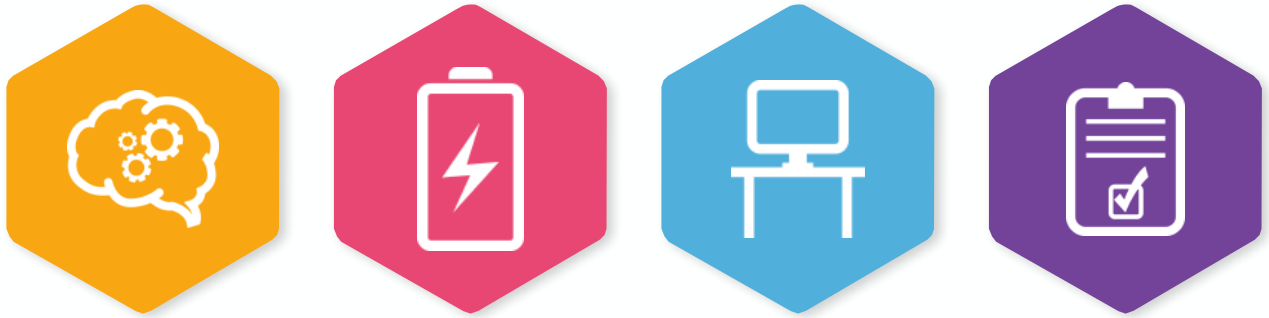
# THE PERFORMANCE PRESCRIPTION

The Science of Sustainable Success

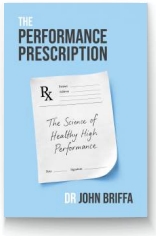


4 November 2026

**Dr John Briffa**

# THE PERFORMANCE PRESCRIPTION






Dr. John Briffa





REMINDER

# STRESS AND BURNOUT ARE COMMON

“Mental Health UK’s third annual Burnout Report once again exposes a persistent and troubling trend: **burnout** and **extreme stress** continue to affect **nine in ten people** across the UK.

Many employees are still on the brink, with **growing numbers taking time off due to mental health pressures,** while stress remains too often **overlooked** and **under-supported**.”




The Burnout Report - Mental Health UK - 2026




REMINDER
IN OUR RUSH TO OPTIMISE THE WORK
WHAT GOT LOST IN THE MIX IS THE WORKER

# THE PERFORMANCE PRESCRIPTION



The **stress response** (good and bad)



