

The Hidden Edge

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Why Mental Fitness is the Only
Advantage That Matters in Business



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For nearly 20 years it's been Jodie Rogers' business to understand what makes people tick, and to use that learning to help them be more engaged, feel more empowered and become more productive for the business they're in.

Jodie is a **human behaviour consultant, skills trainer** and **facilitator** with a background in **psychology and interpersonal communications**. Jodie founded her company **Symbia** with a specific focus of helping **leaders build dynamic teams of emotionally and socially intelligent individuals** who are proactive problem solvers, resilient in the face of change. With her team, Jodie works closely with global corporates empowering them with the insight and courage to drive business results and unlock **the importance of 'Mental Fitness' as a catalyst for growth**.

Jodie is Author of #1 Amazon best seller 'The Hidden Edge - Why Mental Fitness Is The Only Advantage That Matters In Business,' the core insights of which inspired the game-changing leadership development programme, The EDGE.

Preface

This book is the product of working inside and alongside businesses for the last 20 years. But it's not just my career experience that I've poured into the book, it's also my personal experience. I've seen what a lack of 'mental fitness' and even basic mental health can do to people. I grew up in a small fishing village in the north of Ireland where thinking about your thoughts, emotions, or behaviours was not a done thing (still isn't). I was a teenager during 'the troubles' where bombs and shootings were a routine part of life. Self-actualising, or any form of personal or professional development, was not generally on the top of people's lists, nor was mental and emotional well-being. But people fought, they believed that more was possible, that what you had wasn't all that there was. There was always hope.

My childhood was idyllic. My two brothers and I spent our days outside exploring, climbing trees, swimming in the sea, building makeshift huts, plotting against imaginary foes, inventing submarines, and flying go-karts. Yet, at the age of 11, I distinctly remember my twin brother, Johnny, slipping into a form of childhood depression which lasted for a year or so. There were many potentially contributing factors; reflecting on it today he believes it was because academically he was a square block being forced into a round hole. It was also the first year we had ever been separated (as I went to an all-girls secondary school at 11). The teacher who told him he was 'only good enough to build walls in the mountains' didn't help either. Small and not so small things can have a disproportionate impact on our life. One single comment can impact our belief in our capabilities and subsequently our performance, if we let it. But it was my parents' firm belief in him and his own inner resolve that saw him through that period.

My mum and our older brother Naithin were determined to find him something *practical* to focus on (none of us are what you would call 'natural academics'). Naithin discovered a film and photography course and, even though it was miles away, my mum drove Johnny there every day. It was this course that gave him a glimmer of hope, a chance to do something practical instead of theoretical like most of what is offered in academia. He flourished. Today he is one of the most successful people I know. He's a wildlife cameraman and has travelled the four corners of the world, working on natural history documentaries like *One Strange Rock*, *Earth's Natural Wonders*, and *Blue Planet* for the BBC, National Geographic, Discovery, Netflix, and Apple TV. You name it, he's done it. He could have easily

fallen through the cracks. Many of my friends and family (including myself) have experience a mental or emotional challenge at some point in our lives, one that has had an impact on how we show up in life and work.

You have too.

How do I know? Because you have a mind, and you know very little about it. Besides, if you met someone who told you they had never ever had any form of physical illness in their life, not even a cold, would you believe them? Of course not. It's the same for our emotional and mental well-being. But I don't want to focus on how and where things go wrong. I want to focus on how and where we can set ourselves up for success.

I've spent much of my life in despair at how little is done to enhance, strengthen, and leverage our inner resources, and how little is even known by the general public about our 'inner game'. I'm on a mission to change that, because the knowledge, the exercises, and the tools all exist. They are just not easily accessible or packaged in a way that is engaging, practical and, dare I say it, enjoyable!

That changes with this book.

My business, [Symbia](#), has been working in this space for the last decade. We work with senior leaders and their teams at Unilever, Coca Cola, L'Oréal, Mondelez, and many more. Our company vision is to positively impact the lives of one million people in the next 2yrs, and we are on track to achieve that. Everything we do is based on the belief that there is untapped potential in everyone. We are our own brakes and our own accelerators. I've spent years shaking and waking people up to their limiting beliefs, the thinking traps in their minds, the emotional patterns playing out in their lives. If we only knew a fraction as much about our minds as we do about our washing machines, we'd be laughing!

In this book, I've sought to curate and blend a number of schools of thought from neuropsychology, behavioural economics, emotional and social intelligence, positive psychology, and so on. I've packaged it in an 'easy-to-grasp' way and brought it to life with real-life case studies, data, anecdotes, and stories from my life and my work. My career began in qualitative and quantitative research; as such, I've interviewed tens of thousands of people over the last 20 years. Every project we work on for our clients starts with a diagnostic phase. Therefore, we have gathered a lot of insight and can see the macro patterns and trends playing out in the companies we work with. I've weaved that insight into the book so you can see how the viewpoints are validated.

It's worth saying though, that I'm not coming to you as an expert, I'm here as a fellow human. I'm championing Mental Fitness because I truly believe in it, because I've had to practise it and rely on it as a way of life. Like you, I'm not immune to life's challenges; life throws us all curveballs, no one can change that. It's how we respond to them that matters.

I've had a pretty good life: the daughter of art teachers, a decent education, and an idyllic childhood: the sea outside my front door, mountains outside my back door. I've travelled the world for adventure and for work. There have been ups and downs, but nothing like 2020.

Like most, my business was affected. Clients postponed workshops, cancelled team sessions, or just completely disappeared as they dealt with the impact of COVID-19. I had a team to support in a time of crisis. My husband's business and income vanished overnight. We live in Spain, so we were in an extreme lockdown situation; no daily exercise for us. There were helicopters in the sky and police patrolling the streets (which reminded me of Belfast in the old days). My two-year-old and four-and-a-half-year-old were not allowed outside of our apartment walls for 45 days. Trying to run a business with two little people with intense cabin fever was enough to impact anyone's stress levels and performance.

But the hardest part of 2020 wasn't any of this.

In January, my dad was diagnosed with cancer. He passed away in May, when we were all still in lockdown. I couldn't get back to Ireland to see him. If he had passed away at any other moment in his 73 years of life I would have been by his side.

2020 kicked my ass, but I kicked its ass back.

What happens to us rarely kills us; it's the story we tell ourselves about what happens that takes us down.

It's easy to stay focused on the 'car crash'; we're designed that way. The negativity bias insists we pay attention to the negative things because they could be threats to our survival. We therefore need to consciously make an effort to see the positive things that are in plain sight.

