
THE BRAIN BURNOUT SERIES

BURNING OUT OUR BRAINS

PART 2

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This is part two of the “Brain Burnout Series”, and this month we are focusing on how to prevent it and manage it when it is happening. The most important thing to take from this is that you must learn to be aware of the signs and symptoms of how your brain is being used and how it is functioning, and not to ignore the fundamental physiological signs of when you are pushing it beyond its capacity and burning it out. This takes expanding the use of your mind (conscious awareness) and being proactive in the current marketplace we are working in to be mindful of what we are using our brain for, given the volume of stimulation and information our brains are being subjected to. If you read last month’s article I introduced brain burnout as a phenomenon that I am currently engaged in addressing, to help many people that come to me who are or were performing at a high level across most areas of their life, and have lost the capacity to maintain it and thus are not functioning properly. In short, I observe and assess that to varying degrees they have brain burnout. In the first part of the Brain Burnout series, as it is with all of the people, I coach and train that you must first become aware of this phenomenon, notice and observe your own habits, behaviours and patterns of thinking that may be contributing to it. In this second part of the series, I will show you how to prevent and deal with it when it is happening, alongside some practical things to work on in your daily life to reduce, mitigate or remove the stressors contributing to it. The way we are using our brains in today’s modern fast-paced world is not how they were designed to be used, and in my view, and with all the research on the brain I have been reading over the last couple of years, we have not caught up with being able to manage and deal with the volume of things that we have to process on a day to day basis. Your brain’s flexibility (neuroplasticity) can train it to cope better with the demands needed to be put on it. But from my experience working with some very smart, well organised and successful business professionals and executives, we don’t fundamentally understand how to manage our mind and brain properly, or how to deal with the stress from all the myriad of stressors that we are constantly exposed to. To prevent or stop you experiencing burning out your brain, there are some fundamental things you need to understand, apply and practice. Here are, from my experience, some of the key things to start working on to prevent you burning out your brain.

GET CLEAR ON YOUR ALLOSTATIC LOAD, REDUCE YOUR STRESS LEVELS AND DEAL WITH THE STRESSORS THAT ARE CAUSING IT.

Allostatic Load is defined as the physiological consequences of chronic exposure to fluctuating or heightened neural or neuroendocrine response that results from repeated or chronic stress. It is used to explain and measure how frequent activation of the body’s stress response, essential for managing acute threats, can damage the body in the long run. In terms of how this affects your life, the higher your allostatic load over a period of time, the more your body and mind will have to adapt to deal with the levels of stress hormones and other chemicals the body produces in response to the stressors. This in turn eventually leads to declining levels in performance, productivity and overall wellness.

To get a handle on this and increase your awareness of what is going on in your mind and body, write down all the negative stressors that you have in your life right now – as many as you can. Here is a list of possible ones to stimulate your thinking (don’t have this list make you more stressed out, just write them down and look at them objectively):

- *Not exercising for long periods.*
- *Eating unhealthy foods constantly.*
- *Overeating.*
- *Being overweight.*
- *Thinking negatively for sustained periods.*
- *Reacting negatively to circumstances in life.*
- *Remaining under great pressure at work.*
- *Not disengaging and taking breaks from activities you are doing that require a lot of your energy.*
- *Drinking alcohol too frequently.*
- *Drinking too much coffee.*
- *Being resentful and angry about things that have happened to you.*
- *Not getting sufficient sleep or rest for several days.*
- *Not switching off your brain and relaxing weekly and not having down time.*
- *Driving in the traffic and road rage.*
- *Poor posture and a misaligned spine (subluxation).*
- *Injuries that cause you chronic pain.*
- *Being late and in a rush to be on time.*
- *Missing a deadline.*
- *Arguing with someone.*
- *Bad or negative relationships.*
- *Your children crying or not behaving and upsetting you.*
- *Trying to multi-task the incredible amount of information we have to process on a daily basis just to keep up with life.*
- *Toxins from smog, smoke or chemicals in the products we use.*
- *Smoking.*
- *Being overwhelmed by the amount of work we have to accomplish or our too-busy social calendar.*
- *Dwelling on events from the past that were negative.*

Rate each on a scale of one to five; five being they cause a

high state of stress and one meaning they cause a mild to low state of stress. Now examine the impact or effect these stressors are having on your performance, productivity and overall state of mind and look at what actions you can take to either reduce, mitigate or remove any of these stressors to lessen the amount of stress that they are causing on your mind and body. The more you become aware of the stressors that are going on in your life at any time, the more access you have to understanding the level of stress you may be under. Stress directly affects your prefrontal cortex function so you have less ability to consciously manage your mind; your subconscious and automatic habits, behaviours and thought patterns are likely to take control and impact your ability to function at your best.