**Psychological strategies** for **managing stress** more effectively



**Physiological tools** to **manage stress** and our **state**

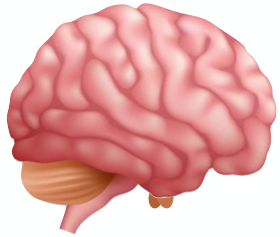


How to **execute effectively, reduce overwhelm** and **boost productivity**

Dr.John Briffa

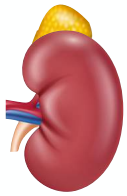

THE SCIENCE
OF STRESS
AND RESILIENCE
0
20
40
60
80
100
PRESSURE

# THE STRESS RESPONSE



NEUROLOGICAL

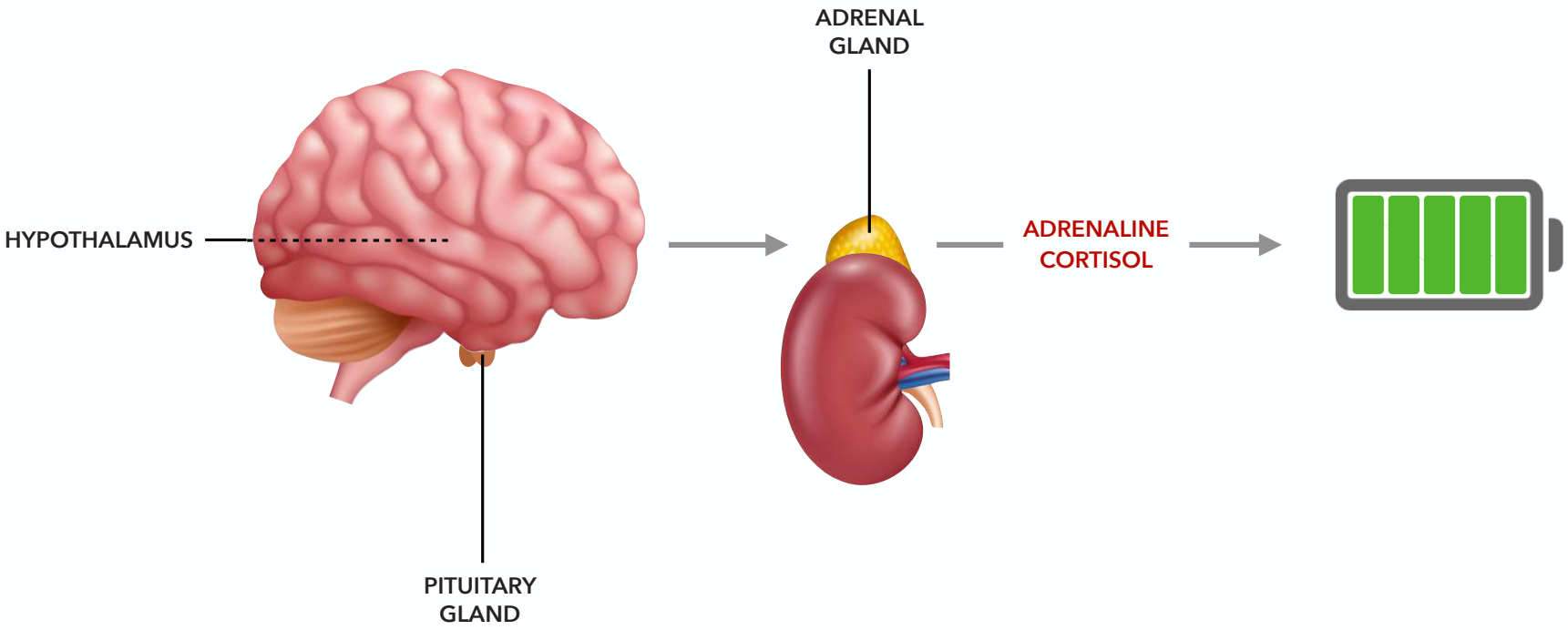
THE AUTONOMIC
NERVOUS SYSTEM



HORMONAL

THE `HPA AXIS´

# THE HPA AXIS


ADRENAL
GLAND
HYPOTHALAMUS
ADRENALINE
CORTISOL
