

From SAS Operator to Longevity Medicine Pioneer

Matt Bunker's journey reads like a masterclass in reinvention - the kind that doesn't happen by accident, but through conscious, courageous choices made at critical junctures. Here's a man who withdrew from the world's most elite special forces selection course in 2007, spent five years wondering "what if," then wrote a letter cataloguing his own weaknesses to earn a second chance. He passed SAS selection at 30, served as an operator, transitioned into emergency medicine, and is now launching a longevity clinic that challenges conventional approaches to men's health.

What makes Matt's story particularly relevant for this audience is that he embodies what psychiatrist Carl Jung called "the afternoon of life" - that period where the metrics of success shift from climbing to meaning-making, from proving to improving. His trajectory mirrors the research of developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, who identified generativity versus stagnation as the central tension of midlife. Matt chose generativity - teaching, mentoring, building something that serves others - over the stagnation of remaining in familiar but limiting territory.

Throughout this conversation, we encounter themes that recur in longevity research: the protective power of purpose, the metabolic consequences of stress, the underestimated impact of hormone optimisation, and the cultural blind spots around men's health in midlife. Dr Peter Attia's work on healthspan versus lifespan provides useful framing here - Matt isn't just extending years, he's ensuring those years retain agency, vitality, and contribution.

The reflections and experiments below are designed for the listener navigating their own transition - whether from one career to another, from burnout to balance, or from default settings to deliberate design. As Matt's story demonstrates, the second half of life doesn't have to be about managing decline. It can be about strategic renewal.

1: The Strategic Withdrawal - Knowing When Retreat Is Advancement

In 2007, Matt sat on a sand dune during SAS selection, saw a family on the beach, and made a decision that would haunt him for five years: he withdrew. "I took all the food out of my pack and ate it all," he recalls. "I burnt the ships." What's remarkable isn't the withdrawal - it's that he returned to the same

challenge five years later, having turned that perceived failure into the foundation for success.

Psychologist Angela Duckworth's research on grit emphasises the importance of perseverance, but she also acknowledges that knowing when to quit is equally important - what she calls "strategic quitting." Matt's withdrawal wasn't weakness; it was alignment. He recognised that his values had shifted. Five years later, with two children and renewed clarity, he returned not as the same person but as someone who had integrated the experience.

This pattern appears throughout the research on successful midlife transitions: the ability to distinguish between quitting from exhaustion versus stepping back for recalibration. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck's work on growth mindset suggests that people who view challenges as opportunities for development rather than tests of fixed ability are more likely to persist strategically rather than stubbornly.

2: The Vulnerability Letter - Writing Your Way to Second Chances

When Matt decided to re-attempt SAS selection, protocol didn't allow it - withdrawals were permanent. So he did something extraordinary: he wrote a letter to the commanding officer cataloguing every weakness that caused him to fail and documenting how he'd addressed each one. The response was a single line: *"Captain Bunker, you are good to try out for selection again."*

This act embodies what researcher Brene Brown calls "daring greatly" - the willingness to be vulnerable not as weakness but as strength. In leadership literature, this is increasingly recognised as essential. Former Navy SEAL commander Jocko Willink writes extensively about "extreme ownership" - the practice of taking full responsibility for outcomes, including failures. Matt's letter demonstrated both ownership and growth, a combination that's rare and powerful.

What Matt discovered is what psychologists call "post-traumatic growth" - the phenomenon where people who work through failure often emerge stronger than those who never failed. His vulnerability wasn't just honesty; it was evidence of developed self-awareness, the ability to receive feedback without defensiveness, and the capacity to turn weakness into strength.



3: The Partner Conversation - Negotiating Your Non-Negotiables

Before Matt's second SAS attempt, he sat down with his wife Christie and said something most people struggle to articulate: *"Over the next 13-14 weeks, I need to come first."* This wasn't selfishness - it was clarity. And Christie, knowing the stakes and the timeline, agreed. Matt trained obsessively while she managed the household and two young children. He passed selection.

Relationship researcher Dr John Gottman's work on successful couples emphasises the importance of "bids for connection" and mutual support, but also acknowledges that relationships require explicit negotiation around competing priorities. What Matt describes is a time-bound, clearly defined agreement - not an open-ended demand. This is the difference between partnership and scorekeeping.

Many midlife transitions fail not because of lack of commitment but because of lack of conversation. People pursue goals without enlisting their partners, or worse, they martyr themselves by never asking for what they need. Matt's approach offers a template: be specific about what you need, be honest about the timeline, be clear about the cost, and let your partner decide if they're willing to support it. This requires trust on both sides - him to be vulnerable in asking, her to be generous in giving.