MINDFULNESS AND AWARENESS OF YOUR MENTAL/EMOTIONAL STRESSORS.

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 state of mind.

See if you can write down the common and most regular mental/emotional (in the mind) stressors you have in your life that cause you to get stressed and react and impact you negatively. Practice 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 or being triggered and the onslaught of chemicals, emotions and feelings, your brain begins to fire off. But see if you can stop this; 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) as well as the narrative or interpretation you are actually giving to what is happening in reality and also the feeling that it is giving you (your subjective reaction/state). The more you can practice separating what is happening objectively, the physiological reaction and the subjective narratives that your brain/mind start to come up with, the quicker you will be able to bring yourself back to a good state of arousal and consciousness when things do happen that cause a mental/emotional stressor (reaction), preventing it from impacting your state of mind and causing unnecessary levels of stress.

MAXIMISE THE LIMITED ENERGY YOUR BRAIN HAS TO PERFORM AT ITS BEST:

The pre frontal cortex (PFC) is the part of the brain responsible for our conscious brain activity and has a limited supply of glucose. Certain activities will use up this precious resource faster than others. To increase the capacity, you have to use your mind to its best, and to ensure you are not tiring your brain unnecessarily thereby leaving you less able to perform other important tasks that need your PFC. There is so much research about the PFC and how to maximise the use of your brain, but for the sake of making it simple for you here are three key things to work on.

- Prioritise prioritising – One of the most energy-demanding

activities for the conscious brain is prioritising what you have to do. To help plan your day better and become more effective you need to understand that your brain has a limited amount of energy. Our ability to make sense of our thoughts gets depleted over time as we engage in mentally challenging tasks so we need to treat our mental energies as a limited resource. If you have any prioritising to do for planning, tasks or projects, make sure you do this at a time in the day when your mind is fresh or recharged. I would recommend doing any prioritising or planning early in the day when your mind has the most energy.

- Don't try and hold multiple things in your mind at the same time while working things out. Again, this activity is very energy expensive on the brain and will use up your mental resources very quickly. Our brains work best when we can see things visually so I would also recommend if you are trying to work things out, solve problems, figure out how to organise projects, etc, write it down so you can see it and you will preserve your brain and have more capacity for other important things you need to use your mind for.

- Try and limit multi-tasking and constantly diverting your attention between different tasks as it is shown scientifically to reduce your levels of performance and productivity and simply drain your brain unnecessarily, diluting your focus. While we all think we are doing great by multi-tasking, it actually does not improve our productivity and performance, so I strongly recommend doing less of it.

“ In our modern world we have threats to our brain constantly – these can be small with minimal increases in stress or large sending us into a complete state of fight or flight reducing our performance and productivity. ”

USE THE SCARF MODEL TO MINIMISE THREATS AND MAXIMISE REWARDS TO YOUR BRAIN.

Your brain is designed to be constantly on the lookout for and detecting any threat that it perceives may be a danger. In our modern world we have threats to our brain constantly – these can be small with minimal increases in stress or large sending us into a complete state of fight

or flight reducing our performance and productivity. This can shape how you deal with life moment to moment and impact your capacity to get the best out of your mind, which is why the SCARF model is a very powerful tool for you to practice, develop and apply to your life.

The SCARF model stands for Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness. It distinguishes five areas of experience that trigger strong threats and rewards in the brain, which influence many of our behaviours. It gives people the ability to understand why they react and behave the way they do in social situations, and is a powerful means to access, modifying and changing how they react.

I find it such a great tool as it gives me a clear and easy-to-remember language to reappraise my emotions and deal with the myriad of social threats and rewards that I encounter daily. Social threats, like the fear of looking bad in front of others can impact your perception, brain function, and ability to think, create and collaborate. With practice, using the language of the SCARF model means you can notice these five experiences before, during or after an event that cause a social threat or reward to your brain. It enables us to mitigate or take away the threats that an interaction might bring about. The language of SCARF can help us notice a threat occurring while it is happening in real time and look to regulate our emotions. After an emotional event, such as a team meeting that went wrong because a comment generated a sense of unfairness,

SCARF can also help people explain and therefore understand a situation. Using it you are left with different choices as you minimise the potential impact of your actions on others (and others' actions on you).

FEED YOUR BRAIN THE HEALTHY MIND PLATTER.

