



THE EXECUTIVE ALCHEMIST



WELLBEING IN THE FACE OF STRESS

A GUIDE TO SUSTAINING MENTAL
HEALTH AND WELLBEING AT
HOME AND AT WORK

“For everyone, well-being is a journey. The secret is committing to that journey and taking those first steps with hope and belief in yourself.”

Deepak Chopra



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WELCOME

Hello!

I've put together this e-book to support the AAT webinar on 25 January 2024 at 6.30pm titled 'Wellbeing in the face of Stress.' It includes the links I'll reference during the session, and the content covered by the slides (plus a little bit more).

Enjoy!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A.A.' with a flourish.

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FROM STRESS TO STRENGTH

There are four broad styles of thinking and behaving, each associated with one of four basic brain systems: dopamine, serotonin, testosterone and oestrogen (also closely related to oxytocin). Researchers have found these impact the way we respond to stress, and in turn how we behave and express ourselves when we are feeling positive. I talk about how our *stress type* is linked to our *success style*. See the the next two pages for alternative summaries of the four areas. Which are your primary and secondary drivers?

Anthropologist, Dr Helen Fisher is the leading scientist in this area of personality research. She has created a personality quiz based on her findings. If you are curious, the Fisher Personality quiz can be taken here: <https://theanatomyoflove.com/relationship-quizzes/helen-fishers-personality-test/personality-test-1/>



WHICH ARE YOUR PRIMARY AND SECONDARY STRESS TYPES?

Whirlwind

Anxious
Distracted
Too busy for "this"
Flighty
Reject rules
Others find it hard to keep up



Bull-in-a-china-shop

Angry
Frustrated
Assertive
Highly directive
Told "you don't understand"

Judge

Cautious
Critical and Inflexible
Micro-manager
Fixated on process
Traditionalist



Pushover

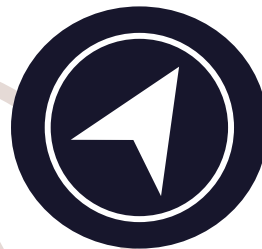
Avoid confrontation
Over-commit
Indecisive
Too accommodating
Prioritise others over yourself



DO YOU RECOGNISE YOUR MOST NATURAL SUCCESS STYLE(S)?

Innovator

Energy and innovation
Open-minded
Positive
Enthusiastic
Creative
Seek better ways



Director

Clarity and impact
Goal-orientated
Focused
Clear
Logical
Assertive

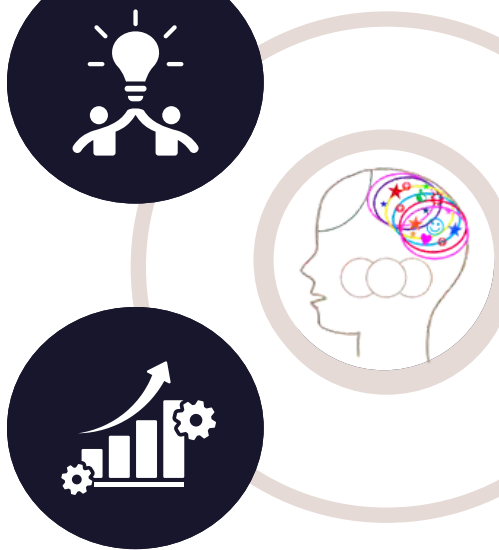
Producer

Quality and delivery
Attention to detail
Reliable & Loyal
Systems & Processes
Rhythm & Routine
Community



Connector

Strong communication
Relationship building skills
Big-picture, long term thinking
Engage, listen and empower
Negotiate and find way forward
Flexibility



FROM STRESS TO STRENGTH

The neurochemical make up of our brains influences our temperament and in turn our instinctive responses when we are stressed and when we are feeling positive.

People with different temperaments perhaps unsurprisingly prefer different work environments and communication styles in order to do their best work.

