

Stressed or Overwhelmed?

Dr Laura Watkins shares some science-backed ideas to keep your brain functioning at its best

How much time do you spend feeling at your best and firing on all cylinders? And how much time do you spend feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or under pressure?

One of the paradoxes of being a parent is that you'll be a better parent when you're feeling on form, but the various demands of parenting can make that challenging.

In my case, broken nights, limited time for exercise, and worrying about long to-do lists are the biggest risks to my effectiveness and well-being. I've learnt (the hard way) to deliberately counteract them. You'll have your own set of challenges and of course, the pandemic has exacerbated this dynamic for many of us, with increasing levels of challenge (such as unpredictability of childcare), and often fewer options for staying in balance such as time for, or access to, self-care.

So how can we build a toolkit to help our brains function at their best, even when we are under pressure? As research for a book I have recently co-authored, we investigated dozens of techniques for settling our brains down and helping them focus more constructively. One well-known and researched example is attention-based mindfulness practice (such as placing your attention on your breath). But we know that lots of people struggle to get into mindfulness, so we wanted to offer many options for helping our brains be at their best.

I'm going to cover three techniques that I have found to be personally helpful. They have solid scientific foundations and are especially useful for busy parents: they only take a few minutes, they don't require special equipment or instructions, and two of them can be done whilst you are on the go. That means they can easily fit into your routines and not end up as an additional burden on your to-do list.

Expressive writing

When I returned to work after maternity leave, I was tired, finding it hard to juggle, and emotional about leaving my young daughter in childcare. After struggling to settle into a previously valuable mindfulness practice, I turned to expressive writing, which is a type of journaling in which you write your stream of consciousness. There is surprisingly strong scientific evidence behind this simple technique: it settles our minds, reduces brain and body stress markers, and boosts our immune system. I have found that it also gives me perspective on my thoughts and feelings. I become more aware of how I am getting in my own way, leading me to find new ways to think about and approach things.

To do it, you'll need a quiet moment (such as at the end of the day, or at your desk with some headphones on). Get a pen and notepad and set a timer (start with ten minutes). Write down whatever is running through your head. Don't let

your pen leave the page, just keep writing, even if it's 'I'm wondering what I'm going to think about next'. To be most impactful, notice and write down your deepest thoughts and feelings. Get out your hopes, worries, ruminations, frustrations, joys... anything that is 'gripping you'. Do it most days for a couple of weeks, then find a sustainable rhythm. Regularly look back at your writing. What do you notice about what you are focusing on, how you are approaching challenges, or your patterns and tendencies?



Lengthening your outbreath

The brain-body feedback loop sends signals from our body to our brains indicating how we are feeling. This means we can use our body to influence our thoughts and emotions. One method of doing that is through deliberately changing our breathing patterns. Such deliberate breathing techniques are used by elite military units and athletes, and can boost mood and help depression, chronic pain, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

For the last few years, my go-to technique is taking slightly deeper and slower breaths, whilst lengthening my outbreath. This has a calming effect on our nervous system, and can help process stress, and lower blood pressure and heart rate. I use this when I'm feeling stressed, to be ready for tricky meetings, or to fall back asleep. You can do it on the go (on a commute, whilst walking) or whilst sitting down (I often do it during quiet moments with my daughter, such as bedtime).

First, practise expanding your lungs slightly more widely and deeply. Start breathing in with your diaphragm, making sure to expand the abdomen and the sides and back of your ribs. Then, start breathing in for the count of 3 and out for the count of 6. If the ratio doesn't quite work for you, find what does work (e.g. 3 in, 4 out) and then gradually aim towards a 1:2 in:out ratio. The key is to regularly practice when you're feeling calm (whilst walking is a great time to pace out the breaths), so that you can draw on your technique when needed.

Daily review

A 'daily review' is another type of journaling where we look back at yesterday and ahead to today. Reviewing yesterday helps us get quick insights about what 'worked' and 'didn't work' so we can learn quickly and adjust. Revisiting our learnings also helps our brain lay down memories. Looking ahead helps us set intentions, which primes our brain to spot opportunities to bring them alive. This rapid and immediate feedback loop helps our clients' progress soar. I've found it especially useful when facing new situations and needing to adapt quickly, or when I want to make changes, such as cementing new habits.

The daily review takes just a few minutes.

Initially, make notes on a device or in a notebook, but you may find over time that you can do it in your head. Do it at the same time each day (either morning or evening). Answer three questions:

1. What did I learn about myself yesterday?
2. What are my intentions for today (e.g. what do I want to learn, experience, contribute, feel like)?
3. How will I bring those intentions alive?

Now take a moment to reflect on how you help your brain bring its best. Would any of these techniques complement or replace what you currently do? Or do they spark ideas for something different? Whatever you pick, make sure it's sustainable. Turn it into a habit: something you do regularly and automatically at a certain point of your day. And try to make it fun, nourishing, or thought-provoking. A lovely notebook or accompanying coffee can make journaling much more inviting. If you feel you're no longer gaining from a technique, try something else. We're each unique, complex, and evolving creatures, and the small investment that you make to create a routine will pay back in spades when you feel your brain being at its best more often. It will help you unlock that paradox of being a good parent (and human being), especially when it's challenging.

Dr Laura Watkins has recently co-authored (with Vanessa Dretzel)

The Performance Curve: Maximize your potential at work while strengthening your well-being, published by Bloomsbury.