



YOUR ANCIENT

BRAIN

VS

YOUR MODERN DAY

MIND

Stress. It's something all of us are probably intimately aware of. Whether it's stress from work life or your personal life, it all affects us. New Zealand stress expert, Drew Knowles looks at stressors, how to approach them and better yet, how to overcome them for ultimate success.

Imagine you are sitting in your office at your desk staring at the computer on a Friday evening at around 6pm, struggling to think of what to say in an email to someone about a deadline you are not going to meet for the second time. This instantly elevates the feeling of mental pressure you are under from a long and busy week. Knowing you should have left already, you get a text from your wife asking what time you will be home as you are due to go out for dinner at 7pm. Your attention is diverted by an immediate feeling of agitation and worry as you know you will have to say you will be home later than promised, upsetting your wife. You then hear a "ping" and get an instant message from your boss asking if you can come and see him urgently about a report you submitted earlier that day, which immediately gives you a sense of worry about what he might say, increasing your agitation and feeling of being stressed, and then the phone rings on your DDI, which you pick up without thinking because you are in an internal dialogue with yourself and not present. It is a client wanting to run over some final changes to the big and important proposal you sent them for a high-paying contract before they accept it, so you stop and speak to your client for fear of losing the contract if you don't handle it now. And while you are trying to listen to your client and answer their questions, you are texting your wife that you will be late and messaging your boss to say you will be there in ten minutes. Then you get off the phone to the client, and quickly try and get back to the email about the deadline but feel like someone has now injected your conscious mind with tranquilliser as you struggle to even think coherently about what to say and feel completely overwhelmed as chatter in your head is now very loud and a whole committee of voices – having an argument with your wife ready to defend yourself saying, "Why doesn't she appreciate how hard I work and understand I can't help it...?" and preparing yourself for the criticism from your boss about your work, which makes you feel like you have disappointed him, and then start a tirade of some very negative words to yourself about your performance and that you need to be better than this. The feeling of failure creeps in and being a disappointment comes on, and in your heightened fight or flight state, you feel like you just want to quit and not deal with any of this, and go and get drunk.

While this may for some of you be an extreme picture to paint and not a usual day for you or the exact same scenario as what you deal with, the point is that in a normal business day, your mind has to process a vast amount of information coming at you in multiple forms and cope with varying stressors or threats to the brain to have you survive any given day. In this example, in reality, it is just a series of events that happen and exchanges between people, however, it is the way they are perceived in the mind of this person that is what makes it so stressful and causes the high levels of stress.

If your brain did not have this innately intelligent threat response machine in it to detect and signal to us when we are in danger or when there is a real or perceived threat to our survival, we would possibly not be alive today. However, in the 21st century modern day world, it is almost never a physical threat to our life that has us in a fight or flight state; it is the way we perceive what we are feeling threatened by that produces this heightened state of stress. Last month, we talked about the way our brain reacts to stressors today is from a very primitive fight or flight stress response designed some 50,000 years ago to have us survive real threats to our survival. I explained how frequent activation of the body's stress response, essential for managing acute threats, can in fact damage the body and mind in the long run – measured by your Allostatic Load.

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In this article, we will get into more depth of understanding stress and stressors, what happens in the brain and your body when you keep increasing your Allostatic Load, and how you can reduce this load and get access to new levels of performance, productivity and overall wellness.

The ancient brain versus the modern mind – are you being mindless or mindful when it comes to dealing with your stress? When it comes to dealing with stress and making it simple for you to get your hands around something to apply to your own life, I find it gives you a good perspective (in a very unscientific and subjective way) if you look at the brain and the mind as two different things. You could look at the brain as a predictable computer that spits out automatic patterns when there is no mind involved – call this being mindless. You could look at the mind then as the master controller that when you are being mindful, can stop or inhibit the mindless brain from taking over and causing you unnecessary stress. Mostly, if we are not careful, we easily become mindless when some threat triggers our brain into a fight or flight response. From his extensive research, David Rock, who founded the discourse of "Neuroleadership", has articulated five primary threats (and rewards) to the brain that trigger us to have a fight/flight response. They are status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness (SCARF). If any of these get threatened, your brain immediately gives you a hit of stress hormones to deal with the threat. Depending on how severe or how many of these primary threats are triggered,

determines the size of the stress response. He created the SCARF model to help people easily remember these threats when teaching them to master using their brain better (davidrock.net).

While our ancient brain will react automatically (being mindless) to any of these primary threats that show up in the form of some stressor, whether physically real or

perceived, it is our conscious mind or our pre-frontal cortex part of our brain (being mindful) that can give us access to inhibiting the automatic patterns our brain fires out when the stressor activates our brain to a threat response.

I like to break stressors down into three categories to make it simple to see what you can do about the ones you have that are causing you unnecessary stress in your life:

1. STRESSORS IN YOUR ENVIRONMENT

You either put these stressors there or they are part of your lifestyle. For example: children, work and living situations. You have less control over these particular stressors, and you will need to learn to manage their effect on you, i.e. if your children or your boss/colleagues are a stressor, you can't just get rid of them to deal with this stressor.

2. STRESSORS THAT ARE PHYSICAL

Injuries; pain; not moving your body sufficiently; what you do or don't put in your mouth; when you eat and how regularly; how much you eat; chemical or toxic things you are subjected to, etc. You mostly have control over these particular stressors, and you can reduce, mitigate or remove them.