This year, I could get lost in the negative story – if I shared it, people would sympathise – but it doesn't serve me. Although my business was affected by the

pandemic, we have bounced back, our team has doubled, and we've brought on five more major corporate clients. The crisis gave us laser focus. We're busier than ever (businesses are finally realising the importance of mental fitness in playing the long game). My goal for the year was to travel less, move some of my business online, and spend more time with my kids. I didn't want a pandemic to deliver it, but mission accomplished all the same. I've also finally birthed the book that has been inside of me for the last seven years – there's a lot to be proud of, yet it's easily missed.

So, my mission with this book is for you to take away one key insight, exercise, anecdote, or tool that will positively affect your life – although I'm confident you'll take away much more than one. With everything that I share I've also shown how to apply it to teams because this is the work myself and my team do every day at Symbia.

I truly believe that we all have untapped potential within us. When we work on and enhance our 'mental fitness', we unlock possibilities in ourselves and in our teams that we didn't know were there.

Part Six

Stress and Performance



Part 6 of The
Hidden Edge

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Every step of the way, so far, has been about enhancing your self-awareness and your ability to regulate and manage your thoughts, feelings, and actions. If you do everything I've already shared with you in this book well, it can only improve your performance and experience of life and business. However, none of us are superhuman; we're all still susceptible to experiencing moments of stress in life. Even if, through practice, most of the time we are managing ourselves, there will always be unexpected moments in life that can raise our stress levels, no matter how composed we are!

In this final section of the book, I'll look at both stress and performance and give you some long-term habits and immediate practical exercises that you can do when you're feeling as though you're in a hot state (or triggered, anxious, and stressed).

I'm also going to help you understand performance and how a little bit of stress is actually good for performance. I'll show you how and why the right level of stress can get you into a state of flow, but how too much stress will diminish your performance. Stress and performance are intrinsically linked, so it's important to understand both of these dimensions in order to get yourself into a place of sustained peak performance. I've also given you a toolkit just for this section. There are a variety of tools and practices you can implement and share with your teams.

15 Stress and Control

As part of the foundations of mental fitness, I always include some teaching around how we manage and relate to stress and pressure, and how that affects our performance. The combination of our perception, thinking, emotions, beliefs, and values will either result in us performing at our best or responding to life's challenges by being stressed and anxious. We all have good days and bad days, so it's important that if we find ourselves in a place of stress or anxiety (day-to-day anxiety, not clinical anxiety) that we know what to do about it.

We aren't always that attuned to what triggers stress for us as individuals and as teams. Yes, deadlines – sure, but what are the unexpected triggers that build up over time, and what can we do about them?

Let's start with a small reflection exercise. Take a few minutes and write down all the things that create stress and pressure in your life. Write until you can't think of any more; they can be both professional and personal, anything at all that raises your heart rate!

I ask this question all the time in my workshops and webinars, and the typical answers I get are:

- Unexpected obstacles
- Deadlines
- Tight budgets
- Limited resources
- Demanding boss
- Changing objectives
- Personal obligations
- Being pulled in too many directions
- No time to think/plan

We all have stressors in our lives. The key is not to eliminate stress, but instead to find the ways in which to manage it, and its associated emotions, in a healthy and productive way.

Pressure and stress are unavoidable, and we deal with a variety of these on a daily basis in one way or another. However, the ability to understand the nature of stress and recognise our reaction to it when it's happening is what's needed to manage its impact on us both mentally and physically. *If you're expending energy on irrelevant things or negative thought patterns, you're taxing your brain unnecessarily and wasting this precious resource.*

Stress is not necessarily the result of the heavy workload, the demanding boss, or the 'traffic jam' of unfinished projects. It occurs *when the demands of a situation exceed our perceived ability to control them*. The more you perceive you can control, the lower your stress levels, and vice versa.

It's very important to know what you have influence and control over in your life to determine how and when to react to stress. When you control a situation, you influence the outcome. Every time you exercise control, you determine what happens in your brain, body, and the situation itself. In a confident and calm state, you work faster, solve problems more easily, and make fewer mistakes.

We can create immediate and dramatic shifts in our effectiveness and stress level by exerting control in small situations throughout the day. But before we can do that, we need to be able to determine what we can and can't control, along with what we can and can't influence.

Changing Our Relationship with Stress

Allowing stress to take over can inflict direct damage on our career, relationships, and well-being. But when taken as something to learn from, stress can be

- A great motivator
- A source of strength
- A survival instinct that pushes us beyond our perceived limits

Stress is experienced internally, and, as such, changing your response to it is actually within your ability – if you know how.

Now, you may have seen this concept before, perhaps as circles, but I like to use a matrix so you can then map your stressors out and they are visible to you (Figure 15.1).

The matrix is simple. At the bottom left, we have No Control and No Influence. At the top right, we have Control and Influence, and at the bottom right, we have Influence but No Control.

I'd like you to take the list of your stressors that you wrote down earlier, and take the time to map them out on the matrix. Are these things you have control over or not? If not, do you have influence? Remember the top left quadrant is void because you never have control and no influence. So, just focus on the other three quadrants.

Make sure to challenge your first thinking on this, because sometimes we believe that we have more control than we really do over things. At other times we think we have no control when actually we *do* have some control.

