toward, and it's reachable many times a day for a minute or two.

These modes aren't who you are. You're not "a grinder" or "lazy" or "fake". They're what your wheel does under load, and they can change in an afternoon.

Two quick questions make up the **Wobble Check**:

1. Which state am I in right now?
2. How bumpy is the ride, from 0 to 10?

That's it. Naming the state is the first move, because you can't steer a car you don't know is skidding.

Body first

When the alarm is ringing, you can't argue your way out of it. The Animal doesn't read. It listens to your body. So start there, and match the tool to the state.

If you're in Overdrive or Grind Culture (bring it down):

- **The physiological sigh.** Two breaths in through the nose, the second one a short top-up, then a long, slow breath out through the mouth. Do it two or three times. In a 2023 study by Balban and colleagues, five minutes a day of this kind of breathing lifted mood more than mindfulness meditation did. That's one study of healthy volunteers, so call it promising. It also costs nothing.
- **The long exhale.** In for 4, out for 6 to 8. A longer breath out nudges the brake side of your nervous system. You can do this mid-negotiation and nobody will know.
- **Hands on the wheel.** Before you start the car or answer the call, grip the steering wheel and push into it for ten seconds, then let go. Feel your back against the seat and your feet on the floor. At home or in the office, push against a wall instead.

- **Cold on the face.** Cold (not icy) water or a wrapped cold pack on your face for 15 to 30 seconds, breathing normally, triggers the dive reflex, which tends to slow your heart quickly. *Skip it, unless your doctor has okayed it, if you have a heart condition, a slow heart rate, very low blood pressure, Raynaud's, cold-triggered asthma, a history of fainting or an eating disorder, or take a heart-slowing medicine such as a beta-blocker.*

If you're in Underdrive or Withdrawal (bring it up gently):

- **Orient.** Look around slowly and name five things you can see. Let your eyes find the exits, the window, the light. It tells the Animal where you are.
- **Movement snack.** Two minutes of walking, stairs, shoulder rolls or shaking out your arms. Not a workout, just a signal that the body is back online.
- **Protein and water.** A surprising amount of "I can't face this" is "I haven't eaten since 7 a.m."
- **A small offer with a stopping point.** "I'll open the file and find the deadline. Then I'll decide whether I do another step." Keep the stopping point. Underdrive trusts promises it sees you keep.

If you're in False Okay, the Flipper's Special: Don't fix anything yet. Notice it. Unclench your jaw. Drop your shoulders. Say to yourself, "I'm not actually fine right now." Then pick whichever tool above fits what's underneath.

After any tool, ask one question: **same, better or worse?** Better, even a notch, is enough to make your next move. Worse means stop and try a different tool. Not every tool suits every body.

Read the voice on the GPS

Once your body has settled a notch, look at what the Narrator has been saying. Under pressure, it says things like *"This deal is dead," "They're going to fire me," "I'll never make my number this year."*

The book teaches three readings. When the voice says something that hurts, ask which one fits:

1. **Old map.** The voice is navigating from an outdated map: a past deal that blew up, a parent who yelled about money, the first year you nearly quit. *Move: test drive.* Check it against what's actually happening now.
2. **Wrong voice.** It isn't even your voice. It's a former manager, a coach on a stage, someone's Instagram. *Move: swap the voice.* Ask what someone who respects you would say.
3. **Road closed.** Sometimes the voice is right. The deal really is in trouble. *Move: reroute.* Accept the closure and find the next road.

Then say the **boring-true** version. Not a pep talk, just the plainest accurate sentence: *"The inspection found an issue that needs a specialist. I don't know yet how big it is."* Boring-true is calming because your brain can make a prediction from it.

If the thought still grips, try putting it at arm's length: "I'm having the thought that this deal is dead." It's the same words with a little distance.

And when the plan changes, borrow the word your GPS uses: **"Recalculating."** It doesn't panic or blame. It finds the next turn.

Before you blame your head, also run a **Weather Check**. Have I eaten? Slept? Moved? Been outside in daylight? Talked to a human who likes me? How's my body? Half the storms agents fight on the GPS are really a skipped lunch and five hours of sleep.

Six moments every agent knows

The inspection surprise

Run the reset before you reply. Thirty seconds of hands on the wheel and two sighs will make your next message better. Then read the whole report before you write a word, because the Animal reads the scariest sentence and stops.

What to say: "I've read the whole report. There are three items that matter and a lot that's normal for a 1978 house. Let's get a structural engineer out this week so we're working from facts, not guesses. I'll call you at ten tomorrow with options."

That message turns a coin flip back into a plan. You've given your client, and yourself, a prediction they can hold.