PITUITARY
GLAND

# THE AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

## SYMPATHETIC

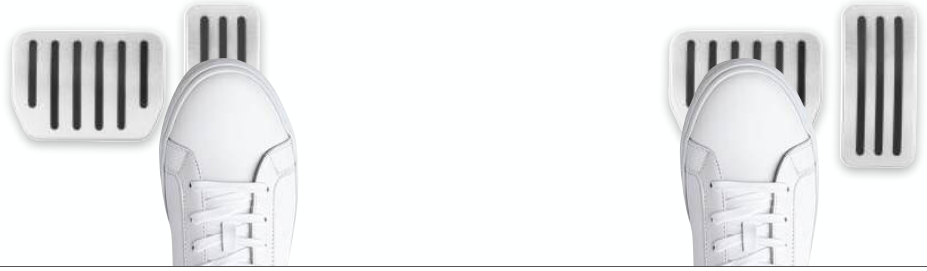
***INCREASES*** BREATHING RATE,
HEART RATE, BLOOD PRESSURE

**'ACCELERATOR/GAS'**

## PARASYMPATHETIC

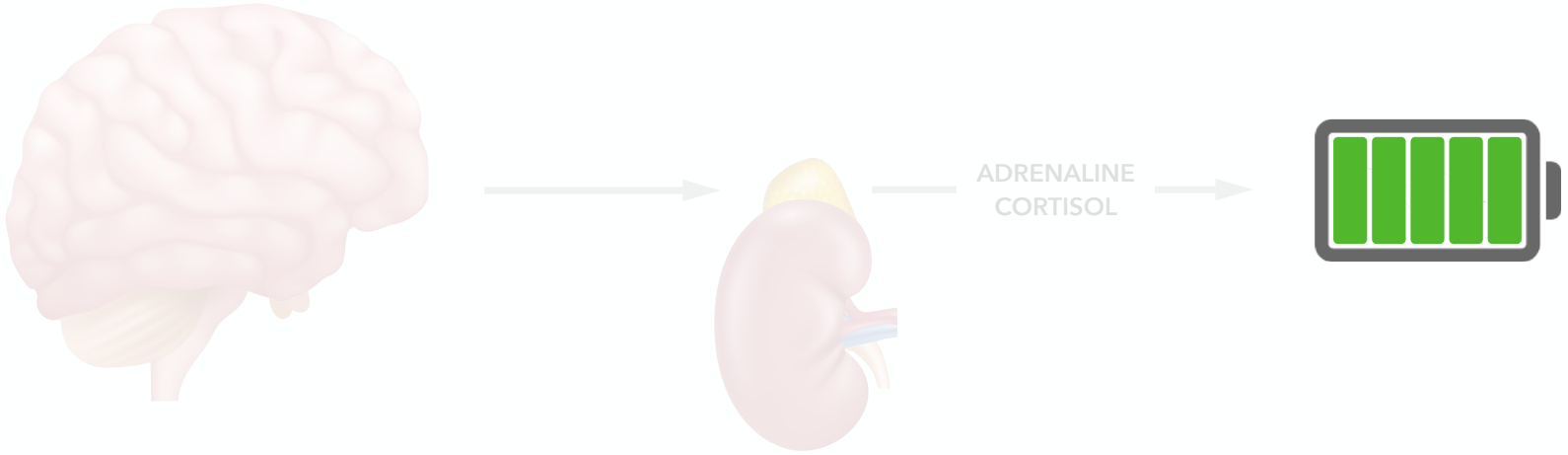
***LOWERS*** BREATHING RATE,
HEART RATE, BLOOD PRESSURE

**'BRAKE'**

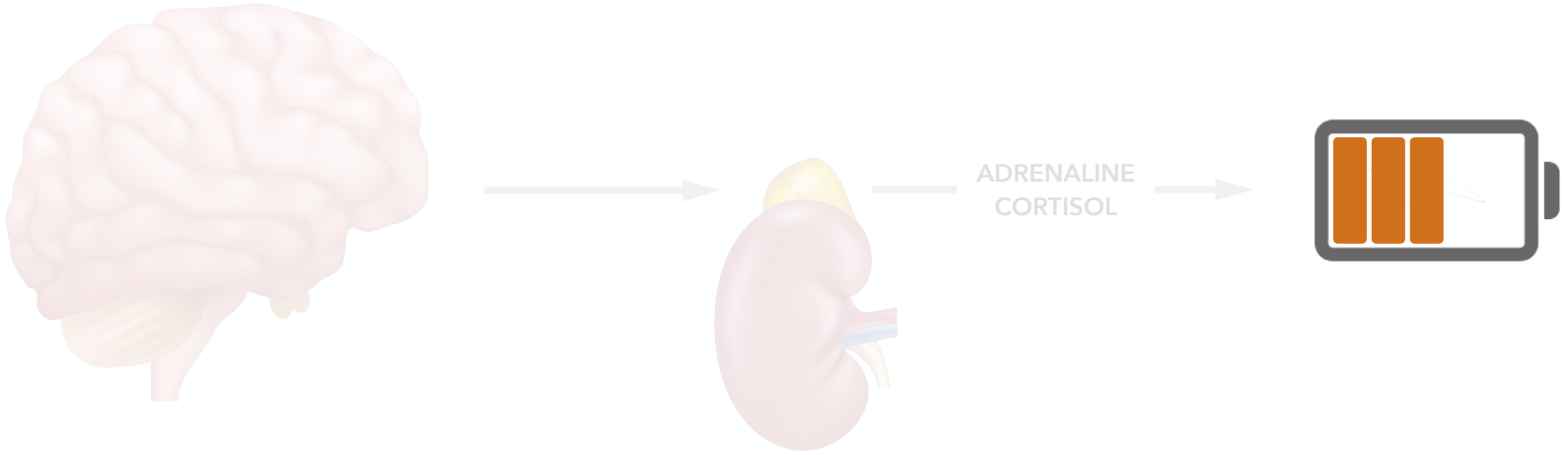



PERFORMANCE SUSTAINABILITY
STRESS/CHALLENGE

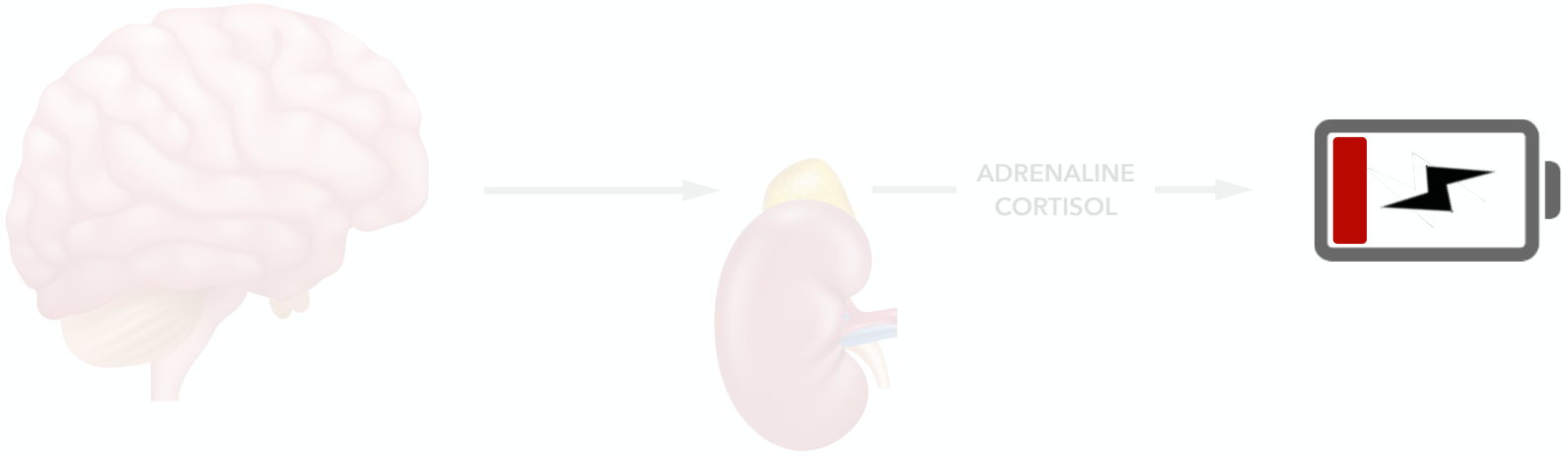
# THE HPA AXIS CAN WEAKEN OVER TIME



# THE HPA AXIS CAN WEAKEN OVER TIME



# THE HPA AXIS CAN WEAKEN OVER