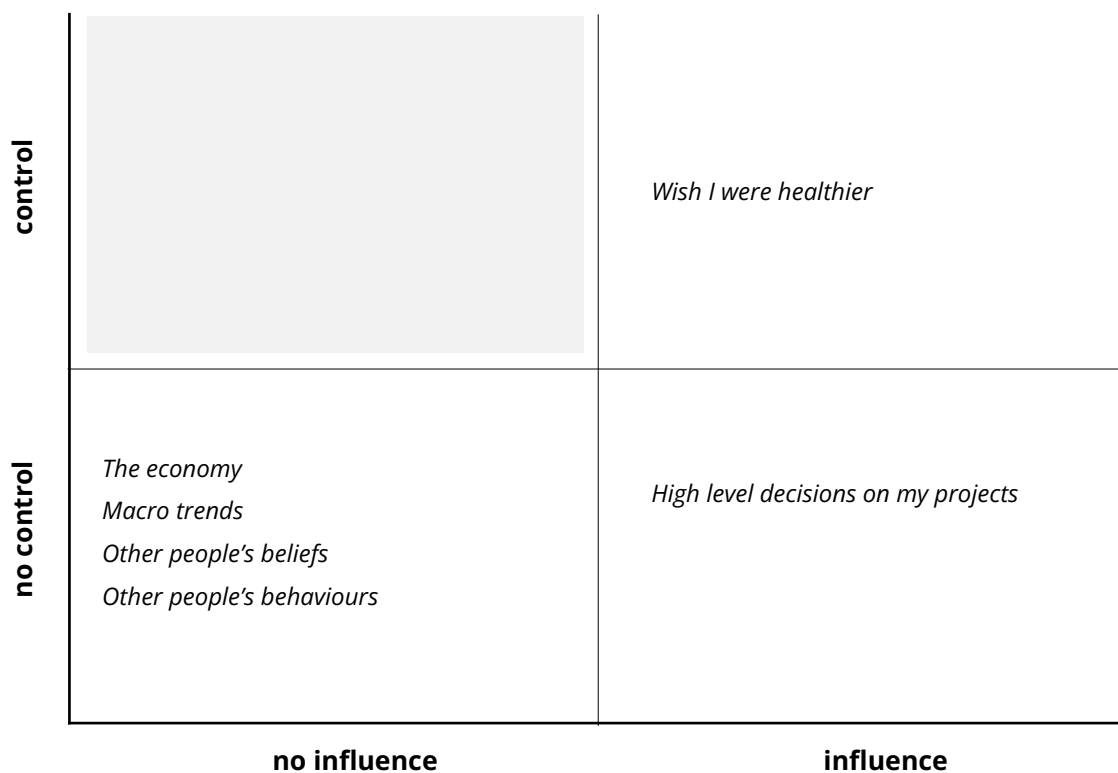


Figure 15.1 Mapping your stressors.

Explaining the Matrix

Control + Influence

The things within your control and influence that are stressing you out are the ones you must take action on, whether that's killing the task, changing the parameters, delegating, etc. You have to create an action plan for everything in this box to decrease the stress surrounding the tasks.

No Control + Influence

The things you can't control but have some influence over you must influence, but then let go – you can't control the outcome, so it's important to recognise that.

Remember, it's your perception of control, or rather lack of control, over a situation that stresses you out. However, if you have never had control in the first place, it's important to acknowledge that you can't dictate the outcome.

Once you've influenced as much as you can, you must let go and accept the outcome for what it is.

No Control + No Influence

For the situations or events stressing you that are both out of your influence and control, you need to adopt a more 'Zen' attitude and really *let go* of the anxiety.

Meditation and mindfulness help create space between stressors and your reaction to them. But allowing something you have neither influence nor control over to affect your emotions, stress levels, and overall well-being is irrational – you must practise and perfect the art of 'letting go'.

Use this tool as a handy exercise any time that you're feeling overwhelmed. The great thing about it is that you can use it to help other people as well, perhaps people that you manage or who are in your team, to deal with their own stress levels and get perspective on what's driving them and what they can do about it.

The statistics on mental wellbeing are beyond shocking to be honest. We have to believe we're in the process of moving to a completely new understanding. Just as we have a physical body, we have a mental body. Like the physical body, the mental body is on a spectrum of healthiness at any given time. Virtually everybody is mentally and physically unwell at some point in their lives. So, equipping people to manage both their mental and physical bodies is the right and natural thing to do.

- Tim Munden, Chief Learning Officer, Unilever

Mental fitness is everything. It's the key to productivity. It's the key to enhanced physical activity. It's key in creativity. Strong mental fitness allows your team, your people, to understand, explore and seize opportunity when it comes along. If you're too busy scrambling around at the bottom, just dealing with day-to-day minutia of things going wrong, you're never going to get your head above the clouds to see what possibilities are actually out there. It's mental fitness that helps you do this.

- Aldo Kane, Adventurer, Record Setter and former Royal Marines Commando

16 Overcoming the Amygdala Hijack

When it comes to stress, *distraction* has a big role to play. Not all stress is bad, and the best stress focuses our attention – think about that deadline that you suddenly had that made you hyperfocused and productive. Often the key to helping us feel less stressed and more focused is eliminating the unnecessary distractions in our life.

We have two primary distractions: internal distractions and external distractions. We can get pulled in both ways. Let's get into internal distractions and, more importantly, how to manage them.

The biggest internal distractions are our emotions; they are attention magnets, and managing our emotions is vital if we are to have more efficient focus. Daniel Goleman, the author of *Emotional Intelligence and Focus*, states that emotions make us pay attention right now. They grab our attention and tell us, 'This is urgent, focus!'

He also coined the term 'amygdala hijack' (Figure 16.1). I talked previously about how the amygdala can just take over and 'hijack' the prefrontal cortex. This is when it primarily takes all the energy from the prefrontal cortex and demands that you fight, flight, or freeze. It can be immediate and overwhelming, which is why often we find ourselves in a state of confusion.

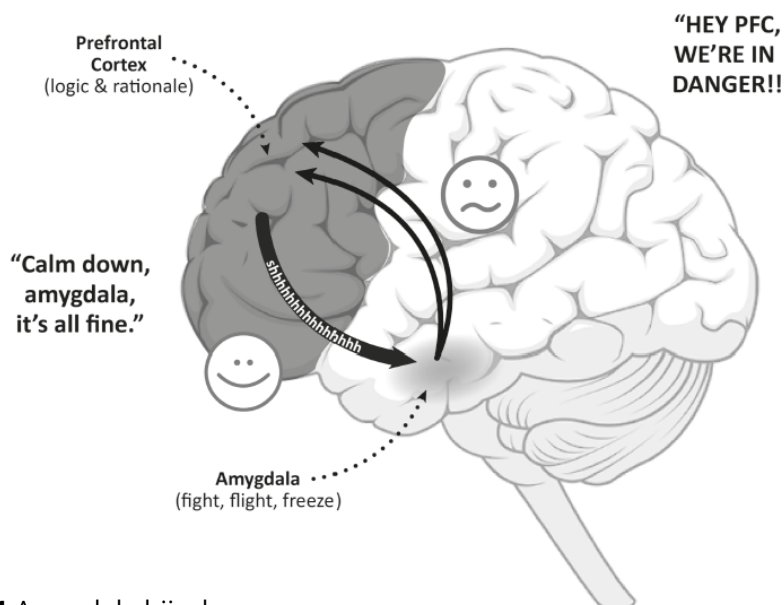


Figure 16.1 Amygdala hijack.

What happens in the brain when you're stressed?

Any time we have a sense of fear, insecurity, doubt, worry, or anxiety, a pathway between our amygdala and our prefrontal cortex gets activated. The amygdala is part of the limbic system, often referred to as the place where the fight, flight, or freeze response occurs.

It's designed to prioritise our survival in any and all situations, like our alarm system when we feel threatened in any way. It's designed to protect us, but sometimes it can be oversensitive.

As I mentioned in Part 3, 'Owning Our Thinking', this neurological bias was designed to ensure our survival from predators. These days, the danger is less likely to be a real physical threat and more likely to be triggered by an email from our boss!

But because the amygdala is the oldest part of our brain, the neural pathways firing from it to the prefrontal cortex (sending panic signals!) are strong and well used.

