

7 PRACTICAL LEADERSHIP TIPS FROM NEUROSCIENCE TO DEAL WITH CHRONIC STRESS FROM THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Whilst many of us are used to managing stress and change in our workplace and daily lives, the layers of uncertainty and volatility the pandemic has created, have intensified the amount of stress we are all facing. This means even if you had good strategies to manage pressure before the pandemic, the unrelenting uncertainty and related insecurities are causing prolonged periods of stress and for many, extreme levels of pressure. Our brains are designed to handle short bursts of stress; which can have benefits such as enhancing learning. We have personal ways of recovering from short periods of stress but what happens to our brains when we are in a chronic state of threat, uncertainty and fear? Understanding what is happening internally, enables us to create new strategies to proactively manage the impact of chronic stress.

The brain excels at spotting threats in our environment. Our 'threat expert' in the brain is a small but powerful

region called the amygdala. Once it perceives a trigger, it rapidly gets us ready to fight the threat or take flight away from it, to ensure survival. To enable a fight or flight response, the brain shuts down all 'unnecessary' complex thinking that takes place in our prefrontal cortex (PFC). Unfortunately, this part of our brain is our 'wise guide' that we usually engage to strategize, innovate and integrate our thinking into informed decisions. In short, under stress, we become reactive, impulsive and anxious and less creative, resourceful and flexible.

If we do not interrupt our automatic ways of responding to threats, we risk staying in a reactive thinking space when we need to take a longer-term view. We can, however, find ways to intentionally activate the 'wise' part of our brain and stop the 'threat expert' from dominating. This is a bit like building muscles in the gym. The more we put our 'wise guide' to work, the stronger it gets.

PRACTICAL TIPS TO OVERCOMING UNPRECEDENTED STRESS

Leaders who are finding themselves in the reactive space, can decrease the strength of overactive 'threat expert' and put the wiser guide back in charge. Here are a few practical things to do and why they work from a neuroscience perspective.

1

Acknowledge how you feel

We can't ignore what we really feel, no matter how much we try. Negative emotions stay in the subconscious and continue to fire up the threat response. Research has shown that naming our feelings makes negative emotions less intense. It calms down the amygdala and increases activity in the 'wise guide' region of the brain that processes emotions. By taking the time to acknowledge and courageously name what you are really experiencing makes you feel better. Leaders can role model this with their teams and create space to name what is difficult before moving to a solution focus.

2

Focus on what we can control

This is not about ignoring the gravity of the situation but rather a way to stop being reactive and become open-minded and grounded. By proactively focussing on what we can control, leaders regain a sense of calm and put the 'wise guide' back in the driver's seat, allowing access to their deeper resources. Ask yourself and your team: what is within my control, and how can we channel our focus there?

3

Partner up to find more than one solution

It is easier to stay in black and white thinking when problem solving alone. Find a partner or work with your team to identify multiple solutions. This process activates your 'wise guide'. Solution focused coaching questions help us step back:

- How can we use the crisis to make positive changes?
- What do I need to accept about this challenge to find another way to solve this problem?
- What are other ways to help me see a different perspective?

4

Be fully present and don't multi-task

Our 'threat expert' can put us into constant fire-fighting mode and as a result, we try to do too many things at once. Constantly switching from one task to another decreases our effectiveness. Consciously separating 'fire-fighting time' for immediate demands from long-term planning, will enable you to differentiate the approach you bring to complex problems. Having discreet times for different activities creates intentional choice, to engage a different part of the brain.

5

Tie up 'open loops'

Take a step back to organize and clarify your thoughts to avoid overloading your brain. All unfinished tasks that float around in our mind take up limited 'brain space'. Tying up open loops gives a sense of clarity and control, as it frees up the 'wise guide' from having to hold it all. The brain actually treats all unfinished tasks the same, so ruminating about "buying milk" is taking up as much thinking space as ruminating about "fixing the budget". Try writing down all unfinished tasks, no matter how small or insignificant they seem. Then go through the list and decide what to delegate, what to action, and what to do later. Organizing our mental space frees up space, and reduces the stress that comes from an overloaded brain.

6

Look for the positives

The brain has a strong negativity bias, meaning it is much more likely to focus on what is bad than what is good. Leaders can actively counteract this by openly celebrating what is going well and where positive change has taken place, in spite of all the difficulties. Recognizing positive changes helps others to move away from the brain's default negativity. Of course, this needs to complement the earlier point about acknowledging the difficulties.

7

Build a culture of care and support

Leaders need to continue to make sure people feel connected and supported. This need was clear in the early stages of responding to the pandemic, but it is still just as important as we manage the ongoing uncertainty and change. Positive emotions of care and compassion counteract the negative response of the stressed-out amygdala. Positive relationships play a significant role in regulating our emotions and helps us to engage the 'wise guide'.

IN SUMMARY

Leaders can proactively take charge to direct their brain to re-engage their 'wise guide' to enable their solutions. In doing so, they inspire others to do the same. This is by no means easy, as we are wired to focus on fear and negativity. However, it is possible, with a proactive and practical approach. The more we do it, the easier it gets – the brain adapts and changes in response to the choices we make.

**LEARN
MORE**

YSC has a variety of Executive Coaching programs that can help your leaders in these stressful times.

Email info@ysc.com to find out how we can support your leaders. YSC.COM