The deal falls through

This one hits as a loss and a surprise at the same time, and it often lands as Underdrive the next morning. Expect that. Don't make big decisions about your career, your brokerage or your marketing budget in the first 24 hours.

What to say to the client: "I want to give you the facts first, then the plan. The buyer's financing fell through. Here's what that means, and here's what we do next." Facts first is kind. It lowers everyone's alarm, including yours.

What to say to yourself: "It's heavy because it's heavy." Some things aren't distortions to reframe. The book calls them nails: real losses that hurt because they matter. You don't have to talk yourself out of feeling bad about a lost deal. Feel it, eat something, call your green person, and then reroute.

The demanding client

The client who texts at 10:40 p.m., wants answers you don't have yet, and gets sharper when you're slow is usually running on the same alarm you are. Their biggest purchase is a coin flip. Most "demanding" behavior is a person trying to reduce uncertainty.

So give them predictability before they ask for it.

What to say: "While we're under contract, I'll send you an update by six every evening, even if the update is 'no news yet.' If something urgent comes up, I'll call you right away. Can we try that for the next two weeks?"

When they still call at 9:15 p.m.: "Got it. I'm with my family tonight. I'll be on this at eight and you'll hear from me by nine." Then do exactly that. Being reliable is what makes a boundary hold.

That works best when it's set up front and backed by your team: "I check routine messages until six. After that, you'll hear from me first thing in the morning. If we have a deadline tonight, we'll plan for it today, and here's who covers for me if something urgent comes up." Agree on that coverage with your broker or team before you promise it.

And when you're the one who slipped, repair it plainly: "I missed the update I promised. I'm sorry. You'll have it by four, and I've set a reminder so it doesn't depend on my memory." Owning a miss quickly does more for trust than a perfect record nobody believes.

When you need a moment in a live conversation, buy time instead of promising: "I hear you. Let me check with the lender and get you a real answer by noon." That's a stall that still keeps faith with them.

Commission uncertainty

Lumpy income is a constant low-grade coin flip. The Animal doesn't care that you had a great quarter last year. It cares that the next check is pending.

Three things help:

- **Be honest about the math.** A calmer minute can't pay a bill. If a lost deal really does change what you can pay next month, say so, "This changes my next month," and then make the practical plan. What you can drop is the extra verdict, "so I'm a failure."
- **Make the floor visible.** Know your bare-minimum monthly number and how many months your reserves cover. A known number, even a scary one, is easier on the body than a fog.
- **Write a Lean Month page now, while you're okay.** One page: what you'll cut first, who you'll call, which three prospecting moves you'll do daily, and one sentence to yourself ("You've been here before, and you know what to do"). In a lean month, the Driver can't think clearly. Past you can.

- **Track pending as a probability.** Write "pending (70%)" instead of counting the money. It's more honest, and it takes the drama out of the drop when one falls through.

Constant notifications

Every ping is a tiny jolt, and the Animal checks each one for snakes. In a two-week experiment by Kostadin Kushlev and colleagues, people reported more inattention and restlessness with notifications on than when the same people silenced them. In a later study by Nicholas Fitz and colleagues, people who got notifications in a few batches a day felt better than people who took them as they came, and better than people who turned them off entirely and worried about what they were missing. Short studies, but they point one way: batching beat both extremes.

For an agent, try this:

- **A VIP list.** Clients under contract, your lender, your title rep, your broker and your family get through any time. Everything else waits.
- **Batch the rest.** Check email and portals at set times, say 9, 12, 3 and 5:30.
- **Tell people your rhythm.** "I return calls within two hours during business days." Clients rarely need instant. They need predictable.

Can't switch off

You're home, but your brain is still at the showing. You're answering texts at dinner and rereading the counteroffer in bed.

- **Make a transition anchor.** Before you walk in the door, sit in the car for one minute. Shake out your arms. Say out loud: "Work is over for today, even if it wasn't perfect." It sounds silly. It works because your body needs a signal, and a thought alone isn't one.
- **Build a landing strip.** Five to ten minutes, the same way every night, that tell your body *we're landing now*. Lights down, phone parked, one repeatable cue like the same song or the same stretch, then a few long exhales. Planes don't land at full speed.
- **Charge the phone outside the bedroom.** If you're on call for a closing, one ringtone for your VIP list and nothing else.
- **Have a 3 a.m. plan.** When you wake up rehearsing the deal, keep a notepad by the bed. Write the worry and the first step, then do a few long exhales. "It's on the paper. I'll handle it at eight."

Your spokes, in real estate terms

The ten spokes come in four families. Here's what they tend to look like in this job.