What's important about the amygdala when it's on high alert is that it shuts down our prefrontal cortex which is at the front of the brain. As a result, not only are you overcome with emotion and panic or fear, as well as stress, but any chance you have of soothing yourself and really rationalising things is taken away when your prefrontal cortex is off.

Even though the predators no longer exist, in the modern world we do have a lot of congestion, we have a lot of deadlines, and speed is of the essence. We're living in a very fast-paced world and because of that, we more often than not find ourselves in the amygdala hijack situation. That's why it's so important to be aware of it and to regulate our emotions if we want to have a balanced life.

As I mentioned earlier, neurobiologist Richard Davidson discovered that people who are emotionally resilient and have more of a positive mindset have strong neural pathways from the prefrontal cortex to the amygdala. For these people, the negative feelings generated by the amygdala peter out, and they don't get mired in feelings like unhappiness or resentment.

By contrast, people with little emotional resilience have fewer or weaker signals *from their prefrontal cortex to the amygdala*, due to either low activity or poor connections.

The good news is that we can exercise and strengthen our neural pathways through repeated practice. On the next pages, you'll find different exercises and some simple behaviour 'hacks' to strengthen this important pathway, helping to train your brain to prepare for, and positively respond to, negative or challenging situations.

Four Ways to Take Back Your Amygdala

There are four things that you can do.

Meditate 

A lot of research has been conducted into the effectiveness of mindfulness, not just in the moment, but its long-term effects too.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is a healing approach that combines meditation and yoga. Developed by Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn in the 1970s, it aims to address the unconscious thoughts, feelings, and behaviours thought to increase stress and undermine your health. Research backs up the claims of MBSR. One such study¹ measured people's brains using an MRI before and after an eight-week MBSR course. They found that after the eight weeks, the grey matter around the amygdala had reduced and had changed structurally as a result of the mindfulness training. The mindfulness practice had created new neural pathways in the brain.

In another study, they found that 20 minutes of mindfulness a day resulted in a significant difference on attention tests in as little as four days.

This shows you don't need to spend decades meditating or go off to Nepal before you get the benefits. If you're committed, and actually even if you're not, just four days can change your brain. If you haven't already tried it, I really encourage you to do so. There are so many apps out there. Even five minutes a day can start to make a difference.

¹Gotink, R. A., Hermans, K. S., Geschwind, N. et al. (2016) 'Mindfulness and Mood Stimulate Each Other in an Upward Spiral: A Mindful Walking Intervention Using Experience Sampling', *Mindfulness*, 7: 1114–1122.

Counting from 1 to 10

If you're angry, count to ten in your mind before you say anything.
If you are very angry, count to one hundred.

—Thomas Jefferson

It sounds simple, but Jefferson was right. When you count, you are switching 'on' the prefrontal cortex (the part of your brain that deals with logical thinking), which has just been shut off by the amygdala hijacking. Forcing yourself to count 'overrides' the amygdala which has gotten you in the state of fight, flight, or freeze.

If you start to count while you feel that intense emotion, you effectively get some space from it. When you force your mind to do some logical thinking, like counting to 10, counting backwards from 10, or remembering your phone number, for example, it helps a lot.

Counting and Breathing

The sympathetic nervous system is responsible for fight or flight. Then there's the parasympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for rest and digestion.

When you take those deep mindful breaths, you are activating the parasympathetic nervous system, and the net result is that you feel calmer and more focused.

Combine intentional counting with mindful breathing, and you have a surprisingly powerful tool to combat amygdala hijack and regain control.

Close your eyes and focus on the breath. If you begin to think about something else, just gently bring your focus back to the breath.

Don't judge yourself if your mind begins to wander, just return your attention to your breath.

Every time you bring the wandering mind back to this state, you're working the concentration muscle.

If you're ever in a situation at home or at work where you just want to explode or get angry, use this technique. When you are in a highly emotional state, it's the quickest way to gain control of your prefrontal cortex and get your parasympathetic nervous system in action. Count to 10 and with each breath count as well.

Silent Scream !!!!!

This one is excellent if you find yourself in a situation where you've got a lot of adrenaline pumping through your body. In that moment your eyes will dilate, your voice will start to shake, and your veins will actually move away from being too close to the skin. All of this is preparing you for attack or to be attacked.

Let's take an example. It's like how some people will feel when they have to get on a stage in front of lots of people. They get overcome by emotion and the advice they're often given is, 'Just imagine that the audience are naked.' That does not work; you need to beat physiology with physiology.

The quickest way to get rid of the adrenaline going through your body and deal with the physical effects of the amygdala hijack is to tackle it with physiology.

The Silent Scream is simple and effective.

Go somewhere ideally private (so people don't think you're crazy) and clench your whole body, bend your knees, contract all of your muscles, and scream silently. You can, of course, scream properly as long as you know you aren't going to alarm anyone!

Do this until you're out of air.

When you are in fight/flight mode, you have adrenaline going through your body, and you need to dissipate that adrenaline. Unless you're going to punch someone (which I don't recommend), or go for a run around the building, the best way to get it through and out of your body is by acting as if you are in some sort of intense fight without having to be in one. Once you do this, it will help you to control your heart rate, your voice will return to normal, your breathing will become calmer, and the adrenaline will be released.

Use this exercise in intense situations. But as I said, try not to do it in public, or you will raise some eyebrows. Again, this is another way of really making sure that your focus is on the right things and that you are taking control of your emotions before you make important decisions or take actions. Consider the number of decisions people are making daily at work when under pressure or heightened stress. You can then multiply this figure for more senior staff; the higher up the food chain, the more the demands on people's time, the bigger and riskier decisions need to be taken often with less data or certainly without being as close to the details. If we all started to implement some of these tools, we'd be able to distance ourselves from the emotional charge, create some 'headspace', and make more considered choices. What would that be worth to your company? What would be the compound impact if everyone in your business collectively learned how to make decisions under stress but without experiencing its direct negative impact?

It's easy to think this is just about wellbeing and mental health, but it's really about all of the good things that we want for mankind and humanity, for our societies and for our businesses. These things can only come to fruition through human beings, so we want human beings to be both highly developed and thriving. It's about how much we are really helping them to access their capabilities and then how well a person is. Wellness and performance are linked, but they're also distinct. You can be a very developed human being, but then succumb to a mental illness, so I think we have to work across the two dimensions to truly get results.

- Tim Munden, Chief Learning Officer, Unilever

There are so many different parts that you can use that will ultimately make your team not just perform as a team, but perform at an elite level. The Royal Marines are an elite fighting force and we operate at the highest functioning level that you can operate at. That comes down to lots of different things, but all of that is directly transferable into business and that winning mental fitness edge can be trained, it can be practiced and it can even be fun.

