



Healthy Mind



Rewiring the Brain for Success

by Don Joseph Goewey



"I wanted my people stressed," a former president of a Fortune 500 company once told me. **"If I thought someone was losing their focus, feeling overwhelmed, or complaining about being overloaded, I turned up the heat. I pushed the deadline up or added more to their plate. It usually got me what I needed."**

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At the same time, he admitted, he was plagued by interpersonal dysfunction within his senior management team. The atmosphere at meetings was tense and competitive, generating an emotionally negative energy in the room. People appeared to have little regard for one another and showed little interest in helping each other succeed.

Eventually, this leader hired a consultant to shift the attitudinal climate. The first thing the consultant did was help people understand their emotional reactivity restrictive thinking, and limited self-interest as a brain locked into survival mode.

A brain chronically under stress is prone to imagine threats and enemies around every corner. A brain habituated to *fight or flight* produces a reactive and, at times, paranoid human being. Fortunately, we can train the brain to change modes. It takes a fundamental shift in attitude, from stress to calm, from fear to peace. Yes, peace. Believe it or not, a peaceful attitude unlocks brain power. As people on the management team made this shift, personally and interpersonally, the old negativity and dysfunction subsided and an attitudinal climate took hold that was positive, creative, and engaging. There was less stress in people's brains; as a result, more was accomplished. They went on to grow into one of America's great companies, and the president attributes part of their success to the change in attitudinal climate.

Even leaders who disagree with using fear as a motivator may not realize how often their own stress and anxiety causes them to crack the whip. It produces an unwanted effect. A brain under stress subjected to yet another pressure will start to shut down and work less, not more. Stress hormones dampen higher brain function. Brain chemistry becomes imbalanced, especially dopamine and serotonin, leading people depressed, uninspired, and unmotivated. Adrenaline and cortisol drain the body of energy. Memory, attention span, and decision-making are impaired. The greater the stress, the greater the likelihood immediate survival goals will replace long-range considerations. Creative thinking declines and aggression and escape behaviors raise their ugly heads. ¹



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This is hardly the picture of a high performance team. Yet it is alarming widespread. According to a Gallup poll, four out of ten Americans experience extreme chronic stress. Another four are one major stressor away from joining that group. Imagine a team of ten people, eight of them impaired in this way. ² Unfortunately, the majority of organizations fail to provide the tools managers need to effectively deal with stress. ³

There is a solution. It involves a process that rewires the brain, shifting control from the amygdala, the primitive network that launches fight or flight, to the prefrontal cortex where the brain generates everything people need to succeed, from creativity to

cooperative action, from inspiration to emotional balance. It may sound strange, but this change is achieved by being at peace.

In the last 10 years, research has established that a dynamically peaceful attitude builds a brain that can sustain peak performance. Neurologically, “peace” means we are not afraid or threatened by whatever we face. As a result, our brain is free of stress hormones. Peace generates the brain function that finds the zone great coaches teach gifted athletes. It is the calm under siege the military cultivates in soldiers. In business, it sustains the brain power that keeps people at the top of their game.

Making this shift is simpler than we might think. It involves four qualities anyone can cultivate through a set of proven tools that are easy to apply⁴.

1. The first quality to cultivate is engaging challenges with a quiet mind that is fully present. It’s the cure for the attention deficient stress causes. As we practice this quality, we flex a brain muscle that strengthens our ability to focus.
2. The second quality is remaining calm inside, regardless of what is happening on the outside. As we practice this quality the brain builds the GABA fibers that extinguish fear. Extinguish fear and you eliminate stress.
3. The third quality is connection. It involves listening better, judging less and forgiving more. As we practice this quality, our brain strengthens networks that produce an effective team member and a great leader.
4. The fourth quality keeps us in touch with the big picture instead of getting trapped in the narrow perspective stress engenders. Practice this quality and we strengthen networks that enables us to move beyond a limited self-interest to see a greater good.

Neurologically, success is inner peace; succeeding is letting go of stress. It’s the new business paradigm that these four qualities reach.

Don Joesph Goewey is founder of ProAttitude and author of Mystic Cool, A proven approach to transcend stress, achieve optimal brain function, and maximize creative intelligence.

¹ Sime, Wesley E., PhD., Health and Human Performance, University of Nebraska

² Gallup’s annual *Lifestyle* poll, issued January 24, 2007.

³ The Stress of Leadership, Center for Creative Leadership, 2007, www.ccl.org

⁴ “Proven tools” refers to approaches based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, the Person-Centered Approach, Attitudinal Healing, and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction