



# **Rewired to Relate – Text**

## **Chapter 2**

### **Staying calm, cool and collected**

# Staying calm, cool and collected

In Chapter 1, you saw why you react the way you do, particularly in stressful situations. Now, you might be wondering what you can do about it! In this chapter, you will find the answers.

## Your brain's executive function

The good news is that your brain has an executive function which helps manage your limbic system's needs and fears and supports you to be calm, cool, and collected. It will help you make robust and reasoned decisions and build better working relationships with your colleagues and stakeholders. The not so good news is that this executive function tires easily.

## When the executive function is tired

A study on parole hearings in court rooms found that the biggest factor for determining whether inmates would receive parole was not based on reasoning or facts, but on the time of day that the hearing took place. Prisoners with a morning court hearing were granted parole about 70% of the time.



*What do you guess is the percentage granted parole if their hearing was late in the day?*

*60%, 30% or 10%?*

*Researchers from Princeton University found that later in the day judges granted parole in just 10% of cases. The study concluded that this was because the judges were so tired of making decisions by the time they heard the afternoon cases that they chose the easier, less risky decision: denying parole.*

So, what was causing the judges to choose the easier decisions when they were tired? The answer is that the executive functions in their brains were low on energy.

Tapping into your brain's executive function and keeping it topped up with energy will help you manage your limbic system's reactions, improving how you relate to others.

## Prefrontal cortex

The prefrontal cortex (PFC) enables us to take in information, consider a bigger picture, reflect, reason, decide and control impulses. But doing any of these things burns up energy and, when the PFC gets low on energy, it becomes much less effective at its job. It needs glucose, rest and time to recover and enable us to do our best work.

The more you use your PFC, the less glucose you have available for the next task you are asking of it. While you may not experience it in the same way as physical tiredness, your brain gets low on energy, and becomes much less effective at its job.

## The PFC has many functions

As well as helping us make decisions, our PFC plays an important role in:

### Cognitive behaviour

- Problem solving
- Setting goals
- Focusing and re-focusing on goals
- Being rational
- Reasoning
- Focusing attention

### Seeing the big picture

- Understand the complexity of a situation
- Being able to reason and see beyond conspiracies or myths that we would like to believe in
- Holding paradox – being able to consider two opposing thoughts at the same time

### Managing limbic system:

- Overcoming the need for rewards
- Delaying gratification
- Resisting or calming fight, flight, freeze reactions
- Staying present in the presence of adversity, discomfort, ambiguity, volatility, uncertainty

### Moderating social behaviour

- Collaborating, listening to others' ideas, letting go of your own ideas
- Being curious about others who seem difficult
- Having empathy
- Seeing others' perspectives

### Handling change

- Changing your mind-set
- Overcoming old beliefs

### Self-control

- Being disciplined – doing what's important or what you need to do rather than what you feel like doing, even if you don't like it

## The PFC is easily depleted

When we ask the PFC to undertake one of these functions it uses energy. Once that energy is spent, the PFC has less energy for the next function. And the next. And the next.

We can think of the PFC as a battery. When the battery is fully charged, it works with ease – making decisions, controlling our emotions, helping us focus.

The more we use our PFC, the more the battery is depleted. It becomes harder for the PFC to work – harder to control our emotions, solve problems or handle change.

## Real world stories

Understanding your PFC is not just theoretical. In the online programme, you can watch or read stories on how real people have used their PFC to override their limbic reactions to be in stronger relationship with their colleagues. Some of them, we are showing here:

### Lucy, Senior People Manager, Global Technology Vendor

"This course has led me to consider how I am showing up and coming across. I used to be reactive when people brought issues to me on top of my already busy schedule. When they approached me, people would always say, "I know you are very busy..." or just approach me less.

I have learnt to step back and see things from others' perspectives instead of just reacting. Now I say to people, "I'm here for you, I want us to spend time together, I want us to talk about what's on your mind." People approach me often now and our conversations are better because instead of just reacting, I ask myself, "Am I listening to them?"

### Asabe, Director of Business Development, Global Law Firm

"I have developed more confidence and more courage to be really proactive in how I manage meetings. I tend to think certain meetings are going to be quite challenging, and this used to intimidate me. My worries about the meetings still arise, but now that I know how to look at where my reactions are coming from, I think to myself, that's just a particular perspective, so how am I going to run this particular meeting knowing what outcomes I want out of it!

I've noticed that understanding where my worries come from, managing my own reactions, and giving myself some slack, helps create a more relaxed environment in the meetings. This has helped encourage a two-way dialogue and the meetings are much more engaging, collaborative and productive."

### Ahma, Employee Engagement Manager, Global Incubator

"I received feedback at work on more than one occasion about my reactions when I have an emotional reaction to a conversation or email.

I keep a post it note on my computer that says:

- Aware
- Breathe
- Choose
- Override the limbic system!

Practising this daily is helping me to adjust how I respond to others when I am triggered. For instance, I am now very careful to use less curt language in reply to emails that have triggered me."

## ABC of Mindfulness

The ABC of mindfulness is a tool to use at any time to keep yourself grounded and calm. It can be used to gain control of emotional reactions and put your PFC back in charge. Victor Frankl perfectly sums up how ABC gives you space to choose your response:

*"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."*

- Victor Frankl

ABC is a short exercise which will literally increase the capacity of your PFC if used daily. Practising these three steps will give you more ability to focus and to stay cool under pressure.

### Aware



Become aware of your body and any adrenaline or stress chemicals. Just by taking a moment or two to be aware of what is happening in the brain and body will begin to reduce the impact of the limbic system's influences.

This is the beginning of a mindful state. Focusing on breathing will also help to strengthen this state.

### Breathe



Breathe and relax the body to flush out stress chemicals and find a balanced, neutral state. From this state, you can more easily observe events with a non-judgemental and more objective perspective.

Mindfulness is being able to be aware of one's own thoughts and step out of judgements of right/wrong and good/bad – at least for a moment.

Staying at this step for a period of time will help you build the capacity of your PFC. Just notice your breathing and let your thoughts come and go. Keep coming back to a neutral, relaxed state.

### Choose



Once we know how to recover from reactions, we have a choice about how we respond to others:

We can respond from a limbic, emotional state or from the PFC which is better able to reason, to see the whole picture, to embrace paradox, to delay gratification and to have empathy for others.

We can choose a perspective and how we want to view a situation.

The more we experience a mindful state, the easier it will be to access it when needed.

The ABC model can be used in several ways and in different situations. For example, preparing for a situation that you know will be challenging or threatening to your limbic system.

## When and where to use the tool ABC of Mindfulness

You can use the ABC model in different ways to help manage your relationships and reactions. Consider these ideas.

### Regular practice to build resilience

Mindfulness has been shown to grow the PFC – physically.

As a form of mindfulness, ABC will increase your PFC capacity if used daily, improving your resilience and giving you more ability to stay cool under pressure.

### Prepare for difficult situations

You can use ABC before:

- attending a stressful meeting
- giving someone difficult feedback
- talking to someone after a conflict
- going into an uncomfortable situation

Choose to get yourself calm, cool, collected before you go into these situations. If you rush in you are much more likely to make fast, limbic-led decisions that you might regret later.