- Aldo Kane, Adventurer, Record Setter and former Royal Marines Commando

17 Flow Versus Frazzle

I've just been talking to you about the biggest internal distractions of all, which are our emotions. When you're in a heightened emotional state, we're actually talking about stress. Stress can be very distracting from our focus, but we're also talking about performance, because what do you need focus for? To achieve whatever your goals might be for that day or for your life.

The relationship between stress and performance has been well known in psychology for over a century. It's called the Yerkes–Dodson Law.¹ Yerkes and Dodson didn't actually know that this was what they were looking at, at the time. It is only with hindsight that we recognise what they had uncovered. It's a very different way of thinking about how the brain operates, but the term 'flow' has made its way into day-to-day conversations.

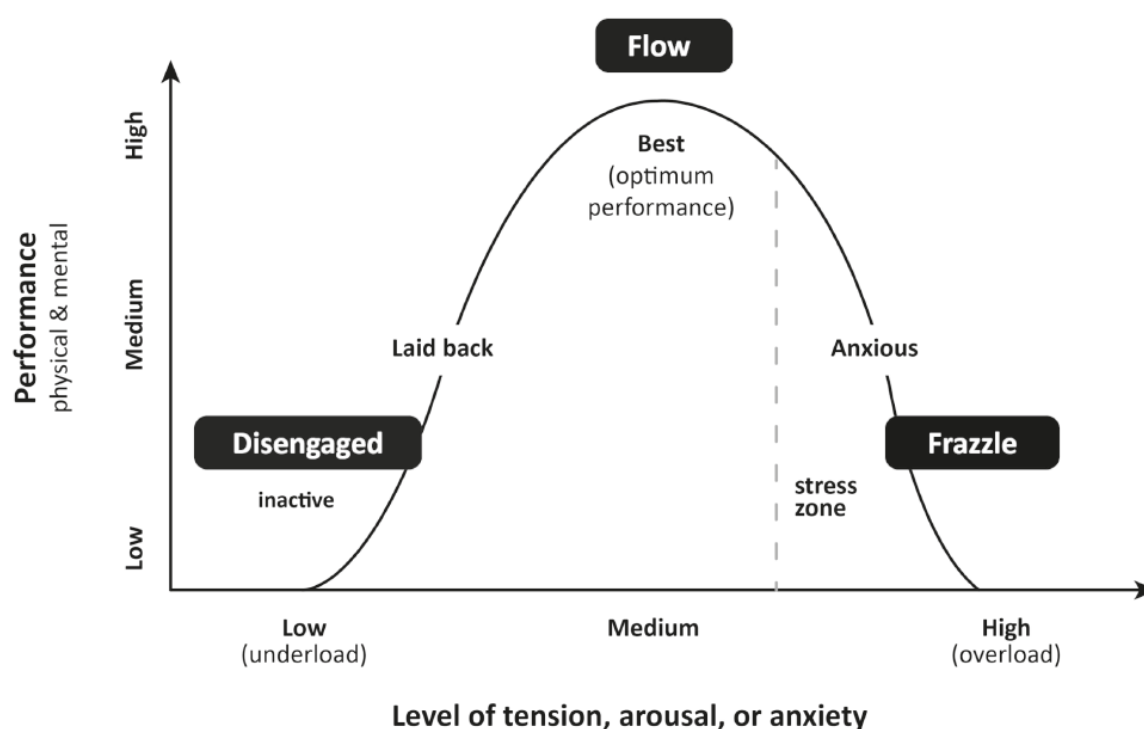


Figure 17.1 The Yerkes–Dodson curve.

¹Dodson, J. D. and Yerkes, R. M. (1908) 'The Relation of Strength of Stimulus to Rapidity of Habit-Formation', *Journal of Comparative Neurology and Psychology*, 18: 459–482.

On the bell chart above (Figure 17.1), you can see that flow is in the middle. Before flow we've got disengagement, and frazzle is on the other side. These may be terms that you haven't heard of before. Daniel Goleman said, *'Each of these has a powerful impact on a person's ability to perform at their best, disengagement and frazzle torpedo our efforts while flow lets them soar'²*

The three main states are Disengaged, Flow, and Frazzle:

Disengaged: When people are bored, you see randomly scattered neural activation, rather than a sharp delineation of activity in the areas relevant to the task.

Flow: When people are in flow, only those brain areas relevant to the activity at hand are activated.

Frazzle: When people are stressed, you find lots of activity in the emotional circuitry that is irrelevant to the task at hand, and which suggests a state of anxious distractedness.

How to Tackle Disengagement

Many workplaces around the world have varying numbers of people stuck in disengagement: bored, uninspired, and disinterested.

The good news is that the scientists who've been studying motivation have given us a new approach. It's built much more around intrinsic motivation. Around the desire to do things because they matter, because we like it.

—Daniel Pink, TED Talk The Puzzle of Motivation

²Goleman, D. (2012) 'The Sweet Spot for Achievement', Psychology Today <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/the-brain-and-emotional-intelligence/201203/the-sweet-spot-achievement>>

Motivation often comes from finding a personal purpose or goal within the work that we do. Answering the questions:

- What can I uniquely bring to this project that will improve it in some way?
- What can I focus on that will not only get the business/project results but will be personally fulfilling and rewarding for me also?

We have run countless numbers of purpose workshops for our clients over the years. These are focused on helping people uncover what drives and motivates them, what impact they want to have in the world, and what skills they can contribute. They can be profound sessions and are as rewarding for me to run as they can be for others to participate in. Much research³ has now been conducted on the role of personal purpose and its impact on productivity and well-being:

- Business experts make the case that purpose is a key to exceptional performance.
- Psychologists describe it as the pathway to greater well-being.
- Doctors have even found that people with purpose in their lives are less prone to disease.

Having a purpose within a project matters; having goals we are motivated by matters. Deep down, we all want significance, and knowing that our work matters goes a long way in enhancing an individual's mental fitness. I have much to say on the topic of purpose, but that's a book in itself.

What Happens During 'Frazzle'?

The neurobiology of frazzle is the same for panic and fear – the amygdala hijack.

When demands become too great for us to handle, when we get overwhelmed and have a sense of too much to do, our brain secretes too many stress hormones that interfere with our ability to focus.

³Craig, N. and Snook S. A. (2014, May) 'From Purpose to Impact', Harvard Business Review <<https://hbr.org/2014/05/from-purpose-to-impact>>

We shut down, we can no longer work well, learn, innovate, listen, or plan effectively. When we are feeling frazzled, it's important to step away from whatever we are doing, take a break, get some rest, or go outside for a change of scene.

If we're overwhelmed by the magnitude of a task, the best thing to do is break it down into all of its component parts. Below is a simple but helpful exercise for managing overwhelm.

