

---

# THE BRAIN BURNOUT SERIES

# BURNING OUT OUR BRAINS

---

## PART 3

---

WORDS BY DREW KNOWLES

**T**his is part three of four of the Brain Burnout Series, and this month we are looking at using your mind and brain to your competitive advantage. Last month we focused on how to prevent you burning out your brain and how to manage it when it is happening. The most important thing to take from it was that you must be aware of the signs and symptoms of how your brain is being used and how it is functioning; not to ignore the fundamental physiological signs of when you are pushing it beyond its capacity, thus burning it out. This takes expanding the use of your mind (conscious awareness) and being proactive in the current marketplace we are working in to be mindful of what we are using our brain for, given the volume of stimulation and information our brains are being subjected to.

In looking at what would equip you best to take yourself to higher levels of being able to use your mind and brain more effectively for your performance, it was at first challenging to work out what to create for you as there are so many things that you can do in your day to day life – to use your mind and brain more efficiently and effectively to harness its power in the best way possible in every moment. Because our lives are dynamic and always changing with the amount of information we have to process, there is no set formula that caters to the various circumstances we are faced with; no definitive one-size-fits-all way to manage your mind and brain to give you a competitive advantage. What I am going to attempt to do here is give you five main areas to focus on and practice that, for me, are most important when it comes to wanting to use your mind and brain for best performance and productivity, and to be able to get an edge over those you are interacting with and wanting to get results from in the marketplace. The intention here is that when you are managing yourself effectively to not burn out your brain, implementing what I will create in this article will give you access to elevating your ability to not just prevent brain burnout, but thrive in the marketplace and in your life.

### 1. STRESS AND STRESSORS

If you have read any of my previous articles, this is always the starting point if you are someone who is up to something in life and striving for higher levels of performance. You cannot exist in today's current marketplace without having to deal with multiple stressors at a time, and a certain level of stress depending on what you have on your plate at any moment. Understanding what stress is, and what stressors in your life are contributing to your load of stress (allostatic load), is in my view the most important aspect of being able to get the most out of your mind and brain. Stress begins in an area of the brain called the limbic system, so if that part of the brain is being overstimulated because you are not aware of and managing your stressors, then you can forget being able to powerfully manage your

mind to improve your performance and overall state of mind. If your limbic system is working overtime, then other parts of your brain will not be able to function optimally – especially your prefrontal cortex which is responsible for all your executive functions and focus – as you just can't fire up all parts of the brain at the same time. That's why if you are exercising (using the motor cortex part of the brain), then you will find it harder to solve something or think about anything complex using your prefrontal cortex.

I find that most people who are working in a company or running their own business do not deal with how much they need their mind and brain to be functional for the whole working day. Remember, it's not just your income producing or money making 'work': you need your brain for the between hours you go to the office or whatever you do to produce income and money. We have a 16-18 hour 'work' day (not including sleep), as we are using our mind and body to work from the moment we wake until the time we go to sleep. If you don't want to sacrifice your family life, social life, leisure time, or any other area of life outside the office, then you need to mitigate, reduce or remove as many stressors as possible. If you want a thorough list of possible stressors, download part two of this series from my website, [drewknowles.com](http://drewknowles.com). The rest of what I am going to give you to work on, practice and explore in your day to day life will not be as powerful if you do not first deal with the level of stress you are under and the stressors that are producing it, and for how long you have been under that load of stress.

Once you have got this clear, you need to practice becoming more and more aware of what stressors affect you, as well as when and how much stress they produce, especially if there is more than one stressor happening at a time which is often the case. Awareness is the key and knowing your registers and triggers so you can deal with them proactively and not have it impact your performance and productivity negatively.

As an example, I will from time to time stop engaging in a conversation with someone if I know my limbic system is too aroused (stressed out in common language) and will stop to deal with the physiological symptoms of being in this state if necessary, as it is likely counter-productive to continue. If you want to be able to compete in the marketplace at higher levels and have the mental energy for all other areas of your life (which most people don't), then understand that stressors in your life that cause it, and keep developing a greater awareness and prowess in dealing with them powerfully.