What helps you think clearly, stay focused, and perform well?

| Chemical | Negative stress traits | Positive success style | What helps you feel good |
|-----------------------------|---|--|---|
| Testosterone | Bull-in-a-china-shop <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anger • Hostile / aggressive • Lacking in empathy and social awareness • Impaired communication skills | Director - Impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus • Impact • Efficiency • Direct & assertive | Confident, direct, assertive, attention to detail, tough minded, analytical, strive for efficiency and logic, sceptical, competitive, inventive, independent, rational, goal-orientated <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respond well to goals and targets • Like logic and efficiency • Don't like waffle • Enjoy autonomy and opportunity to self-direct |
| Dopamine | Whirlwind <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distracted • Very busy elsewhere • Bored & restless • Reject rules | Innovator - Energy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energy • Intellectual curiosity • Innovation • Courage | Energetic, creative, curious, open-minded, cerebral, novelty/adventure-seeking, love to learn, impulsive, flexible, irreverent, positive, flexible, daring, independent, charismatic, outward-looking. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love variety and change • Enjoy the ability to think creatively and out of the box • Hate being constrained by rules • Find systems and processes difficult to comply with |
| Serotonin | Judge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cautious • Withdrawn emotionally • Critical Inflexible | Producer - Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calm • Ordered & reliable • Self-disciplined • Traditional with family & community-focus | Create and value order and security; like schedules; managerial; sociable; respectful; cautious; self-controlled; precise; conscientious. Compliant, respect authority and social norms. Modest, loyal, patient, persistent, conventional, predictable, family and community orientated. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoy routine and structure • Value clarity and facts • Dislike ambiguity • Appreciate attention to detail • Respect authority • Are good collaborators • Hate people who are late and unreliable. |
| Oestrogen / Oxytocin | Pushover <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritise others; over accommodate • Indecisive • Self-doubt • Emotional & sensitive | Connector - Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep interpersonal skills • Empathy • Flexibility • Big-picture, long term thinking and planning | Imaginative, intuitive, big-picture thinker; socially-skilled, compassionate, verbal acuity. People skills, intuition, empathy, nurturing, generosity. Co-operation, agreeableness. Contextual, holistic, long term thinking. Mental flexibility. Trust. Emotionally expressive, consensus-builders, long-term planners, nurturing, ambiguity. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value understanding the big-picture and long-term vision • Hate aggression and confrontation • Are likely to tell others what they want to hear, rather than what's actually going on. • Need to feel trusted and valued. |



HOW TO OPERATE AT YOUR BEST

How can we help ourselves operate at our best, even under immense pressure? How can we build our resilience against stress and ease any anxiety, anger, or depression. The next few pages outline how the brain works, and include top tips on how to help yourself thrive rather than merely survive.

How does the brain work?

The conscious part of the brain is the bit you know as you. It is the part which interacts with the world and which we use to be aware of our interactions with others. When we are thinking positive thoughts it is attached to a vast intellectual resource: the intellectual mind. We do not share this with other animals. I call it our **positive intellectual brain**.

When we operate from this part of the brain we generally get things right. It will always come up with answers based on a proper assessment of the situation and is generally very positive.

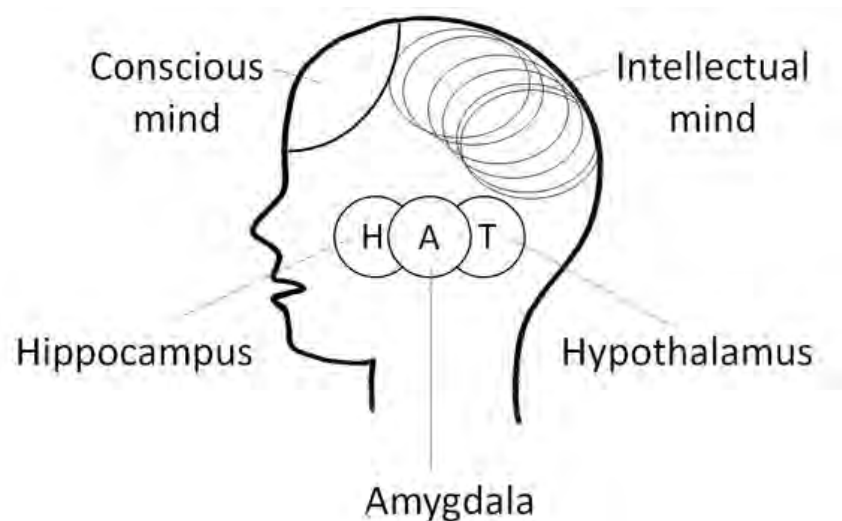
Here I like to say we '**SHINE**': our **S**peed of thought is twice as fast as when we are negative or neutral; we are **H**ealthy and tend to live longer; we appear to be more **I**ntelligent, able to digest complex information and recall facts well; we are **N**uanced and creative in our thinking; and we are **E**nergised and more efficient than when we are negatively primed.