Get some Post-It® notes, and write down as many tasks as possible, one per Post-It® note. Once you have it all out of your head, then organise the tasks, either simply in terms of what needs to happen first (stick them on a wall for visibility) or in themed groups (e.g. admin tasks versus strategic thinking). Once you have mapped out all of the tasks, make a plan for how you can get everything done. Ask yourself these three questions:

- **Do I have the capacity to do all of these tasks?**
 - If yes, then plan what needs to happen first.
 - If no, work out what you can delegate or who you can bring in to help you.
- **Do I have the time?**
 - If yes, put in order of priority.
 - If no, see which tasks you can renegotiate timelines on.
 - If none, see what you can delegate, outsource, etc.
- **Do I have the capability?**
 - If yes, put in order of priority as above.
 - If no, see who you can bring in to help.

What Happens When We're in 'Flow'?

Where we want to be on the Yerkes–Dodson arc is the zone of optimal performance, known as 'flow'.

Flow represents a peak of self-regulation, and maximum performance or learning.

A little bit of stress is actually good for us. It gets us motivated and out of the disengaged zone and into the flow zone. That might show up for you as a deadline or a phone call from your boss. Sometimes we will allow ourselves to be disengaged until a deadline creates a sense of urgency. Stress isn't always bad, and it is good to feel a little bit of it, but just not too much.

We can enhance our ability to get into flow by 'preparing the stage'. That means creating the right environment for optimal performance.

For example:

- **Get the basics right** – Get a good night's sleep, eat, and perhaps exercise.
 - This will lessen internal distractions.
- **Pre-empt distractions** – Clear your diary, turn off all notifications on your computer and your phone.
 - This will lessen external distractions.
- **If you work well with music**, choose the album best suited to the type of work you'll be doing.
- **Prepare for future distractions** – Have snacks and refreshments at hand. Have everything you need already at hand (so you don't go on a one-hour escape looking for paper!).

Being in flow is very satisfying; it's a great mix of progress and fulfilment.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (University of Chicago)⁴ describes flow as the state in which people are so immersed in what they're doing that their brain simply can't focus on anything else.

⁴Csikszentmihályi, M. (1990) Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, Harper & Row, ISBN 978-0-06-016253-5

What's interesting is that he really understood that getting in flow is a *perfect combination between ability (and skill level) and challenge*. So, if the challenge is low and your skill is high – and you've seen this with very smart kids in the classrooms – you'll be bored. If the challenge is high and your skill is low, you'll be in a frazzle and stressed out; you'll be in a state of anxiety. Therefore, you want to find the perfect balance between having some skill and a challenge that is actually a bit of a stretch, but not an over-stretch. This is when we are at our best in terms of performance.

Stress and Mindset

Research⁵ has found that we tend to have one of two stress mindsets: a stress-is-enhancing mindset (SEM) or a stress-is-debilitating mindset (SDM). The way we experience stress is dependent on which of these mindsets we adopt.

In simple terms, if you have an SEM, you believe stress enhances performance, productivity, health and well-being, learning, and growing; and if you have an SDM, you believe stress is detrimental in these areas. These mindsets are either / or. There is no in between.

The good news is that you can change your stress mindset. Research conducted on mindsets⁶ in general has shown that, with the right intervention, it's possible to change your mindset relatively quickly.

Where stress is concerned, this can significantly reduce the negative impact it has.

A 2019 study⁷ using electroencephalography (EEG) recording techniques of the brain's electrical activity and cortisol levels found that changing your stress mindset has an almost immediate positive impact on the mind and body's experience of stress. This means it's possible for stress to be used positively rather than negatively by simply changing your mindset.

⁵Crum, A. J., Salovey, P., and Achor, S. (2013). 'Rethinking Stress: The Role of Mindsets in Determining the Stress Response', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104 (4): 716 in *How to reduce stress by changing mindset research briefing*, Research Briefing. The Oxford Review. <www.oxford-review.com>

⁶Dweck, C. (2006) *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, New York, NY: RandomHouse.

⁷Park, H. and Hahm, S. (2019) 'Changes in StressMindset and EEG through E-Healthcare Based Education', *IEEE Access*, 7: 20163–20171.

Stress and Your Health

One study⁸ tracked 30 000 adults in the United States for eight years, and they started by asking people how much stress they experienced in the last year. They also asked if they believed that stress is harmful for their health. Then they used public death records to find out who died.

People who experienced a lot of stress in the previous year and viewed stress as harmful had a 43% increased risk of dying. People who experienced a lot of stress but did not view stress as harmful were no more likely to die. In fact, they had the lowest risk of dying of anyone in the study, including people who had relatively little stress.

The researchers estimated that over the eight years they were tracking deaths, 182 000 Americans died prematurely, not from stress but from the belief that stress is bad for you.

As the stress researcher Kelly McGonnigal points out:

'That is over 20 000 deaths a year. Now, if that estimate is correct, that would make believing stress is bad for you the 15th largest cause of death in the United States last year, killing more people than skin cancer, HIV AIDS and homicide.'

The study raised the question – can changing how you think about stress make you healthier?

To test this hypothesis, an experiment was run where they taught people to reframe their typical stress response as helpful instead of being a sign of something 'bad' (Figure 17.2).

⁸Keller, A., Litzelman, K., and Wisk, L. E. (2012) 'Does the Perception That Stress Affects Health Matter? The Association with Health and Mortality', *Health Psychology*, 31: 677–684 - PMC - PubMed

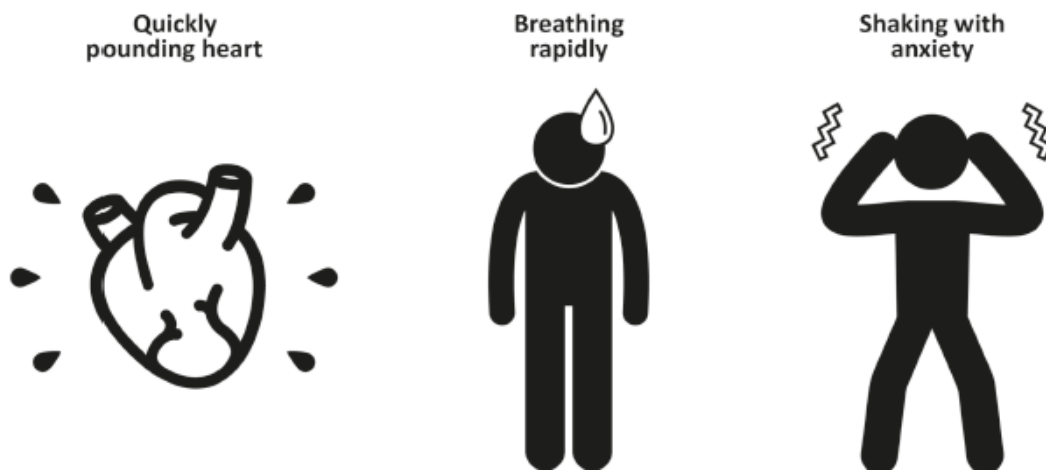


Figure 17.2 Stress response.