TIME



# THE AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

**SYMPATHETIC**

**‘ACCELERATOR/GAS’**



**PARASYMPATHETIC**

**'BRAKE'**

# THE EFFECT OF STRESS ON THE BRAIN

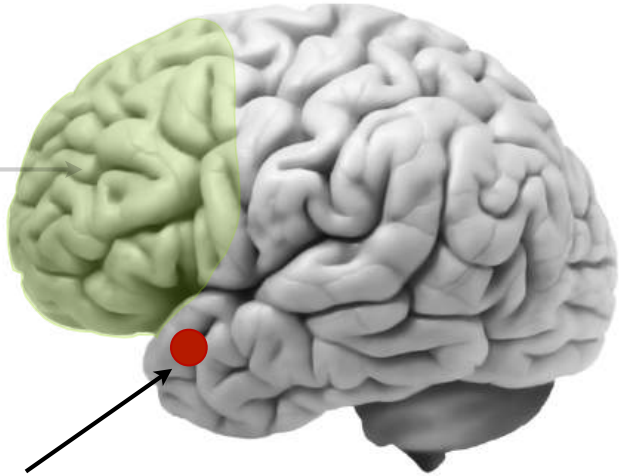
PRE-FRONTAL CORTEX

**'RATIONAL'**

CRITICAL FOR RATIONALITY, CRITIAL THINKING AND DECISION-MAKING

IMPORTANT FOR WILLPOWER AND SELF-CONTROL

***RESPONSIVE***



**AMYGDALA**

**'EMOTIONAL'**

OFTEN FEAR-BASED

IMPORTANT FOR SURVIVAL

***REACTIVE***

# STRESS EFFECTS

IMPAIRED FOCUS AND ATTENTION

UNDESIRABLE EMOTIONAL STATES

NARROW FOCUS ON ‘PROBLEMS’