3. STRESSORS THAT ARE MENTAL/EMOTIONAL

Thinking negatively; your view of yourself; the stories and conversations you have about yourself; what you say when things don't go your way; your reaction to stressors in your state of mind; how you react to what others say to you; how you perceive what others say to you; etc. You have complete control over these particular stressors.

We are going to focus on the third category of stressor as I find this is really the source of most unnecessary stress levels that affect people's performance, productivity and overall wellness, and is directly connected with the effect of the first two.

There is so much incredible research and data now about stress, the brain and how it works but this theory does not always give you access to applying it to dealing with stress in your day-to-day life. When in the moment of a stressor triggering a threat to your brain, what I find makes THE difference in working with my clients is how you manage your mind (mindfulness) and being conscious of the thoughts and narratives you are saying to yourself (your internal dialogue) that gives you the chance to actually control and inhibit your automatic reactions, patterns and behaviors that cause you undue stress and impact your day-to-day performance. When you understand the relationship between stress, your brain, your conscious mind and language, you can get access to elevating your levels of performance moment to moment.

Language or more simply put, the narratives and interpretations we have about our life constantly and how we human beings use language, is such an important thing to understand when it comes to dealing with your stressors and stress. If we did not have the capacity for language, we would probably respond to stress a little like a cat or a dog. When a dog or a cat feel sick (signalled by a stress response to their brain), they will often go and eat grass and vomit. But because we can use language to describe our feelings and situations we encounter, we have a unique way of dealing with stress.

Compared to the caveman of 50,000 years ago, we deal with stress differently because our brains are bigger and some parts have become much more advanced, creating a mind that can be mindful and consciously inhibit the mindless, more ancient parts of the brain. And we have the capacity for language and can make up narratives and interpretations of the stressors that are coming at us on a day-to-day basis.

Our brain is wired for the five primary threats and always on alert for them. Because we have had so many things already happen in our past, our very smart brain has come up with as many possible indicators that something dangerous might happen any moment, so without knowing it, we react to things that happen or things that people say with some narrative or interpretation that we made up some time ago. The release of stress hormones from stressful events from the past causes our brain to remember those short-term events such that we avoid the experience of them in the future or so our brain can trigger a fight or flight response if a similar event is perceived may happen.

To use your mind powerfully to reduce, mitigate or remove stressors that are causing you undue stress, there are some fundamental points I will make when it comes to dealing with your stressors and thriving in the 21st Century. When these are understood in an holistic or more holographic way, they can give you an insight into how to start mastering and managing your mind to enable you to inhibit the effects your ancient brain can have on you in response to threats, to give access to a new level of performance, productivity and overall wellness.

- **We are fundamentally and foremost physiological and biological beings.**
- **We are also linguistic beings and have the capacity to use language to describe and articulate things.**
- **Our physiology/biology has not evolved or changed since it was designed.**
- **Our linguistic capacity and ability to use language has evolved and changed.**

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- **Our environment has changed rapidly and drastically.**
- **We mis-interpret the physiological and biological responses of our body/mind to this environment.**

To sum up these points, here is the main point – you need to understand your physiology/biology and the power of language to deal with stress and improve your performance, productivity and overall wellness. Understanding our basic and fundamental physiological/biological nature and how our brain is wired to constantly be on the look-out for potential threats needs to be understood in conjunction with understanding that because we are human, when our brain spits out a bunch of chemicals into our body to try and survive some perceived threat, we will be compelled to give it some interpretation of which are usually pre-programmed narratives from the past that will potentially contribute to or increase the feelings of being stressed. If you can observe the feelings that come with your mindless brain signalling a threat and then engage your conscious mind and be mindful and aware of the subjective narrative or interpretation you have of what is happening, then you will be able to reduce the level of stress that the stressors you have in your environment can cause.

Here is what there is to start practicing to develop more muscle with your conscious mind and inhibit the mindless and automatic brain that if not managed will continue to cause you to react inappropriately to stressors that cause you unnecessary stress and impact your performance, productivity and overall wellness.

See if you can write down the common stressors you have in your life that cause you to get stressed and react and impact you negatively. Start noticing when you react to these stressors and really try and observe the feeling that comes when your brain is triggered to react to it and tune in to the narratives or interpretations you are having about what is happening in your body, mind and your environment. In the moment of noticing your reaction and the onslaught of chemicals, emotions and feelings your brain begins to fire off, see if you can STOP, catch yourself about to be mindless or in the midst of being mindless and do your best to separate what is actually happening in reality or just the facts (the objective state of things), the feeling you get when the stressor causes a stress response in your brain or makes you “feel” stressed or agitated (your physiological reaction/state) and the narrative or interpretation you are actually giving to what is happening in reality and observing what you are saying to yourself about it (your subjective reaction/state).

I coach and teach my clients to become masterful at separating the objective state of what is actually happening, their physiological reaction/state and their subjective reaction/state. When you can become proficient at this, you will find that you can stop the narratives and interpretations that are from the past, that have been the same for as long as you can remember and cause you to get stressed or more stressed, and re-interpret, re-frame or re-programme your mind by creating new narratives and interpretations of what is happening and what you are feeling in response to stressors you are dealing with. It just takes constantly winning the battle against your ancient brain (being mindless) and using the power of your modern mind (being mindful). The more you win over your ancient brain, the more access you have to reducing the effect that stressors have on you and creating the opportunity for new levels of performance, productivity and overall wellness. **M2**

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