### 2. WILLPOWER

Willpower or self-control could be said to be the greatest human strength. Unfortunately, it is limited in supply as are the fuel (glucose) reserves in the brain, as it has to compete with a number of other executive functions of the prefrontal cortex. Leading on from the first

area above about stress and stressors, willpower is, in my view, the next most important area to become more aware of and understand, if you want to have a competitive edge in the marketplace. How you use your willpower can determine in some cases the difference between making the right or wrong choice when confronted with an important decision; the quality and experience of relationships with your spouse, children, friends and colleagues; your capacity to stay cool under pressure and not react to circumstances that do not go your way; your ability to be in meetings and be focused; and your capacity to not make choices that negatively affect your physical and mental health. Your willpower is your greatest strength, and how you use it is the key to being able to thrive in modern society.

One way to improve your use of willpower is to start looking at how you use it now, and where you use it up unnecessarily. As I have said in many other articles, limit your multi-tasking and task switching to times when it is necessary to do so to get done what you need to get done. You will have an edge over most people around you if you can catch yourself trying to switch your attention between things or do multiple things at the same time, and keep your attention on one thing. Your productivity will improve and you will make less mistakes than those around you, you will take less time to get things done, and the quality and effectiveness will be better – this has been studied and proven time and time again for over 20 years.

Another way to improve the use of your willpower is to simply make sure you take sufficient breaks during the day to give your brain space to recharge and rest. I know this sounds too simple, but I can promise you that if you just take more short breaks and create opportunities for brief moments of downtime throughout the day, you will find you have more reserves of willpower to draw on, especially for when you go home to your spouse or kids and you have to give them your attention. If you deplete your willpower your ability to hold your attention on something decreases, and this does not work if you want to maintain healthy relationships as well as perform at work and in other important areas of your life. Use it wisely and make sure you recharge it regularly!

### 3. PLANNING AND SCHEDULING

Along with the management of willpower, planning and scheduling go hand in hand to ensure you are using your brain's resources in the best possible way. If you do your best to think about, plan and schedule according to the activities you are using your brain for, you will greatly improve your capacity to perform and be productive in all areas of your life. The number one concept I would like you to get your head around is scheduling and planning your life for a 16-18 hour work day. Think about what you have on in your whole day, and how you will be using your mind and brain – what resources you may need later in the day if you have something that requires you to be conscious, aware and present.

What this looks like is actually stopping at the beginning the end of the week, and looking at the days ahead to see what activities you have to get done and plan for. Everything you do requires your conscious or unconscious brain, and you have to watch that you are not trying to do too much conscious and focused work, or you will run out of juice. Try and plan for doing activities that require your prefrontal cortex (conscious mind) early in the day, or after you have had a good break, power-nap, done some physical activity or something that has had you disengage this part of your brain.

Disengaging is important for allowing your brain to have downtime and recover when you have been using it in a focused way. You need to schedule time throughout your day when you can stop 'working' and do something that has you completely disengage from what it is you are trying to focus your energy on. This could be reading a book, going for a walk, talking to your spouse or kids on the phone, calling your mother, flicking through a magazine, looking at things on the internet, shopping or something that allows your brain to disengage your prefrontal cortex.

It is also critical to schedule time for movement and physical activity in your day. If you are a busy person and you are pressed to find time to 'exercise', at the very minimum I recommend getting 15-20 min of some kind of movement first thing in the morning, and then at least twice in your day you get up from your desk and you do 5-10 min

of some kind of movement. Your brain needs a sufficient amount of movement to function optimally, and you must understand and respect this. If you don't move your body sufficiently throughout a day you are going to impact your ability to get the most out of your mind and brain. You may be able to survive the day in the office, but I can promise you that it will impact other areas of your life and you will not have the kind of energy or willpower to function at your best. I can say this with complete authority as many of my clients are in this boat, and they report that regularly moving their body throughout the given day gives them more energy and helps them reduce their stress levels. It doesn't have to be going to the gym or anything structured. It can be anything that gets your body moving – so get creative if you like!