# STRESS EFFECTS

IMPAIRED FOCUS AND ATTENTION

UNDESIRABLE EMOTIONAL STATES

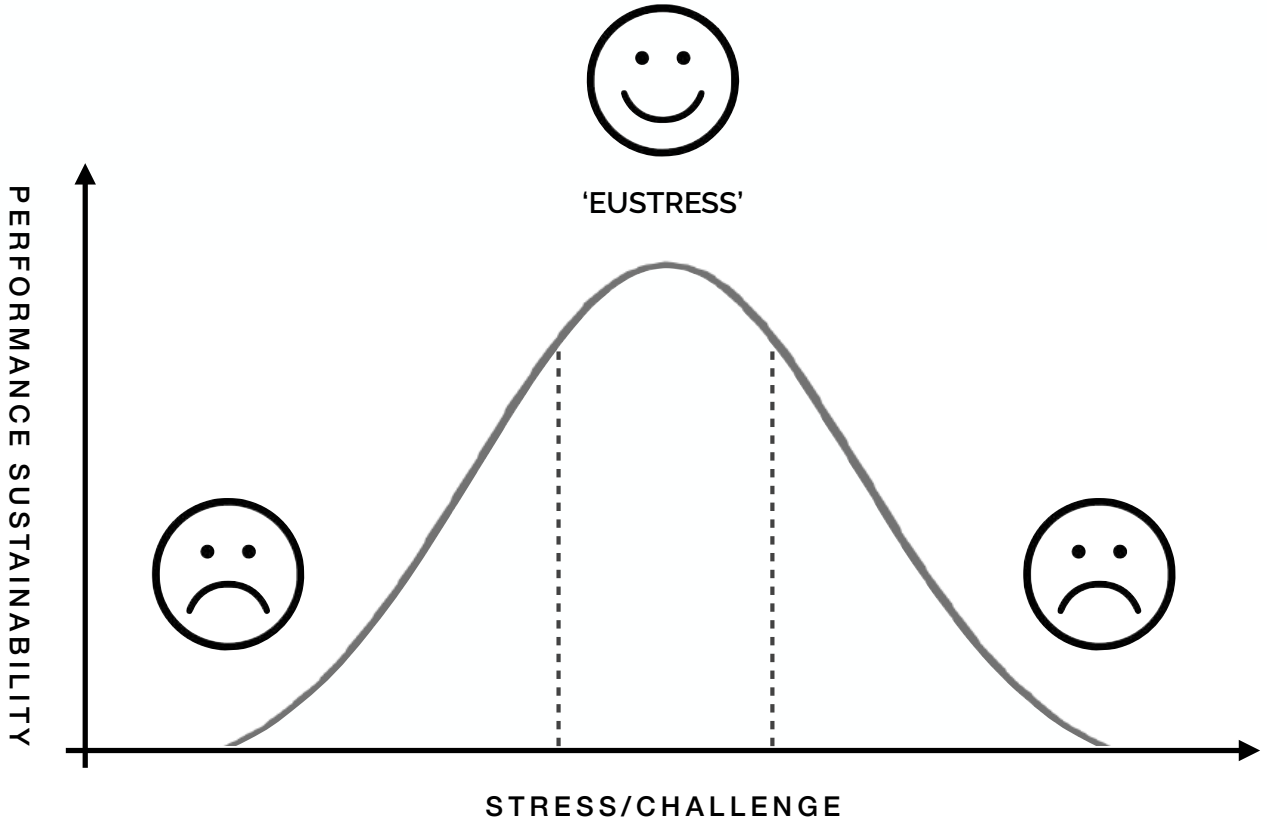
NARROWED FOCUS ON ‘PROBLEMS’

IMPAIRED JUDGEMENT AND DECISION-MAKING

IMPULSIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR






'EUSTRESS'
PERFORMANCE SUSTAINABILITY
STRESS/CHALLENGE

# THE PERFORMANCE PRESCRIPTION



The **stress response** (good and bad)



**Psychological strategies** for **managing stress** more effectively



**Physiological tools** to **manage stress** and our **state**



How to **execute effectively, reduce overwhelm** and **boost productivity**

Dr.John Briffa

# THE PERFORMANCE PRESCRIPTION



The **stress response** (good and bad)