OUR PRIMITIVE, EMOTIONAL BRAIN

There is another part of the brain. This is the original, primitive section. The central and influential bit of this brain is the amygdala. This is generally referred to as the fight/ flight/ freeze area of the brain. It is associated with two other very primitive parts:

- The hippocampus – which holds all our primitive and sometimes inappropriate behavioural experiences and patterns.
- The hypothalamus – which regulates chemical responses in the body and mind.





DANGER!

So let us imagine that when you step outside today you run straight into a polar bear. What would happen? **Your anxiety would go up. You would lose intellectual control and move from the intellectual brain to the primitive, emotional brain.** You would go sweaty, your heart would race, your stomach would churn, and you would be off like a shot. In the circumstances this response would be entirely appropriate. You'd be relieved and pleased.

Unfortunately it is the same in life. When our anxiety goes up, and it can be a gradual process, we lose intellectual control and to a greater or lesser extent the primitive mind takes over. This mind always operates within the primitive parameters of anxiety, anger and depression, or a combination of all three.

If our primitive mind thinks that, for one reason or another, our life is in some sort of crisis or emergency generally it will step in to help. Anxiety, anger and depression are all primitive opt out clauses.

- **Anxiety:** It is doubtful we would have been too far away from our panic button at any given time during those early times.
- **Anger** is merely a primitive way of increasing our strength to defend ourselves against wild animals and other wild tribesmen.
- **Depression:** When the cave man looked out of the cave and saw snow, ice or danger and realised he couldn't go out to hunt, he pulled the rug over his head and didn't interact until the situation changed. We have adapted this to all the modern day symptoms of depression.

EVEN MORE TO THE PRIMITIVE MIND:

- **The primitive mind is a negative mind.** It will always see things from the worst possible perspective. If you think about it, it has to for your self-preservation. When you run into a polar bear it won't say, "ah, magnificent animal". No, quite rightly you will say, "it will eat me!" This response is great when we run into polar bears, but not so good when the bank statement arrives, or we have an argument with a colleague or family.
- **It is an obsessional mind.** If you did have a polar bear in the back garden you would be reminded of it constantly. You would keep checking.
- **It is a vigilant mind.** If the perception is that danger is all around, then it is wise to stay on red alert.
- **It can't be innovative.** It has to refer to previous patterns of behaviour because the primitive brain is not an intellect. If what we did yesterday ensured our survival then we are encouraged to do it again.

ANXIETY AND NEGATIVE THINKING

How do we create the anxiety that moves us from the intellectual, sensible, astute part of the brain to the emotional, angry, anxious and depressed part?

Anxiety is caused by negative thinking. It is not the events in one's life that necessarily cause the perception of crisis. No, if that were so everyone about to deliver a presentation would be suffering from panic attacks, and we know that is not the case. So it must be our thought patterns surrounding the events of our life.

Every negative thought we have is converted into anxiety. **We can create anxiety by negatively looking back over the past and negatively forecasting the future.**

Here we should remember that **the mind can't tell the difference between imagination and reality.** Intellectually you know your exam is going to go okay - they generally do - but being you, you start thinking about things going wrong. You think about it 50 times? The actual exam goes quite well, but you have experienced 51 exams and 50 have been disasters.

Happily though, we can use our minds equally powerfully to ease anxiety and feel more calm, confident and positive.

PHYSIOLOGY OF THE BRAIN

Early man and early women were given quite definite rewards for carrying out certain evolutionary processes.

They got a reward when they hunted and gathered, and successfully supported themselves and their families. Humans are better as a tribe rather than individuals, so they got rewarded when they interacted with others. The reward they got they definitely recognised: they felt motivated, and it helped them cope with day to day activities – helped them cope better with physical fear; made them braver; and even helped them cope with physical pain. No doubt they were pleased.