Lastly, throughout your day you should make sure you have time for your brain to defrag or process everything you are putting into it. We have so much input in a given day, our brain can get somewhat full if we don't manage our mind properly, and we need to create room for having down-time. One recommendation is to have a rule like I have that you do not check emails before 8am and after 8pm unless it is something that you MUST respond to and cannot wait. Being online from early morning to late at night is not a productive way to use your brain, and I find time and time again that the source of people having sleeping problems and finding they cannot switch off when they go to bed or they wake up in the night and their brain is racing, is that they do not give sufficient time at the end of their day for their brain to defrag and unwind and process everything they have been stimulated by that day. You can make up your own parameters here, but this is something that makes a very big difference if you are someone who is wired in and online responding to things at all hours. STOP IT if you want to master managing your mind for peak performance and productivity, and have a balanced and healthy state of mind.

### 4. FOCUS

To keep learning new things and keep up with the ever changing world we live in takes periods of needing to focus your mind on the task at hand. To focus your mind requires the use of your prefrontal cortex. This is why I look at focus as a separate area to work on, and like each other area, by now you should be able to see the correlations and inseparable nature between each.

The information crush that we are all immersed in with our current lifestyles is not designed to have us focus. It is more common for people to recognise being able to multitask as a favourable attribute than it is to be able to focus these days. If you want to be productive, you must learn to be able to focus your mind and remove distractions as much as possible. There is nothing wrong as I have said when you need to be working on multiple things, but it does decrease your productivity, accuracy and ultimately your performance – not to mention it zaps the energy in your brain much faster.

If you want to improve the quality of your working with others and meetings, have rules or standards that create a concentrated and focused environment to work in, and remove as many distractions and interruptions as possible. Turn phones off and do not have people working on other things when you are trying to engage in meetings. I have a practice of stopping speaking to people if they get distracted and start doing something on their phone and wait until I have their attention again, or if my attention gets taken to handle something on my phone or another device when I am interacting with someone, I will generally politely ask them to pause the conversation and say I need to handle this quickly, so that I preserve my brain's resources. I give the person I am speaking to my full attention such that I don't have to have them repeat themselves or not understand or take in what they are saying. I would like you to consider that if you are like most people in the marketplace that are unaware of the real costs of constant task switching and multitasking, that you waste a lot of time and tasks and interactions with people who take longer than they need to because you are not focused and fully conscious and engaged in what you are doing.

Those who want to thrive in the current marketplace will learn to manage their focus time such that it is used to their best advantage, and will minimise as much unnecessary task switching and multitasking. They also respect the fact that you can only focus your attention productively for short periods of time, depending on the



# BlueSeptember

Facing up to Prostate Cancer

## GET BLUE THIS SEPTEMBER!



Around 1 in 10 New Zealand men will get prostate cancer in their lifetime.  
If you're over 40 get checked!

[WWW.BLUESEPTEMBER.ORG.NZ](http://WWW.BLUESEPTEMBER.ORG.NZ)

PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY



PROUDLY  
SUPPORTING



REGISTERED CHARITY NO: CC30635

activity, and they realise when they need to stop, disengage and let their conscious brain activity decrease so they can re-engage in other tasks with the kind of focus required.

One other practice you should have to ensure you are maximising your focus when working and interacting with others is to get clear on the aims and outcomes you want to accomplish in the meeting, conversation or interaction, as this will ensure you are spending your brain energy only on the things that you need to put your focused attention on. If a person's brain is obviously depleted, they are unable to focus or are unproductive. This can be dealt with by rescheduling things, calling a break, or if you can't do that, simply acknowledge that they are not in a state of mind that is appropriate to get done what you need to, so you can work with what you have and get done whatever you can within the limits of their mental state.

## 5. THE SCARF MODEL

Lastly, an area you can really go to work on and develop a new capacity with is learning and embodying the SCARF model. It stands for Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness. It represents the primary reward and threat circuitry in the brain, and in social environments you either move toward something that produces a reward in your brain and away from something that produces a threat. I am not going to get into the principles of the model itself, as I have covered it in previous articles available on my website, or you can go to the creator of the model at davidrock.net and download his articles.