That pounding heart is preparing you for action. If you're breathing faster it's good, it's getting more oxygen to your brain. Participants who learned to view the stress response as helpful for their performance were less stressed, less anxious, and more confident.

When reviewing this study, Dr McGonnigal pointed out that the most fascinating finding was how the participants' physical stress response changed. In a typical stress response, your heart rate goes up and your blood vessels constrict – one of the reasons that chronic stress is sometimes associated with cardiovascular disease (Figure 17.3).

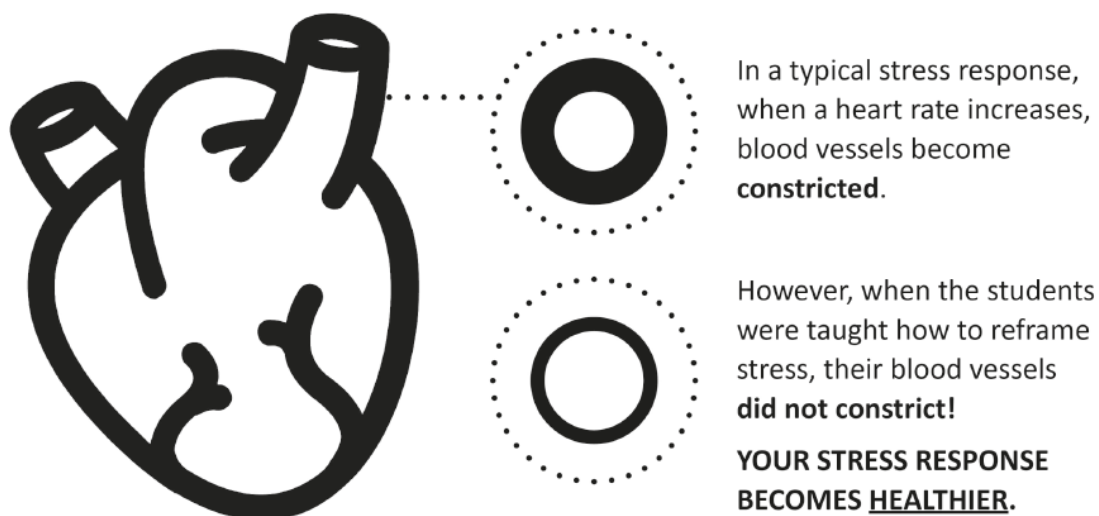


Figure 17.3 How stress affects the heart.

But in the study, when participants viewed their stress response as helpful, their blood vessels stayed relaxed. Their heart was still pounding, but it demonstrated a much healthier cardiovascular profile. It actually looks a lot like what happens in moments of joy and courage. Over a lifetime of stressful experiences, this one biological change could be the difference between a stress-induced heart attack at the age of 50 and living well into your 90s. Therefore, the new science of stress reveals that how you think about stress matters.

As Dr McGonnigal goes on to say:

When you choose to view your stress response as helpful, you create the biology of courage. And when you choose to connect with others under stress, you can create resilience. Now, I wouldn't necessarily ask for more stressful experiences in my life. But the science has given me a whole new appreciation for stress. Stress gives us access to our hearts; the compassionate heart that finds joy and meaning in connecting with others, and yes, your pounding physical heart, working so hard to give you strength and energy. When you choose to view stress in this way, you're not just getting better at stress, you're actually making a pretty profound statement. You're saying that you can trust yourself to handle life's challenges.

To summarise, we all get stressed in life. The goal is not to eradicate stress (because that's impossible) but to manage our relationship with it.

We can do this by focusing on what we have control over and putting our attention there rather than on what we don't have control over.

Stress also isn't all bad: a bit of stress is good for focusing the mind and getting us into a state of flow, as long as we have the tools to manage it. In the following few pages, I've given you a 'stress toolkit' which you can dip into and out of when you need it.

Managing Stress: In the Moment

When you're feeling overwhelmed and need a mental break to reboot or refresh your brain, or you're feeling anxious, nervous or stressed about something or someone, consider these quick easy methods to get yourself back on track.

- **If you're in conflict with someone**, first, don't judge the other person, because you don't know what else might be contributing to the tension outside of the situation. Next, take a deep breath and demonstrate openness by helping them verbalise their needs and encouraging them to share. You can ask questions like:
 - 'Where is your uncertainty coming from?'
 - 'What can I do to help you right now?'
 - 'Tell me more about why you're feeling that'.

Above all, *listen* to what they're saying instead of planning your response. You can and should also ask for the same courtesy when it's your turn to speak.

- **Breathing (4-6-8 Technique)**. First, breathe in and exhale through your mouth, making a whoosh sound. Next, inhale quietly through your nose for a count of 4. Hold your breath for a count of 6, then exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of 8. Repeat five times. This rhythmic breathing will help bring your heart back to its normal rhythm (a consistent pattern) and will also help bring your prefrontal cortex back online if you're experiencing amygdala hijack).
- **Walk away**. This doesn't mean *run* away or ignore the situation; this means give yourself at least five minutes to remove yourself from an escalating situation before it gets out of hand. If you are in an argument with someone, politely say you need X amount of time and you will promise to come back to them then.
- **555**. Sit down and take a minute or two to observe your surroundings (indoors or outdoors). In your head, take note of 5 visuals, 5 sounds, 5 feelings or sensations. Pause long enough to connect to each of the five visuals, sounds, and feelings. Really absorb the senses and notice how the mind begins to settle in the present.

• **Ask yourself why?** Why exactly are you feeling stressed? Have you done everything you could to help the situation? If the control of the situation is out of your hands, and you cannot do more, is there a reason for being stressed? If you need help, what specifically can someone help you with, and do you know who you can ask for it?

Tracking your stress response

It's important to be aware of what happens to you internally when you experience stress. Having this awareness will enable you to recognise the signs and head them off before you enter a typical stress response.

Think about the last stressful situation you were in and answer the questions below. This will help you to start recognising your typical stress responses so you can tune into them and have a better chance of controlling your reaction.

1. Briefly describe what happened.
2. What sensations did you experience in your body? Where?
3. What thoughts did you have?
4. What did you do, and has this happened before?
5. What can you do differently next time?

Managing Stress: At Work

In nearly every second of every day we are bombarded with input from our external and internal worlds. We are forced to process and multitask at an alarming rate and are often attempting to put out fire after fire. While productivity is important, equally important is the need to give your mind proper rest to recharge, recentre, and work out thoughts and ideas. The following are simple behavioural 'hacks' to help you begin to manage and control your environment and thus your relationship with stress.