CHEMICAL RESPONSE:

We know that reward is a chemical response in the brain that produces various neurotransmitters that act as catalysts for that sort of mentally healthy behaviour. The neurotransmitter we talk about most - simply because it is the most important - is serotonin.

When we produce a constant flow of serotonin we are nice, happy, coping, brave little souls!





HOW CAN WE BUILD OUR RESILIENCE & CAPACITY TO FEEL GOOD?

“In order to be operating effectively – let alone at our very best – we have got to be working within the parameters of our resilient, intellectual mind.”

How can we maximise our ability to excel rather than suffer? At the simplest level we need to carry out a series of positive behaviours which release into our brain the neurotransmitters that help us thrive.

We need to weave consistently and consciously three core behaviours into our lifestyle: positive action, positive interaction, and positive thought. In this way, we prime our brains to help us cope better with fear, anxiety, pain and even boredom. This is the secret to operating at our very best.



POSITIVE ACTION, POSITIVE INTERACTION, & POSITIVE THOUGHT

These are the three key positive behaviours that help you live and work well.

Each of us has preferences for what helps us feel good and think positively.

The choice and combination of positive behaviours which serve you most powerfully will be unique to you - and will change with time and circumstance too. Stay curious as you explore the possibilities!

POSITIVE ACTION

- Sleep well
- Eat well and drink lots of water.
- Exercise well – run, walk, dance, cycle, yoga, mountain bike, garden, dance (whatever takes your fancy!)
- Get organised – write a list, tidy your desk, plan your work.
- Breathe slowly and deeply. Try breathing in for 5, holding for 5, and out for 5, 5 times. It really helps.

• **What works brilliantly for you?..... WRITE BELOW**

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

POSITIVE INTERACTION

- Meet up with friends and have fun!
- Talk to people who care about you.
- Phone a friend or member of your family who makes you feel good.
- Have a hug.
- Share a smile (with a stranger, even!)
- Be kind and compassionate. Do a good deed for someone, just because...

• **What are your favourites? WRITE BELOW**

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

POSITIVE THOUGHT

- Enjoy a guided meditation from YouTube or an app like Calm, or Headspace, or one of my relaxation tracks shared on the next page.
- Watch a funny comedy, or enjoy an uplifting film or book.
- Reflect on all that you've achieved, and what you're proud of, even if in the middle of a big challenge.
- Write a gratitude journal, noticing three good things that have happened to you in the past 24 hours.

• **What else helps you? WRITE BELOW**

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

THREE GOOD THINGS

A POWERFUL BRAIN TRAINING EXERCISE

A powerful exercise to train our brain to think positively and reduce our stress is 'Three Good Things'. I recommend you find a small notebook and pen, and put it by your bed. Establish a habit to reflect and write down three good things each night before your turn off your light and go to sleep. Clients of mine who have found this exceptionally helpful have included A-level and university students, managers, Directors, CEOs, nurses, pensioners, and parents.

Three Good Things is a very simple exercise. Shawn Achor in 'The Happiness Advantage' (2010: 100-102) writes about it eloquently:

“Just as it takes days of concentrated practice to master a video game, **training your brain to notice more opportunities takes practice focusing on the positive.** The best way to kick-start this is to start making a daily list of the good things in your job, your career, and your life. It may sound hokey, or ridiculously simple - and indeed the activity itself is simple - but over a decade of empirical studies has proven the profound effect it has on the way our brains are wired. When you write down a list of "three good things" that happened that day, your brain will be forced to scan the last 24 hours for potential positives - things that brought small or large laughs, feelings of accomplishment at work, a strengthened connection with family, a glimmer of hope for the future. **In just five minutes a day,** this trains the brain to become more skilled at noticing and focusing on possibilities for personal and professional growth, and seizing opportunities to act on them. At the same time, because we can only focus on so much at once, our brains push out those small annoyances and frustrations that used to loom large into the back-ground, even out of our visual field entirely.