I almost feel I am preaching about this now as I refer to it in most of my articles, and there is a reason why. Implementing this model will have you learn how to have a healthy mind in the best way I have seen amongst all the literature available as it is so relevant and current. Here is a summary of the seven neuro-cognitive activities to include in your daily and weekly life that nurture the mind:

- Sleep time – Refreshing mind and body, and consolidating memory.
- Play time – The joy of experimenting with life.
- Downtime – Disconnecting for integration and insight.
- Time-in – Reflection, attunement, mindfulness.
- Connecting time – The healing power of relationships.
- Physical time – Improving the brain's plasticity through exercise.
- Focus time – Attention management for performance.

MANAGE YOUR WILLPOWER.

People feel overwhelmed because there are more temptations than ever and we are under much more strain than our ancestors. The thousands of people studied in all the various experiments consistently demonstrated two lessons:

- You have a finite amount of willpower that becomes depleted as you use it.
- You use the same stock of willpower for all manner of tasks.

I have covered this previously, but it is important to remember that exerting self-control uses up the limited supply of glucose in the brain used for many different executive functions of the PFC. So if you are doing activities that use a lot of your willpower, make sure before you make the next decision, or enter into the next activity that demands your concentration, you re-fuel first to avoid losing control of your ability to focus, to stay rational and not react in ways you normally would not.

Planning and scheduling are critical for using your willpower to your advantage and conserving it for things that it really needs to be used for. Once the plan is formed, the unconscious can stop nagging the conscious mind with reminders. Effective planning should even budget your willpower. How will you expend your willpower today, this evening, and the next month?

Here are some of the most common activities that deplete your willpower that you should watch for doing unnecessarily and strategically manage:

- Multi-tasking.
- Task switching.
- Acts of Self-control (resisting temptation/desire).
- Choices/decisions/consideration.
- Planning/thinking about the future.
- Trying to listen to someone while doing an unrelated task that requires your attention.
- Focusing/concentrating on any one task.
- Stress.

There are many simple ways you can practically apply the principle of willpower to use it to your advantage and build your strength. Here are some simple examples of how I implement it:

- Stopping meetings with colleagues when their/my willpower is clearly depleted and productivity is declining.
 - Schedule less willpower-demanding activities later in the week.
 - Move your body between activities that deplete your willpower, or power-nap.
 - Switch off phone/email/message systems at times in the day when you do not need to be available or need to focus your mind on one task.
 - Decline being interrupted or stopping to handle things for people.
 - Train your environment to not disrupt or distract you unnecessarily.
 - Schedule according to the brain resources needed, and plan for when you will be doing things that deplete your willpower.
 - Plan as fully as possible into the future, and schedule your day and week before the start of it, so you spend very little time using your willpower to think about what you "should" be doing. I ensure that every Sunday or Monday my week is fully scheduled with everything I can possibly plan for, and that I am planned out two to three months as much as I can.
 - Capture things as soon as possible that enter your brain that cannot be done now and put them on a list or in your calendar to be filed in a list later. If my mind wanders and starts thinking about something to be done, I stop and get it out of my head as fast as possible. Stop using your memory for things – it depletes your willpower.
 - Notice if you are losing focus or "feeling" drained and if possible stop and deal with your lack of mental resources. If I can't, I will push through, but often look ahead in my day and see what I can do to change some things or rearrange things so I can replenish my stores.
 - Do some form of movement and activity first thing in the morning to charge up your brain and body when you have the most willpower. This is a habit that I have formed over many years, and I recommend getting this into your daily routine.
 - Be mindful of things people are requesting, asking, or activities you are about to do that may unnecessarily use your willpower. I am mindful and constantly aware of things that may use my willpower.
 - Practice putting things back in their place after use and keep things neat and tidy around you as much as possible.
- In today's highly mentally demanding world, it works to look at what you are using your willpower for and how you manage it to give yourself an improvement and edge on your performance and productivity. No matter what you want to achieve, you must remember:
- We are under much more strain than our ancestors.
 - Your supply of willpower (self-control) is limited, and you use the same resource for many different things – make sure you regularly renew and replenish it.
 - What matters is the exertion, not the outcome. Resisting temptation or giving in; both deplete the resource
 - Watch what you use your willpower for.

LIVE A WELLNESS LIFESTYLE.

This was covered in my February M2 Article in detail, but essentially living a wellness lifestyle means being empowered in your mind and aware of the conversations that get in the way of you making choices that promote wellness; dealing with your nutrition and eating habits; having sufficient daily movement and physical activity; having a healthy spine and nervous system free from blocks to your body's ability to express wellness and

function properly; creating an environment and structures around you that promote wellness; understanding how to manage your energy such that you have sustained energy and vitality to fulfill all the things that are important to you; and understanding the stress response, the nature of chronic stress, and its effects on the human mind-body. It is understanding and honoring that your mind-body needs a certain level of sufficiency and purity in what I call the key nutrients for wellness – air, water, food, physical activity, and an empowering/healthy state of mind.

