

EXECUTIVE STRENGTH STRESS MANAGEMENT

*Tame Your
Fears and Take
on the World*

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Module 2:

Your Brain & Stress

Hopefully you recorded all the stressors you noticed and added to it as they came into your awareness. I really like to know *why* I'm doing something so I'm going to tell you the purpose of that exercise.

You might remember from Module #1 that I told you about how our amygdala senses stressors in the environment faster than our conscious brain can register them. And I also mentioned that we're faced with so many stressors these days that our conscious brain doesn't have time to go through the snake/coiled rope decision.

Writing down all the things that stress you is a way of making those unconscious things conscious. When we know what our amygdala is being triggered by, we have the option of using our executive brain (the one that makes all the rational decisions) to override the stress response. So we can get the "no snake, no stress" response.

How do we override the stress response? Let me give you some strategies to try.

1. Sometimes all we need to do is remind ourselves that the stress we're feeling is only our amygdala in overdrive.

This is kind of simple but it works really well. When we experience a lot of stress and our amygdala is on fire we become primed to look for other dangers and stressors around us. For example if we're running away from a sabre-tooth tiger suddenly a ditch that could trip us up is dangerous. Some sharp rocks that we could slowly and gently climb over under normal circumstances suddenly become very stressful because we might have to take them at a million miles an hour and cut our feet to shreds. That cute bunny is suddenly scary as hell – what if it bolted across our escape path and tripped us as we were running!

In the modern world instead of our amygdala functioning like the guard dog that responds to real threats (the crouching tiger) it starts functioning like the over-protective mother who warns us "You'll catch your death of cold if you don't take that extra jacket and make sure you wear clean underwear in case you get hit by a truck and don't order oysters at the restaurant – people die from eating them you know. Oh and speaking of restaurants you want to make sure the cutlery is clean – who knows what you could catch. Probably something terminal."

When we remind ourselves that our amygdala is in overprotective mum-mode we stop giving it fuel. It allows our body to start to return to normal functioning because we're not being driven by these unconscious fears that we *believe*.

See our simple little brains can't tell the difference between what's real and what's imagined. If our little brain is being stressed by a potential business failure it believes that failure is happening. And it therefore believes it needs to be prepared for every eventuality – living on the street, dying of starvation etc. If we remind ourselves that it's just our amygdala being over-

active we've already started to say "Mmmmmmm not so sure this is dangerous stuff and I'm not so sure this is the truth."

2. Hope overrides stress and fear so get hopeful.

Our brain processes information in a hierarchy. And you guessed it – fear and stressful things take priority. There's a lot of research that supports this which I won't go into because it's probably not that interesting to anyone except science geeks like me. You'll just have to believe me.

The only thing that overrides fear in our brain is hope. Yep – beautiful shining hope.

Now that you know what your stressors are you can use hope to override your brains reaction to them. So let's just say I'm stressed about not having a partner and having to do everything on my own. My brain tells me it's scary being on my own. It tells me that it's harder to survive financially. It tells me that people who don't have partners die earlier than people who are married. It tells me that if I get sick I am stuffed! I'll lose my house, won't be able to feed myself, and will wind up living in a caravan park. This could all be subconsciously eating away at me – creating more stress as my brain finds more and more things that are stressful about being without a partner.

If I *know* that I'm stressing about being partnerless then I can pull hope into the equation. I will eventually meet someone. I do have friends I can turn to. I have a job that supports me and income protection that will cover my butt if I'm sick. I have a lot of personal resources that would help me get through something really terrible.

So I have overridden the fear hierarchy. And I have stopped the spread of negative things in my brain.

This is another crazy thing our brains do. Rather than stopping at having a few stressed out thoughts our brains try to create big networks that link this big stress with lots of other stresses creating stress of gargantuan proportions. I have actually seen footage of the dendrites reaching out and searching for other brain bits to connect to. If your focus is on stress then your brain will look to make other connections with stressful thoughts. Which brings me to the next strategy.

3. The 3:1 Rule. For every stressy thought create 3 non-stressy thoughts to combat it.

We need three positive thoughts to every negative thought to create a competing network in the brain. So that means for every stress thought you have you need to come up with three positive

thoughts to switch your brain off overprotective mother mode and back into sleeping guard dog mode.

Our amygdala knows when we're trying to fool it so coming up with stuff that is blatantly not true won't be very helpful. Try to look for positives that have their basis in reality. Most of what we stress about isn't necessarily based in reality but apparently the antidote to stressing has to be. Sometimes brains are sooooo difficult.

Take a moment now to go back to your list of stressors and see if you can first of all come up with some statements of hope. And then see if you can multiply them by three. There's a sheet for you to write your 3:1's on page 10 of the workbook.

4. You Got Rhythm: Using your natural rhythms to de-stress your brain.

We are bombarded daily by a million things that keep our brain active and on alert. Everything is changing so quickly and we have so many drains on our attention that our poor little brains wind up really feeling the stress of it all.

On top of all that the more our brains work, the hotter they get. The hotter they get, the more time they need to cool down. Have you ever noticed at the end of a day where you've had to concentrate a lot you're really, really tired? Well that's your brain saying "Let me chill out dude! It's scorching in here."

