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EPISODE NOTES • GUEST: DERMOT WHELAN

# Treat your stress like data

Dermot Whelan on panic attacks, busyness as a status symbol, and why curiosity beats willpower — in a real sense, the episode that started this podcast.

We built Pharma Prescribed on a simple observation: in an industry driven by data, protocols and pressure, we rarely stop to ask the human questions. This episode is where that idea came from. I first met Dermot Whelan at a conference in Prague in early 2025 — I was in the throes of my own grief at the time — and he closed his session with a short meditation on busyness that landed harder than anything else in the room. This conversation is, more or less, the direct result of that moment.

Dermot is one of Ireland's most recognisable broadcasters — a comedian, best-selling author and, for the last few years, a full-time meditation teacher who walked away from a chart-topping radio show at the peak of its ratings. His mission is deceptively small: make the techniques for calming your own nervous system simple enough that anyone will actually use them. Or, in his words, learn to "make friends with your stress response."



**Stress has a terrible marketing team.**

— Dermot Whelan, on Pharma Prescribed

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## Stress has a terrible marketing team

Dermot's central reframe is one most of us in high-pressure roles have never been offered. We're drilled on fight-or-flight — stress is bad, stress will kill you — and almost never told about the opposite state the body can drop into, rest-and-digest, which he cheerfully rebrands "Matthew McConaughey mode." The point isn't that stress is fine. It's that our *perception* of stress does much of the damage.

He cites a large US study of around 30,000 adults, later made famous by a well-known TED talk: people who reported high stress *and* believed stress was harmful were markedly more likely to die prematurely. The group who reported the same high stress but saw it as useful outlived everyone — including the people who'd tried to avoid stress altogether. The stress wasn't the variable. The story they told about it was.

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## The part a pharma audience should steal

Here's the line that made this a Pharma Prescribed conversation rather than a generic wellbeing one. Dermot's advice is to treat your own stress the way our industry treats a dataset: take the information, don't judge it, and see what you can transform it into. We're rigorous and non-judgemental with trial data and merciless with our own. His fix is curiosity — which, not incidentally, is the one behaviour that only shows up once you're *out* of a stress state.

It's practical, not abstract. He talks about "peace pinchers" — the small, personal, often invisible stressors that set the tone for a whole day. His own example is almost embarrassing: his fitness tracker showed his stress on stage in front of 2,000 people was low, while the daily scramble to leave the house registered at *double* that. The intervention wasn't a retreat. It was getting up fifteen minutes earlier.

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## Busyness is now the status symbol

Both of us have watched colleagues wear exhaustion as a badge of honour, and Dermot has the research for why. He points to Columbia Business School's Silvia Bellezza, whose work shows we now signal status through busyness — the 20-minute reply to "how are you?", the phrase "good busy." A century ago, status was leisure; the Downton Abbey set boasted about how little they did. Now "I have no time for myself" is the flex. Once you've seen it, as he warns, you can't unsee it in a single team meeting.

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## Protect the thing you'll cut first

The most useful operational idea for anyone running hot is his framing of recovery as non-negotiable infrastructure. The walk, the workout, the thing that resets you — that's a foundational block in your Jenga tower, and it's invariably the first thing we sacrifice the moment a "more important" Zoom appears. He runs off-work activities through a filter he calls DRAMA, worth keeping somewhere findable:

- 1 Detachment** — genuinely unrelated to the job
- 2 Relaxation** — it actually settles the system
- 3 Autonomy** — it's for you, not your boss or your kids
- 4 Mastery** — you're learning something, using a different part of the brain
- 5 Meaning** — it adds a sense of purpose
- 6 Affiliation** — you're doing it with, or for, other people

If your "downtime" ticks none of these, that's why you don't feel better after it.

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## Check in with your heart

Asked for his one golden rule in life and business, he doesn't reach for anything strategic. It's "check in with your heart" — brought down from the head for ten seconds before a decision. He's fully aware how that lands in a corporate room ("I've now lost half the room"), and says it anyway. The brain, in his framing, is a great servant of the heart and not much more.

We closed the episode the way we opened the friendship — with a sixteen-second box-breathing exercise, the kind the Navy SEALs call tactical breathing. It's the whole thesis in miniature: one small, repeatable signal to your nervous system that you're safe, deployable before the difficult conversation or the presentation you're dreading.

I'll be honest that this was not a detached interview to record. Dermot led with kindness toward me at a genuinely low point, and it changed the trajectory of what I do. If there's a takeaway for our sector, it's that the systems, standards and timelines all still depend on people who are regulated enough to think clearly. That's not soft. It's operational.



### Listen to the full episode

Dermot Whelan on Pharma Prescribed — at [pharmaprescribed.com](https://pharmaprescribed.com)  
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**Dermot Whelan** is a broadcaster, comedian and meditation teacher, and the author of *Mindful and Busy and Wrecked*.