

Practical neuro-agility tools to reduce stress and how this improves learning

Neuro-agility is about having the mental flexibility to access and utilize all learning and thinking functions of the whole brain easily and fast to solve complex problems and make smart decisions in new first time, stressful conditions.

During continued stress, the brain releases cortical inhibitors called cortisol, which decreases or inhibits electro-chemical transmission between neurons. Depending on our unique neurological design and stress levels, stress causes some brain regions to become less receptive for electrical transmission, commonly referred to as “switching off”. Stress thus, limits our neuro-agility, learning effectiveness and information processing abilities, negatively impacting our performance.

Tips to counter stress:

Take charge of your thinking. Stress is largely manifested through our own thoughts and perceptions. We have the power to change them. Choose to maintain a growth mindset, being an optimistic, possibility thinker.

Humanise your work environment. Make it brain friendly. Align what you see, hear, smell, taste and touch with natural colours, textures, fruit and flower odours and nature’s sounds. Reduce noise where possible. Generate white noise to block out background noise. Apps such as Brainwave, help you generate relaxed brain waves helping you to improve your focus, filtering out background noises. Also playing baroque music helps generate alpha brain waves which assist with improved mental alertness.

Prioritize and plan your work practices. Make time for planning. Set realistic and achievable expectations for your day. Keeping a to do list helps remove thoughts from your short term memory to free it up for other thoughts. People can easily dwell on non-producing activities too long. Start your day with your most important activities and a clear focus. Save e-mail checking as a task to do before or after lunch when your energies levels may be lower. Each time the brain is distracted, attention needs to be refocused. Build into your work day scheduled times to check on the things that take you off task such as e-mail, social media and phone calls.

Make time to relax. Hobbies that you enjoy are great for finding your flow. Go for a walk. Just take some time to sit and be, doing nothing at all, feeling grateful.

Switch off. 24-7 connectivity is a challenge that increase our stress. Our connectivity needs to be managed and boundaries created to avoid distractions to family and leisure time. If necessary, switch off your devices during family or leisure time.

Make time to move regularly. Stretch regularly to release muscle tension and circulate blood flow to your brain. Standing or walking activates the whole brain. Do cross-lateral movements that involve your right hand touching the opposite side of your body and vise versa. Regular exercise helps reduce cortisol levels, fight depression and improve your immune system. Using a movement tracker or Smart phone you can track your activity and then challenge yourself to increase gradually. Don't forget apps like Move that can give you a gentle reminder to get up from your desk at regular intervals.