In our stressful and fast paced life we don't often listen to what our brain (or body) has to say about things. We override our need for rest, pushing ourselves to the limit. This is, of course, very stressful.

One of the ways we can start to overcome some of this additional, non-necessary stress on our brains (and body) is to start to listen to its cries and its rhythms. We all have natural rhythms that fluctuate throughout our day. You may have heard of Circadian Rhythms that control our sleep/wake cycle. They're big, quite noticeable rhythms – we wake up at roughly the same time every day and get tired about the same time each night. They generally operate over a 24 hour period (or thereabouts).

We also have **Ultradian Rhythms** which are much smaller, less noticeable cycles. One of these Ultradians in particular runs at about a 90 to 120 minute cycle. It modulates lots of really important things like our mental alertness, our mood, our creativity, our memory and our performance.

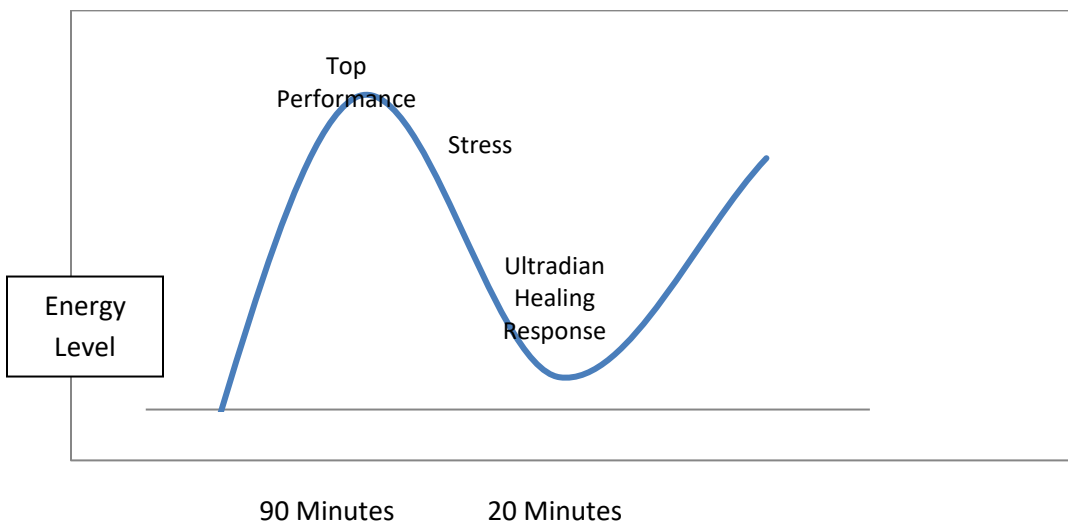
On the upswing we're at our best. You may have noticed through the day that there are times when you're on fire. You're sharp. You learn things better. Great ideas seem to flow right out of you. It's your genius time.

You may have also noticed through the day that even though you thought you were on fire you find yourself staring out the window or zoning out while someone's talking. That's the downswing. And it usually lasts about 15 to 20 minutes. Our subconscious mind says "I need a chance to process all this stuff. I'm shutting you down for a bit." So our unconscious mind tells our conscious mind to close the shutters and have a little nana nap. It's almost like your brain saying "*I'm not listening. I'm not listening*" with its fingers in its ears.

(Have I mentioned yet that your subconscious mind does 95% of the work?)

Anyway, when the subconscious says shut down we don't often listen. Usually that's the time we reach for a coffee or something sweet to perk us up. What we really need at that time is a *break*. This is the downtime on our Ultradian Rhythms. And it's also the time that our brains like to cool down and find a place to file all the things it's been dealing with. If we don't allow this downtime we get... you guessed it..... stressed.

So it looks a bit like this:



Imagine this repeating all throughout our day. Ninety minutes of us switched on and twenty minutes of us switched off. Ninety on. Twenty off. Stress occurs at the point that we're on the downswing and we keep pushing ourselves.

If we chronically ignore this rhythm we interrupt our natural flow and we start to develop chronic stress issues like high blood pressure, fatigue, headaches, and sore muscles. Not to mention feeling low or depressed or anxious. All signs of stress.

If you can find something quiet and non-demanding to do in your Ultradian downtime you will be reducing the stress on your brain and the stress on your body. Looking after your brain and

respecting your internal rhythms like this will make you more productive and much less stressed.

If you're worried about what other people might think of you having Ultradian downtime get them involved in it too. Or you could tell them that "science says brain cells shrink when you're stressed and that severely impacts performance. So I need to honour science and have a break" Taking even 10 – 15 minutes now could potentially save you a lot of stressfully unproductive time later.

Turn to your workbook and *brainstorm* (allowing it time to cool afterwards) some ideas on what you could do in your Ultradian downtime. Getting outside away from artificial lights or other non-natural distractions is the ultimate for Ultradian downtime but there are plenty of other things you can do that will help. Even if it is only for 10 minutes.

I've left some examples for you to get you started on page 11 of the workbook.

That sounds like an awful lot to do for this module already. So before I start to stress you out with too much to do I'm going to finish up there.