4: The Purpose Exodus - Leaving What No Longer Serves You

After 22 years in the military, Matt walked away. Not because he burned out, but because he'd outgrown it. "I'd hit a ceiling," he explains. "I couldn't go any higher. I needed a new challenge." He retrained in emergency medicine, started studying longevity science, and is now building a clinic focused on metabolic health and hormone optimisation for men. Each transition was purpose-driven, not panic-driven.

Psychologist Viktor Frankl, who survived Auschwitz and wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*, argued that purpose is the primary motivator of human behaviour - more powerful than pleasure or power. Research from the Rush University Medical Center found that individuals with a strong sense of purpose had a 50% reduced risk of mortality over a five-year period. Purpose isn't just psychological comfort; it's biologically protective.

Matt's transition illustrates what organisational psychologist Adam Grant calls "planned obsolescence" - the recognition that roles, identities, and careers have expiration dates. Rather than clinging to what once worked, effective people audit their purpose regularly and make deliberate shifts when misalignment emerges. The alternative is what writer David Brooks calls "eulogy virtues eroding to resume virtues" - staying in roles because they look good externally while internally feeling hollow.

5: The Beginner's Humility - Starting Over in Midlife

When Matt transitioned from special forces to emergency medicine, he became a student again. "I was 40 years old, starting from scratch in a completely new field," he says. "That's humbling." But rather than resist the discomfort, he leaned into it - studying paramedicine, then working through emergency departments, constantly learning from people younger and less experienced in life but more experienced in medicine.

Professor Carol Dweck's research distinguishes between "performance goals" (looking competent) and "learning goals" (becoming competent). Midlife often traps people in performance mode - protecting reputations, maintaining facades, avoiding situations where they might appear foolish. But genuine growth requires returning to learning mode, which means accepting temporary incompetence.



Writer Anne Lamott puts it beautifully: "Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people." Matt's willingness to be a beginner in his 40s is rare precisely because it requires relinquishing the hard-won expertise and status that took decades to build. But as management thinker Peter Drucker noted, "The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence itself, but to act with yesterday's logic." Matt chose tomorrow's logic over yesterday's competence.

6: The PTSD Reckoning - Confronting What We Carry

Matt doesn't romanticise his military service. He speaks openly about PTSD, moral injury, and the toll of operational deployments. *"You see things that change you,"* he says simply. But rather than suppressing or self-medicating, he pursued treatment - therapy, medication when needed, and eventually understanding that psychological wounds require the same attention as physical ones. *"There's no shame in getting help. The shame is in suffering silently."*

Dr Bessel van der Kolk's landmark research in *The Body Keeps the Score* demonstrates that trauma isn't just psychological - it's physiological. Unprocessed trauma manifests as chronic inflammation, dysregulated stress response, and metabolic dysfunction. Matt's willingness to address his PTSD wasn't just mental health care; it was longevity medicine. The same stress hormones that helped him survive combat were slowly destroying his metabolic health in civilian life.

Psychiatrist Dan Siegel's work on "name it to tame it" suggests that the simple act of articulating traumatic experience reduces its power. Matt's openness about his struggles serves another function: it gives permission to others. In a culture that still stigmatises mental health challenges, particularly among men, his candour is an act of leadership. As he now says to patients: "You can't heal what you won't acknowledge."

7: The Hormone Optimisation Conversation - Andropause Is Real

Matt is refreshingly direct about testosterone replacement therapy (TRT): *"There's no reason a 40-year-old man can't have the testosterone levels of a 25-year-old."* He argues that declining testosterone isn't inevitable - it's



addressable. Since optimising his hormones, he's experienced better mood, improved body composition, enhanced exercise capacity, and greater emotional regulation. *"Doctors hand out antidepressants like lollies but are reluctant to check testosterone. Yet SSRIs are high-dose hormone therapy - they're manipulating neurological pathways."*

Research from Dr Abraham Morgentaler and others challenges the outdated view that testosterone therapy is dangerous. The current evidence suggests that testosterone optimisation, when done properly with medical supervision, can improve cardiovascular health, insulin sensitivity, lean muscle mass, bone density, mood, and cognitive function. The decline in testosterone - roughly 1-2% annually after age 30 - contributes to many symptoms attributed to "ageing" that are actually hormone deficiency.