This exercise has slaying power. One study found that participants who wrote down three good things each day for a week were **happier and less depressed at the one month, three month, and six month follow ups.** More amazing: even after stopping the exercise, they remained significantly happier and showed higher levels of optimism. **The better they got at scanning the world for good things to write down, the more good things they saw,** without even trying, wherever they looked. The items you write down each day don't need to be profound or complicated, only specific. You can mention the delicious take-out Thai food you had for dinner, your child's bear hug at the end of a long day, or the well deserved acknowledgement from your boss at work.”



RELAXATION TRACK TO ENJOY

Here is a link to the lovely relaxation track I recommend you listen to every night during stressful times going forward. It's good to put on just after you've switched off the light for the night, or you might like to listen to it during the day when you have a moment of quiet. Feel free to enjoy listening to it as often as you like, but please don't listen to it whilst driving or using machinery!

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/u3ez7ugf78acam9/S01-Amy-Armstrong-mix01.mp3?dl=0>

If you'd prefer to listen to it via YouTube, click here:
<https://youtu.be/sifSHnSGty0>



SIGNATURE STRENGTHS

“*To shine your brightest light is to be who you truly are.*”

Roy T. Bennett

A team of psychologists identified the top 24 character strengths across cultures and nationalities which most contribute to an individual's ability to flourish.

To help you identify which of these 24 are most important to you, scientists have developed a comprehensive survey. This can be accessed for free at <https://www.viacharacter.org/account/register>. It'll take you 10 – 15 minutes to complete.

Suggested activity:

Your top five strengths identified by the survey are known as your signature strengths. From these, or selecting from the list below, choose one that is most central to your identity - closest to who you are.

Write a Reflective Log, describing a specific time when you used this attribute to achieve something of value or used this to navigate a major challenge successfully. What did you do? How did you feel? What were the benefits?



STRENGTHS

from www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths-via

Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience.

Bravery: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what's right even if there's opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it.

Creativity: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it.

Curiosity: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering.

Fairness: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.

Forgiveness: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting others' shortcomings; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful.

Gratitude: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks.

Honesty: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretence; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions.

Hope: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about.

Humility: Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is.

Humour: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes.

Judgment: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly.

Kindness: Doing favours and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them.

Leadership: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.

Love: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing & caring are reciprocated; being close to people.

Love of learning: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows.

Perseverance: Finishing what one starts; persevering in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out the door"; taking pleasure in completing tasks.

Perspective: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself/others.

Prudence: Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted.

Self-Regulation: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions.

Social intelligence: Being aware of the motives /feelings of others and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick.

Spirituality: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort.

Teamwork: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share.

Zest: Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or half-heartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated.

WHAT'S YOUR WELLBEING AT WORK SCORE?

Success at work is dependent on both our mindset and our skillset. Without resilience and confidence, it isn't possible to access our full talents . It's not much fun either.

If you're curious to see how well you're doing, find out your THRIVE score - also known as your Wellbeing-at-Work score - by taking our quick two minute quiz:

[Take the Scorecard](#)

It'll take you less than two minutes. Here are some example questions...

- Are you confident in your abilities, rarely struggling with self-doubt and looping, negative thoughts?
- Do you have a strong support system that you can rely on during challenging times?
- Do you feel in control, able to manage your workflow, and achieve the impact you seek?
- Do you prioritize activities that help you feel relaxed, happy, and fulfilled?
- Do you get enough sleep, and wake feeling refreshed and ready to go?
- Do you bounce back from setbacks and failures quickly and effectively?

If you answered "yes" to most of these questions, congratulations! You are on the path to thriving at work and in life.

If you found yourself hesitating or saying "no" to some of these questions, don't worry. It's never too late to develop the necessary skills and mindset to thrive at work. Think carefully about the strategies I've recommended today, and see which you could introduce to help you start to feel better and ease any stress.

A vertical photograph on the left side of the page shows a person's hands typing on a laptop keyboard. The person is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt. The laptop is silver and the keyboard is black with white lettering. The background is dark and out of focus.

PRODUCTIVITY VS PROCRASTINATION!

We can all do it - put off revising, delay writing a particular report. If you're looking for something to do other than what you really want to and need to, then a hilarious 14 minute TED talk to watch is '[Inside the Mind of a Master Procrastinator](#)' by Tim Urban.

Procrastination is both a symptom and a cause of stress.