At work:

- **Don't start the day with email;** instead check your emails at 10 am, and use the time before to write down your three core objectives for the day and the plan to implement and work on them.
- **Accept all meetings you are invited** to but only join the ones with clear objectives that you can actively contribute to. Don't shy away from asking for an agenda and objectives, and if you can share info via email instead, do that.
- **Do not eat lunch at your desk;** if you do, it should be an exception (max. once per week). It's important to give yourself and your mind a rest. Even if it's just a short 30 minutes, sit or walk with a colleague to get lunch. This is not a marathon, you can take a break!
- **When working on a project that requires deep concentration,** consider setting an out-of-office reply explaining that you're working on a big project and will only be checking emails at 10 am and 2 pm for the next X days. For anything urgent, refer them to your communication channel of choice. You may still get unnecessary messages, but at the very least people will think twice before contacting you!
- **Break it down.** A project can seem overwhelming when looked at as a whole. Breaking it down and into milestones and manageable steps makes it easier to reach your goals. Use Post-It® notes to map your project milestones out on your office wall!
- **Delegate, postpone, eliminate.** Assess each task on your list by asking:
 - Is the task important to you/the business?
 - Will it relieve pressure?
 - Is it 'on strategy'?
 - Can it be done only by you?
 - Does it help you move forward?

If not, check if you can delegate, postpone, or eliminate the task completely. See the table on the next page to help you.

- **Remind yourself of the 'bigger picture'.** To ensure the greatest output of your energy, understand the bigger purpose of the task. It's easy to get tunnel vision and burn energy on small tasks, but progress on things that do not ladder up to the bigger picture are just distractions. Always check in with how what you're about to do relates to the bigger picture.

Assessing your task list

Another quick and easy trick is to filter your tasks. Fill in the following table to help you assess your tasks, break them down into manageable chunks, and prioritise them effectively. Once you've filled it in, review and make a decision about what needs to get done first and what can be done by someone else.

Task	Is it important to you or the business?	Is it 'on strategy'?	Can it <i>only</i> be done by you?	Does it help you move forward?	Delegate postpone or eliminate?

Managing Stress: At Home

Setting boundaries around your home or personal time is important. Work is only a part (albeit a big one) of the overall scheme of life, and home is the space where you can explore and work on the *other* things that can bring great reward and satisfaction, like your well-being and health, personal goals, family, interests, hobbies, etc.

At home:

- **Mindfulness apps** improve your ability to remain calm under pressure. A daily 10-minute practice can increase flexibility, adaptability, creativity, and focus. Suggested apps: Headspace & Calm.
- **Decide what time you officially go offline** and switch off all phone/messaging notifications on your phone. You should also let your colleagues know that after X time they should not expect a response. If you still get messages, ignore them; you need to protect this mental space for yourself.
- **Do not send emails after 6 pm or at weekends.** Even if you have to work, keep your inbox set to 'offline' – sending emails might feel productive, but they could stress out others or signal that they can start emailing you. Set your boundaries and commit to them.
- **Break the screen addiction.** Yes, this is an obvious one, but also one that's so easy to get drawn into when you're 'bored' waiting in line at the store, waking up in the morning, or winding down after (or even during!) dinner. There are several apps to help fight, limit, or block social media, like Offtime, Moment, Flipd, or Space to name a few. If you prefer less involved methods:
 - Use airplane mode or turn off your notifications and put your phone in another room during important moments like dinner with your family.
 - Make it harder to access your phone and apps by setting a very long pass-code.
 - Set a rule at home: No phones/screens between or after the hours of X – and stick to it!As a minimum, don't use any form of technology at least one hour before sleep – this will increase the quality of your night's rest.

- **Don't charge your phone, laptop, or tablet in your bedroom.** You may be tempted to 'quickly check' your email or get sucked into an Instagram black hole if your phone is within easy reach. If you use your phone for an alarm, buy an old-fashioned alarm clock!
- **Define your 'self-care strategy'.** Think about the following categories: Basic, Emotional, Relationships, and Physical. Use the table on the following page to write down things for each that help you relax and feel 'okay' again – this will be your go-to list for making sure you're taking care of your needs. When you start to feel stressed, refer to the list to choose an activity to help lower your stress levels.

For example:

- Basic – eating a delicious meal, drinking enough water, getting eight hours of uninterrupted sleep.
- Emotional – writing in my journal.
- Relationships – weekly contact with mom (even if it's just a quick text), quiet dinner with my husband.
- Physical – time in nature, walking, yoga, listening to my favourite band.

My self-care strategy

Use the following template to define your self-care strategy.

Basic	Emotional
Relationships	Physical

We've given you stress toolkit so that you have a variety of ways of managing moments where you feel stressed or overwhelmed. Even those who've been practicing and strengthening their mental fitness still experience stress; no one is immune. That's why it's important to know what you can do both in those moments and in preparation for those moments. The more we practice, just like training our muscles in the gym, the stronger our neural pathways will be. So, when the unexpected happens, we already have the right habits in place to navigate them with ease.

It's simple, people just want to work for an organisation that looks after them, especially now... You've got to look at those successful organisations in the time of crisis. They've been successful because their people are engaged, they want to be there and, in part, some of that is about purpose and wellbeing but a lot of it is about engagement. Those threads of being engaged are about you being attracted or wanting to continue to work for an organisation because the company cares for you, or because someone within the organisation has done something for you, to make you engage and go the extra mile, so now you want to return it. And if you trace a lot of those threads back, a lot of it is about being supported and connected to purpose or having a strong wellbeing proposition. It's about a healthy relationship between organisation and employee; a mutual respect, mutual support and mutual wellbeing.

**- Marcus Hunt, Head of Global Health Services, EMEA,
Johnson & Johnson**

It's applicable to everyone. We're talking about things that make your life more effective, more productive, more joyous and more many things. But for me the thing that is really important is the positive impact of this. It's unlocking a potential. It's the idea of creating the presence of positives not the absence of negatives that makes me most motivated by it.

- Shawn Conway, CEO, Peet's Coffee

We've provided a stress management toolkit to give you actionable ways to manage moments of heightened emotion or overwhelm. Even with regular mental fitness practice, no one is immune to stress. The key lies in preparation, so you can navigate these moments with greater ease. Like training a muscle, this requires continuous effort.

Through my work with corporate teams worldwide, I realized that while individual tools are helpful, it's a more holistic approach that drives deeper results. This led me to create [The EDGE](#) - an online leadership program built on the principles in this book. It's designed for high-performing teams in leading global companies. The 10-month virtual journey focuses on resilience, agility, and sustained performance, offering teams the chance to apply these strategies in a supportive environment.



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