These are all the ways you can learn to manage yourself so you can have a brain that is not getting constantly burnt out, but also prevent you actually hitting brain burnout from chronic misuse of your brain and its capacity. This can lead to you having to take time out to recover or worse, take medication to deal with the effects long term to get back to functioning properly.

If you notice the signs and symptoms that I discussed in the last article of when you are beginning to or actually experiencing burning out your brain temporarily, there are many things you can do. Here are some of the simple things I do, to give you some things to try. But there will be other things that work for you as an individual that you may already do, or can create for yourself to get you back into a state of better brain function and ward off the effects of when you go too far and tip yourself over the edge.

- Stop working on whatever you are working on and have a “movement break”. I use this effectively when I know I have days when I am working constantly on many tasks and my day is very full. If I start to notice signs that my brain is getting fatigued or I am losing focus, I will take a break for five to 10 minutes and do some kind of movement (generally every hour to an hour and a half). I love dancing so I will sometimes put some music on and have a boogie (especially when I work from home) to really disengage and let my brain rest. This is not practical for most so a short walk or any kind of movement for a few minutes will suffice. This may seem obvious, but many people don’t respect the fact that movement is the source of our lives and our brains need movement to function. If you sit for hours at your desk without moving, you are robbing yourself of the kind of nourishment that your brain thrives on to function at its best. I would not recommend going more than one and half hours sitting without a good five to 10 minutes of movement to stimulate your body to pump blood and other important hormones and neurotransmitters around the body.

- Distract yourself and disengage with something that does not require your pre frontal cortex (conscious focus). Studies have shown that if you fire up other parts of the brain like doing things that are mindless (thereby activating your unconscious brain) your pre frontal cortex activation will be reduced and you can give it some temporary rest. This could be simply doing something that does not require your focus and is menial or simple, something fun, chatting to someone about something not connected to whatever you are working on, or anything that disengages you from the task you are working on.

- Have a power-nap (see the healthy mind platter for the research into what works best).

- Meditate and breathe with your eyes closed to allow your PFC to not be fully engaged and bring awareness to what you are experiencing (mindfulness) so you can be tuned in to where your

mind is at and what you may need to do to take care of your brain.

- Use the different forms of re-appraisal you have to get perspective of what is going on so you don’t start spiralling into a negative state of mind. Then stop to look at what you need to do to deal with your brain being in a state where continuing the task will not be productive and lead to you burning out your brain.

- If you are unsure of whether you are in a state of brain burnout but would be likely to just “push on”, use other people in your life that know the signs and symptoms of what you get like when you are over working or over using your brain; someone who can look more objectively at what you have been doing. I do this with my partner a lot, as I sometimes get into a certain state of mind where I don’t feel certain signs and symptoms, but am not sure if it is because of the fact I have used up my brain resources or it’s something else on my mind. I can sometimes not have the capacity to make the right choices or decisions about slowing down or stopping what I am doing so I ask my partner to give me some assessment and feedback about what they think from an objective viewpoint, which can allow me to see things objectively also and not rely on my subjective interpretation – which can

be inaccurate and lead to me pushing on and getting myself into a state of burning out my brain. Having support and people watching what you are doing to your own mind and brain is a great way to ensure that you keep yourself from getting into a state of burning out your brain.

The main point here is for you to keep getting more and more aware of what you are doing throughout your day to your mind and brain, and continue to raise your level of being conscious of how to manage your mind effectively so you can keep improving your levels of performance and productivity. It is to have a healthy state of mind in all areas of your life. Your life is not just in your “job” or during your paid working hours, and many people will let the other important areas of their life suffer as they try to deal with the relentless

demands of their business and professional lives. If you want to have a healthy relationship, have the energy to exercise and take care of your physical body. Be present with your family, enjoy your other interests, hobbies or leisure time – then you need to learn how to manage your mind, and deal with all the work your brain has to do with all the activities in all areas of your life. A client of mine said this in a very powerful way recently, which I have now stolen as a great way to think about your life, and manage your brains resources – we actually have a 16-18 hour work day in which we are awake and actively using our mind and brain, not just when we go to work or a job for 8-10 hours.

In the next article we will look at using your mind and brain to your competitive advantage with others in the marketplace. We will look at strategies to become effective at managing it, and exploit the fact that others are not, having an edge over others to get what you want faster, and once you are mastering it, how to take your performance of your brain to a new level. 

Drew Knowles is a Mind Coach who trains and coaches people to manage their mind and deal with stress to improve their performance, productivity and overall wellness.

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