FOUR STEPS TO BE PRODUCTIVE

1. Get clear of your goals

- Where do you want to get to? What do you want to achieve?
- Why? - getting clear of why you want to achieve something is important - a strong enough 'why' overcomes so many 'how's'.

2. Prioritise high value tasks

- High value tasks lead you to your goals, rather than round and round in circles...
- Identify and prioritise your High Value Tasks!

3. Design your day to optimise your output

- Know when you have most energy
- Do your high value, more tricky tasks then
- Schedule lower value tasks for lower energy moments.

4. Take conscious care of yourself

- Include positive action, positive interaction, and positive thought in your schedule. Don't neglect your wellbeing because when you feel good, then you have the energy for what and who matters most to you.

WHAT SLOWS YOUR PRODUCTIVITY?

EMAIL OVERLOAD?

The average person checks their email 77 times a day.

Research shows that on average it takes more than 23 minutes to fully recover concentration after a trivial interruption.

Solution?

- Block off time for emails: 2 or 3 blocks of time per day.
- Practice the 4 Ds:
 - Do – if task will take < 2 minutes
 - Diarise – if task will take > 2 minutes
 - Delete – if not urgent or important, consider this option seriously
 - Delegate – if relevant, right, and realistic

CONSTANTLY INTERRUPTED?

- Block off uninterrupted time for high value tasks including thinking.
- Tell the people you need to tell – secure their support.
- Turn off notifications, email, Slack, phone. Turn on out of office?



CAN'T GET STARTED?

TRY POMODORO

- **Decide on your best time for pure focus.** The Pomodoro method is for 25 minutes, but for many this is just too long. What works for you? If it's only 10 minutes, go for 10 minutes. If 5, 5 minutes of focus is better than half an hour of faffing!
- **Choose the task** you want to get done.
- **Set the timer** for the time you've chosen.
- **Work on the task.** If you remember you need to do something else, make a note of it, but keep going with this one. No stopping for cups of tea or quick checks of email or social media. Pure focus.
- **Tick off the time** when the timer goes off. Celebrate!
- **Take a 5 minute break.** Make a cup of tea, do some stretches, or take 5 deep breaths. Don't be tempted to miss the break, it doesn't have to be more than a couple of minutes, but do at the least stand up and stretch. Your brain (and body!) will thank you.
- **Every 4 Pomodoros take a longer break.** 20 or 30 minutes is good. This time will allow your brain to assimilate the new information, and rest before you refocus and go again. You've got this!
- **Here's a 1 minute fun motivational video** summarising it again just in case you need even more of a nudge! <https://youtu.be/ykMzzZolhdk?si=xTxyPqh6gOCuaZPI>





IF YOU'RE FEELING OVERWHELMED

- Ask what is the one thing I need to do for today to count as a success? (minimum, medium, maximum)
- Break the task down into small, manageable, bite-sized chunks.
- Still overwhelmed? Go smaller again... and again... and again until you can face doing it.

IF IT STILL FEELS TOO MUCH

Which of the three recommendations resonates most for you? Select from the below:

- Declutter your workspace and clear your desk.
- Consciously take care of yourself: warmth, comfort, light.
- Connect with your support network.
- Ask safe people to remind you of the value you add and keep you accountable.

AND BREATHE.....

5X BREATHING

And finally, deep, steady breathing is one of the most powerful and effective ways to calm ourselves when we are feeling particularly stressed. 5X breathing is a beautifully powerful exercise that can bring wonderful results.

- Place your hand on your belly, and as you breathe in, feel your belly slowly filling.
- Breathe in like this slowly through your nose for a count of 5,
- Hold for 5, and then
- Slowly breathe out through your mouth for 5.
- Do this five times, twice a day if you can.

Deep slow breathing like this creates a feeling of relaxation by stimulating the vagus nerve and activating the parasympathetic nervous system, thereby slowing your heart rate, reducing your blood pressure, and signaling to your body and brain to 'rest and digest', 'tend and befriend'. Your mindful focus on the breath adds further to your sense of calm and stillness.

If you establish this as a practice twice a day, it means that it is far easier to do in-the-moment, when you notice the early stages of anxiety, perhaps after a difficult conversation, or before an exam. It is a powerful way to manage your state and reclaim your calm, before your body starts to react.