I have successfully used this model myself to improve the quality of the interactions I have with people, and train my clients in how to use this powerfully with themselves to maintain the right level of arousal for the task at hand, but also in their interactions with others to ensure that whatever they are out to accomplish with another person happens with more ease, greater speed of compliance and produces faster change. The SCARF model is a very useful model developed by David Rock in 2008, and can be applied very powerfully to both yourself and others.

It is a very general model you can use to quickly catch yourself about to act in response to a threat, and inhibit your normal automatic and unconscious patterns of behaviour or thinking, that would negatively impact your performance or productivity. SCARF threats to the brain produce stress hormones and if you are not aware of it happening you will find yourself over-aroused and not able to function at your best mentally, due to your limbic system being in fight or flight. When you can catch yourself reacting to a SCARF threat before it gains momentum you can quickly bring yourself back to a conscious and rational state of mind, and radically improve your ability to deal with any circumstance that you encounter.

With others, you can apply this model very effectively to produce greater change and compliance. You can produce a threat or a reward to someone's status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness or fairness with very purposeful and intentional ways of framing what you say. A couple of words can be the difference between someone's brain experiencing what you are saying as a threat or a reward to their brain, meaning they either want to naturally move away or towards what you are out to accomplish with them – altering the opportunity for change or compliance happening, and how easily and effectively it happens. I call this practice 'ethical manipulation of the brain' as we all do it to each other often without knowing it to get what we want faster. But if you are going to apply this with people you are interacting with, it needs to be ethical and to promote change and compliance towards something that contributes and makes a difference to the quality of someone's life – not to manipulate them to get what you want at their expense.

How you practice this is study/memorise the model and first practice it with yourself – catching yourself in a SCARF threat and consciously identifying which of the five threats it is. It could even be multiple ones, and when you can gauge what is happening, you can inhibit the normal reaction that would ensue and choose another action, while

also keeping your arousal levels more optimum for better performance and productivity.

Ultimately, the SCARF model is a powerful and quick way to reappraise a situation that would normally lead to you responding in a way that is not how you want to meaning it will get in the way of your performance and negatively impact your state of mind.

## SUMMARY

So in summary the five areas to focus on to gain a competitive advantage in the way you manage your mind and brain are:

### STRESS AND STRESSORS

- Understand stress and manage your stressors powerfully.
- Deal with your allostatic load moment to moment.
- Keep practicing being able to recognise what stressors cause you stress and how to mitigate, reduce or remove them.

### WILLPOWER

- It is a limited resource.
- The brain's glucose for the prefrontal cortex is in short supply.
- Plan and schedule for it.
- Don't deplete it unnecessarily by multitasking and task switching when you don't have to.
- Know when others' is depleted and deal with it accordingly.

### PLANNING AND SCHEDULING

- Plan and schedule for your brain's resources.
- Ensure you are disengaging throughout the day so you can continue to be fully engaged with the things you need to be.
- Have down-time to switch off and defrag especially at the end of the day, hours before you go to bed.
- Create movement time to recharge the brain.
- Limit your hours of being online.

### FOCUS

- Remove distractions when you are trying to focus your attention with yourself and others.
- Limit task switching in meetings with others.
- Schedule things with others to maximise focus and concentrate the environment.
- Have clear aims and intentions when interacting with people.
- Be aware of and deal with it if people are mentally depleted, unable to focus or being unproductive.

### SCARF

- Study/memorise it to apply it in any situation where a SCARF threat is triggered so you can reappraise the situation and choose a different response.
- Use it to set people up for change and ethical manipulation of the brain.

If you apply the above to your day to day working life, you should find that you can create new levels of performance and productivity, have an edge over those around you in the marketplace, and create a healthier more balanced state of mind to be able to enjoy the other important areas of your life outside of your money-making work.

The next article will be the fourth and final article in this brain burnout series. I will wrap up the series and create for you what it looks like when you are managing your mind at a high level, to ensure you avoid burning out your brain. I will give an insight into what I do as an expert in this area and create a proactive approach to the future that you can implement. I will introduce you to what I call the 'Matrix Effect', which is managing your mind and brain at the highest level. [M2](#)

*Drew Knowles is a Mind Coach who trains and coaches people to manage their mind and deal with stress to improve their performance, productivity and overall state of mind. [drewknowles.com](http://drewknowles.com)*