

Lesson 2

Master Your Fight or Flight Response

Introduction

Our survival instinct, or fight or flight response has kept humans alive for thousands of years, however, it is also one of the leading causes of anxiety, overwhelm, and insomnia.

Whilst your fight or flight response can keep you safe in the face of danger, it can be wrongly activated by unthreatening situations, such as a crowded street, a phone ringing, or thinking about hosting a conference call at work.

To be able to manage situations more calmly, mastering your fight or flight response is important. Reframing situations, and understanding that you're safe and can cope with everyday life can help you during times that are uncomfortable, such as when you have cross words with someone, or when you have to do something that's out of your comfort zone.

Once you learn to control your fight or flight response, or stress response, as it's otherwise known, you can move forward without the unwanted anxiety and physical effects it brings with it.

The science

The human brain has evolved to prioritise your safety above everything else. It's constantly keeping an eye out for danger, and when something is identified as a potential threat, the fight-or-flight response kicks in. When that happens, you are not consciously in control of the reaction taking place in your brain, which is working hard to prepare you to either fight or run for your life.

In extreme cases, you will find yourself experiencing stomach problems and digestive distress, feeling that you're having a heart attack, or thinking you're 'going mad'.

Just what you need!

You may also experience an impending sense of doom, a dry mouth, and an odd taste at the back of your throat - this is adrenaline.

As individuals, we all have slightly different triggers to the stress response, however, several strategies have been found to work for the majority of people.

Exercise, psychoeducation, relaxation practice, and mindfulness all help to dampen your fight-flight response when you don't need it.

Value

There are numerous ways to effectively master your fight or flight response, and the benefits of doing any one of them are impressive.

Learning to take the control back over your reactions to stressful events will help move you from a state of anxiety to a state of calm.

Managing your emotional response to challenging situations means that you'll not go from 0 to 100 in the blink of an eye and as such, will be able to better consider how to deal with the situation in the most effective way.

Exercise

So how do you take control back?

Here are four effective ways to short-circuiting that stress response and putting you back in control...

#1 Get Some Exercise...

A sudden burst of activity is exactly what the fight-or-flight response was *designed* to help you achieve, so exercise is a simple yet highly effective way of calming your nervous system and get rid of that excess energy.

Exercise is also the fastest way to manage your fight or flight response. There's no need to learn a new technique, and you can do any kind of exercise that raises your heart rate. With just five minutes of sweat-inducing movement, you will start to break down all those detrimental stress hormones.

If you're in the middle of the workday, take yourself off to the bathroom and do some star jumps or burpees for five minutes. Nobody needs to know you're doing it, and you don't need to leave the office.

Finding time to exercise for longer periods is even more beneficial to staying on top of that stress response. But you'll be surprised at how helpful five-minute bursts of activity can be in a crisis.

The double-win is that exercise also produces lots of endorphins to make you feel good. So you're not only taking control of your stress, you're giving yourself a positive boost.

#2 Remind Yourself That You Are Safe...

Understanding the root cause of your physical symptoms can help alleviate the fear that comes with them. For example, the tight-chested feeling that makes you panic and may cause you to fear you're having a heart attack, is simply your heart speeding up to deliver more oxygen to your brain. The dizziness you may feel is also a result of this and (contrary to your fears) isn't going to make you faint. Meanwhile, the racing thoughts and catastrophising that can make you feel as if you're 'going mad' are a result of your frontal lobe powering down and leaving you less capable of rational thought.

Remind yourself that none of your symptoms associated with the fight or flight response, such as, dizziness, palpitations, racing thoughts and fearing the worst, will last, and none are medically threatening to you. You're not having a heart attack, you can breathe, and you're not going mad.

Your body is preparing itself for either fighting or fleeing a perceived threat. Convince your brain there is no threat, or the threat has passed, and everything will calm down.

At first, you will likely find the 'what if' mentality creeps back in very quickly after you have reassured yourself you're fine. Don't worry. Just keep reminding yourself you are safe.

#3 Trigger Your Relaxation Response...

Another effective way of switching off that stress response is through progressive muscle relaxation and breathing exercises. The diaphragmatic breathing exercise from our last video is perfect for this, and we will be cover progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) in our next video.

Learning these exercises takes time and perseverance, however, they provide you with a solid foundation for managing your fight-or-flight response.

The most important thing to remember here is that you are battling evolution.

The human brain has had thousands of years to fine-tune the stress response in order to keep us safe. Simply 'snapping out of it' isn't really an option. Instead, you must practice switching off your response while you are calm and in control.

The more you practice while not experiencing the stress response, the easier it becomes to effectively short-circuit the reaction when you really need to.

#4 Focus On The Present, Live In The Moment...

Another incredibly useful tool is mindfulness. While this is a difficult skill to effectively master and takes a good deal of practice and effort, it's well worth it!

Your ability to practice mindfulness will fluctuate from day to day - some days it will feel virtually effortless. Other days you will find it virtually impossible. That's perfectly normal, and you shouldn't let it discourage you.

The core of mindfulness is mastering the art of remaining present in the current moment, with purpose, and without judgement.

This is vital to learn, as in time you will come to recognise when the automatic survival instinct is kicking in. The thoughts and sensations that come with the stress response will become familiar, and rather than being swept away by them, you'll become a passive observer, able to return yourself to the present moment and not become caught up with the trauma of memories or fear for the future.

Mindfulness isn't about removing thoughts, but rather returning yourself to thoughts of the present moment as many times as it takes to prevent your thoughts from cycling through negative and self-destructive tangents.

Video

Mindful activity/meditation

Wrap

It can be a struggle to put in place strategies when you're in the thick of a fight or flight moment, so practising when you're calm will always be helpful.

Making a prompt card of what to do when you feel 'anxious,' such as, 'When I next feel like escaping from the crowded shops,' I will remind myself that I'm safe, then I'll focus on the present moment, such as the footsteps I'm taking, one at a time.'

It's worth giving it a go isn't it?

What next?

If you're struggling with muscle tension, feeling aches and pains especially at the end of a stressful day, check in with our next lesson which teaches a specific approach to relaxing the body and calm the mind.