



STRESS

EXECUTIVE PERFORMANCE CHEAT SHEETS

Life doesn't always go to plan... and it stresses us the hell out!

In this short resource we'll cover a 3-minute routine to reduce stress, why you should steer away from defensive mode and a few powerful, stress-busting questions you can ask yourself.

Pg 2. A 3-minute routine you can do anywhere to improve decision making.

Pg 4. Why you must avoid 'defensive mode' in the brain and instead adopt 'discover mode' wherever possible.

Pg 7. The power of a single, well-worded question.

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Heart-Brain Coherence

HeartMath has been studying the relationship between the heart and brain (heart-brain coherence) for over 28 years. Their research has shown there are over 40,000 brain cells located within the heart. These neurons detect things like pressure, hormones and heart rate – sending it to the brain. All of this information is used to determine your state.

Poor Coherence

Negative emotions cause Abnormal heart rhythms, putting the body into a sympathetic state – the high-stress fight, flight or freeze response.

Strong Coherence

Positive emotions cause harmonious rhythms and place you into the parasympathetic state – your rest and digest. Here, your body is working efficiently and under less stress.

The state we are in affects us on a higher level than physical characteristics. **Heart-brain coherence affects our perceptions, intelligence, decision making, mental clarity, creativity, emotional balance and personal effectiveness.** The heart is more than a simple pump.



3-Minute Magic

HeartMath has developed numerous resources to help people improve their heart-brain coherence. The following 3-minute routine has been shown to improve decision-making under stress.

FREEZE-FRAME

1. Begin by focusing on your breathing for 1-minute, slowing it down to a 4-count in and 4-count out.
2. Shift out of the head, and focus on the area around your heart. Keep your attention there for at least ten seconds. Continue to breathe normally.
3. Recall a positive time or feeling you had in your life, and attempt to re-experience it. Remember, try not simply to visualise it, but rather to feel it fully.
4. Ask a question from the heart: "What can I do in this situation to make it different?" or "What is the best course of action" or "What can I do to minimise stress?"
5. Listen to the response of your heart.

You may hear nothing, but perhaps feel calmer. You may receive verification of something you already know, or you may experience a complete perspective shift, seeing the crisis in a more balanced way. **Although we may not have control over the event, we do have control over our perception of it.**



"Is this a threat or a reward?"

Every moment of the day, our brain is busy scanning the environment. "Is this a threat or a reward?" is the first question it asks everything we encounter – each email we read and every conversation we have. Depending on the answer, it triggers the appropriate behaviour in us.

The two behaviours are 'defensive mode' (when we're focused on protecting ourselves) and 'discover mode' (when it feels like the world is on our side). **We're far more likely to have a low-stress day when we manage to spend as little time as possible in defensive mode.**

Defensive Mode	Discover Mode
Focused on perceived threats	Motivated by potential rewards
Fight-flight-freeze	Thoughtful and flexible
Automatic response	Full cognitive awareness
Adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol	Dopamine and endorphins

Steer away from defensive mode.



Defensive Mode

When we face a potential threat the brain's automatic survival circuits work fast to defend us, launching the fight, flight or freeze response. Too much stress (like most workdays) turns our state of readiness into something edgier. We tunnel-vision in on the threat, "bring it on," our bodies say "we're ready to protect you."

The problem is the brain still works hard to protect us in our polished professional world. We aren't being chased by tigers anymore but our brains react to personal slights (like a frown from a coworker) and workplace issues (like a change in deadline) as it does genuine physical threats.

Defensive mode shuts down brain activity in the pre-frontal cortex (where most of your higher cognitive function gets done). You become less smart and flexible. Not exactly what you want when you need to solve a problem.

The good news is once you know that the brain's protective instinct is behind a lot of dysfunctional behaviour, life can be easier.

You can understand a colleague's inexplicable bad behaviour by asking yourself which 'threat' may be causing the reaction and working to improve the situation rather than get angry and further increasing the threat. Even better, if you can spot when your own brain is in defensive mode you won't be able to stop your instinctive reaction from playing out, but you can notice it taking place and regain control before things get heated.



Discover Mode

Noticing what's going on is always the first step in extracting yourself from defensive mode. But along with becoming more adept at recognising when and why we're triggered, we can also engage the reward system in the brain to improve our response to stressful situations.

The brain likes to move towards potential rewards, so if you can tempt it with something valuable, you're more likely to respond to a tough situation with your full intelligence.

'Rewards' our brains enjoy include:

- A social sense of belonging or recognition.
- A personal sense of autonomy.
- Competence or purpose (such as Freeze-Frame)
- Informational rewards which come from learning or experiencing new things (this is the basis of the next segment on 'Well-worded questions').

We'll dive further into ways to move out of defensive mode and into discover mode in the next resource – it has a significant effect on your energy levels.

Develop self-awareness of your own 'triggers'.



The power of a single, well-worded question

Barely a day goes by without something unexpected happening – a deadline gets moved, a decision doesn't go your way or a crisis evolves out of thin air.

Many studies have shown it's easier to rise above unpleasant situations when we're in a positive state of mind. But how do you stumble upon a positive frame while under stress?

You ask a well-worded question.

The right question can be rewarding (discover mode), providing the profound boost we get from learning something new, feeling competent or having a sense of purpose.

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Q1. “What can I learn from this?”

Our brains find it rewarding to learn new things. This question places you back into discover mode, leading you to grow from stressful times, rather than shrink.

The right question can shift your perspective.



De-Stressing Questions

Q2. “When have I handled a difficult situation well in the past? What does this tell me I’m equipped to do in the current situation?”

The things you’ve overcome in the past helped forge who you are today. Revisiting these trials helps remind ourselves of our accumulated skills and experience, and how they can equip us to rise above the challenging situation we’re dealing with right now.

Q3. “What matters most right now?”

A clarifying question takes a step back from the current situation and looks at the bigger picture. Reflect on what matters most to us and consider what that might tell us about the best way to react to a difficult situation.

Q4. “What is the smallest step I could take right now to minimise my stress?”

This question moves you from analysis paralysis into motion. And just taking action reduces stress because it brings you back into a state of personal control.

Q5. “Will anything change if I worry about it?”

As the Swedish proverb goes, “Worry gives a small thing a big shadow.” In most cases, worrying doesn’t help to solve a problem.



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