Matt's point about andropause being misunderstood is critical. While not as dramatic as menopause, the gradual decline in male hormones has real consequences: fatigue, low mood, difficulty building muscle, increased fat storage, reduced libido, and impaired stress response. Dr Peter Attia's work emphasises that hormone optimisation isn't about "anti-ageing" - it's about maintaining function. The question isn't whether testosterone declines with age (it does), but whether that decline should be accepted or addressed.

8: The Alcohol Reckoning - Confronting Cultural Habits

When asked what his 75-year-old self would say to him now, Matt's answer is immediate: *"Why did you drink so much in the military?"* He describes a culture where alcohol was central - celebrations, commiserations, bonding. But now sober, he sees it clearly: *"I put alcohol up there with smoking. I've seen how negatively it impacted my life, and I allowed my daughters to see me drunk. That's a regret."* He's particularly focused on changing Australia's drinking culture, arguing that alcohol's harms are vastly underestimated.

Neuroscientist Dr Andrew Huberman's research on alcohol is sobering: even moderate drinking disrupts sleep architecture, impairs recovery, increases cortisol, and accelerates biological ageing. Professor David Nutt's work comparing drugs found alcohol to be one of the most harmful substances - more damaging than many illegal drugs when considering both individual and societal harm. Yet it remains not just legal but culturally celebrated, particularly in countries like Australia where drinking is synonymous with socialising.

What makes Matt's reflection particularly powerful is that it's not self-righteousness - it's regret tempered with understanding. He acknowledges the fun, the camaraderie, the cultural pressure. But he also sees clearly now how alcohol undermined the health, performance, and presence he valued. Writer



Annie Grace's work in *This Naked Mind* explores how alcohol culture perpetuates itself through social conditioning - we're taught that drinking is sophisticated, relaxing, and essential to celebration. Questioning it requires confronting not just personal habits but collective delusions.

Experiment: The Values Audit

Identify one commitment, project, or role that no longer aligns with who you're becoming. This isn't about quitting irresponsibly - it's about honest evaluation. Set aside 30 minutes to write out: (1) Why did I originally commit to this? (2) How have my values or circumstances changed? (3) What would staying cost me versus leaving? (4) What would a strategic exit look like?

Give yourself permission to consider that retreat might be the most honest form of advancement. If you decide to stay, at least you'll know why. If you decide to leave, you'll do so consciously rather than through passive erosion.

Experiment: The Failure Inventory

Write your own vulnerability letter - not to send, but to practise the muscle of honest self-assessment. Choose a significant failure or disappointment from the past five years. Document: (1) What weaknesses or blind spots contributed to this outcome? (2) What specific actions have you taken to address each weakness? (3) What evidence demonstrates growth? (4) What would you do differently if given another chance?

The discipline isn't in the failure - it's in the forensic honesty about what caused it and the systematic work to transform it. Keep this document private, but review it quarterly. Watch how your relationship with failure evolves from defensive to developmental.



Closing Reflection

Matt Bunker's final words in this conversation capture the essence of what meaningful longevity requires: *"You've got to find what makes you happy in life and establish a purpose behind that happiness. If you're not happy with what you're doing, you need to sit down with your loved ones and have honest, open, frank conversations about what you really want to do in life. Yes, you're going to go through hard times to get there. But if you dare to do something that's going to make you happier, I guarantee it will improve your life in the long run."*

The regimental motto of the SAS is "Who Dares Wins." Matt has lived that principle not just in combat, but in the harder terrain of midlife reinvention - daring to admit failure, daring to ask for another chance, daring to walk away from a 22-year career, daring to become a student again at 40, daring to confront his trauma, daring to optimise his biology rather than accept decline, daring to quit drinking when the culture celebrated it.

These aren't abstractions. They're choices - specific, uncomfortable, consequential choices made at moments when staying comfortable would have been easier. That's the pattern throughout his story: comfort deferred for alignment, certainty traded for growth, reputation risked for authenticity. And on the other side of each transition: expansion, not contraction.

As listeners navigate their own transitions, Matt's trajectory offers proof of concept: the second half of life can be about building, not managing decline. But it requires daring - not reckless daring, but the kind that comes from clear purpose, honest self-assessment, and willingness to start over when necessary. The alternative is what too many people settle for: a slow fade into comfortable irrelevance, wondering what might have been if they'd dared.

The question isn't whether ageing will happen - it will. The question is whether we age with agency, purpose, and vitality, or whether we let time and culture make those decisions for us. Matt chose the former. These eight reflections and experiments offer a map for listeners ready to do the same.



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