Foundation - **Safety:** money reserves, a pipeline you can see, a predictable floor, a brokerage that has your back. - **Body:** sleep, food that isn't a drive-through between showings, movement. - **Sensory:** noise, light, driving hours, screens. Your car is your office, so how does it feel?

Inner - **Emotions:** can you feel a lost deal without it running your whole week? - **Habits:** your systems, your CRM, the default moves you make when tired.

Connection - **Relationships:** people who know you outside the business. - **Authenticity:** can you be honest with clients and still keep them? Do you sell in a way you respect?

Aliveness - **Purpose:** why you do this beyond the check. Helping a family land, building a business that's yours. - **Play:** something with no goal, no metric, no lead source. - **Learning:** getting better at something, in or out of the business.

You don't need ten perfect spokes. You need enough strong ones that one bad week doesn't knock the wheel flat. Notice which two or three are loosest. On a bad day, swap "What's wrong with me?" for "Which spokes are loaded right now?" That's useful information, not a verdict.

Change the road

A lot of agent stress isn't inside your head. It's in the road you drive every day. The book looks at three layers:

- **Sensory:** the noise, glare and clutter around you. Hours in the car with a ringing phone. A desk under fluorescent lights. Small fixes count: sunglasses, a quiet hour, music you chose.
- **Time:** back-to-back showings with no buffer, deadlines stacked on Fridays. Build 15-minute margins between appointments. Put contract deadlines on Tuesdays when you can.
- **Access:** how easily the world reaches you. Every app that can ping you is a door. Close some doors.

Changing the road is often easier than changing yourself, and it lasts longer.

Duct tape

Most of what agents beat themselves up about is duct tape: a quick fix that does a real job. The drink after a closing. Doom-scrolling listings at midnight. Saying yes to every lowball referral. Eating in the car.

Duct tape isn't a character flaw. It's your system holding something together. The move is simple: **name the job, then find a cheaper way to do it.** The midnight scroll might be doing the job of "I need to feel in control of the market". A ten-minute review of tomorrow's plan at 6 p.m. might do the

same job for less.

One quarter-turn

Here's where most self-help goes wrong: it hands you a list of twenty habits. Don't do that to yourself.

A bicycle wheel gets trued by quarter-turns, a small adjustment to one spoke, then a check. So pick **one spoke**, the one that would give you relief, leverage or a little more aliveness, and make **one small change** for one week.

Then make it survivable:

- **Bare-minimum version.** If the change is a 20-minute walk, the bare minimum is walking to the mailbox. On bad days, the bare minimum counts.
- **No catch-up debt.** Miss a day and you just start again. Nobody owes back days.
- **A stopping rule.** Decide in advance when you'll stop or change the experiment ("If this makes my mornings worse after five days, I'll adjust it").

The book calls this **Try, Tune, True.** Try it, tune what doesn't fit, and only then lock it in.

You don't ride alone

Your nervous system calms faster near another calm nervous system. That's co-regulation, and it's why one steady person on the phone can bring your bumpy ride from an 8 to a 5.

Think about your people in three colors. Green people settle you. Yellow people are fine in small doses. Red people reliably knock you off balance, and some of them are clients. You can't delete red people from this business, but you can make sure you talk to a green one before and after.

Two tools for asking well:

A simple text. Agree with a friend or a colleague that either of you can send "Overdrive or Underdrive?" and the other replies with one word. It sounds small. It's a fast way to be known without explaining.

The four-move ask. When you need help, say what's heavy, what would help, what it gets you, and how you'll both know it worked: *"This closing week is crushing me. Could you cover my Saturday open house? It would give me one full day to reset before the walk-through. I'll text you Sunday to tell you how it went."*

And if this ever becomes more than stress, if you're having thoughts of not wanting to be here, please talk to someone today. In the U.S., call or text **988**. You'd tell a client the same.

Your first week

If you only do three things:

1. **Run the Wobble Check** at your first and last appointment of the day. State, and 0 to 10.
2. **Use one body tool** whenever the number goes above 6. Hands on the wheel, the sigh, or the long exhale.
3. **Fill out the State Card** on the *Recalculating* handout and keep it in your car visor.

The two handouts that come with this guide are built for exactly that: a two-minute reset for the hard moment, and a worksheet to map your wheel when you have half an hour and a cup of coffee.

Where this comes from

Everything in this guide is drawn from my book, *The Autonomic Wheel: Learning to Drive Your 300,000-Year-Old Body*. The book goes further: the full set of tools, how to map your own wheel, what the stress chemistry is actually doing, and charts that show which tool fits which state. If this guide helped, the book is the rest of the road.

Either way, keep your hands on the wheel. You were built for a smoother road. You can still learn to drive in this one.

Robert Fuge