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Dr.John Briffa

# SOURCES OF STRESS

- stress usually stems from **events** and **experiences** are **external to us**

- **giving undue attention** to and **attempting to control things** that **cannot be controlled can compound stress**

- what works better is to **focus on** and **change** what is **in our sphere of control**



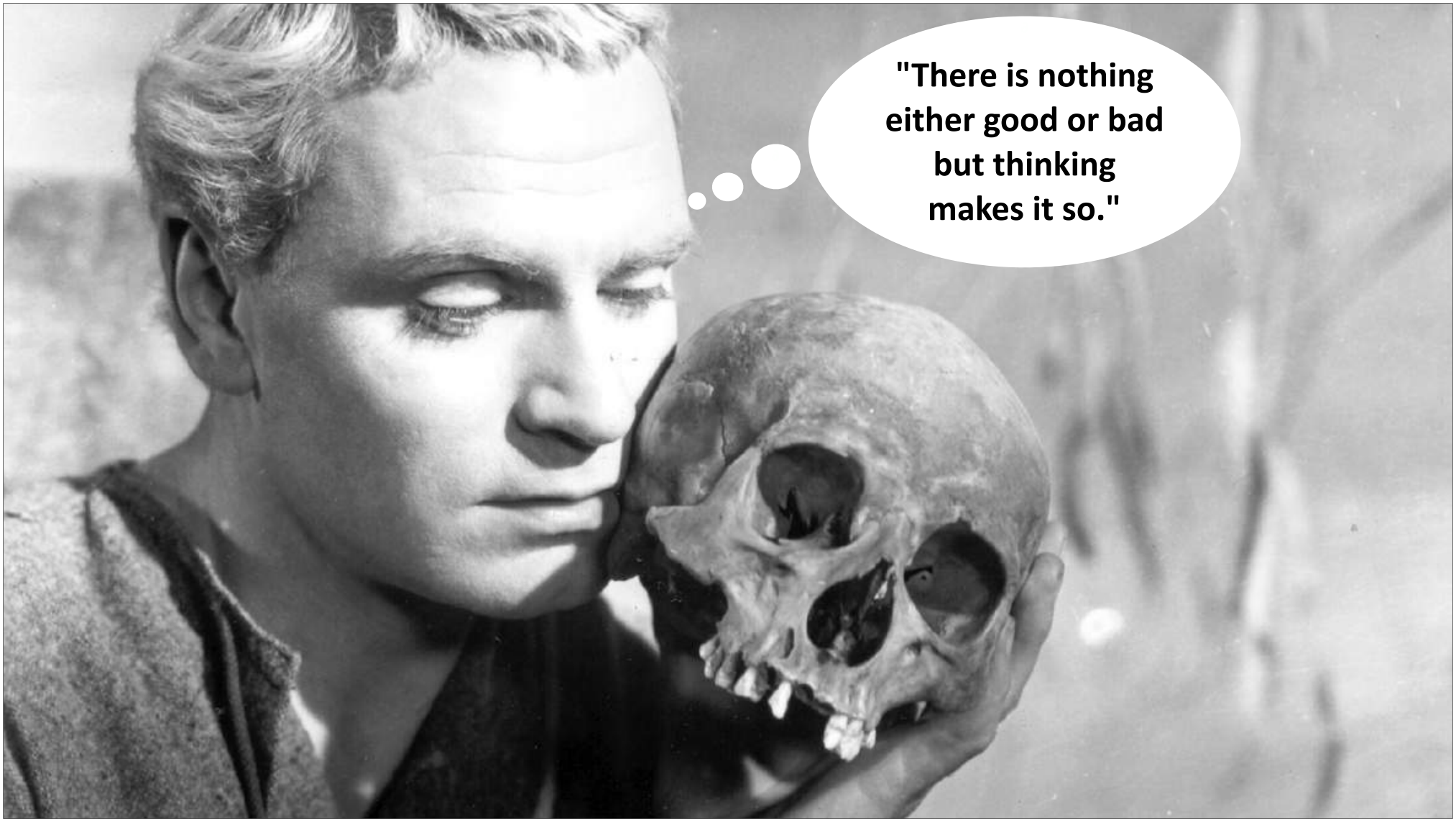


# THE ORIGINS OF EMOTION

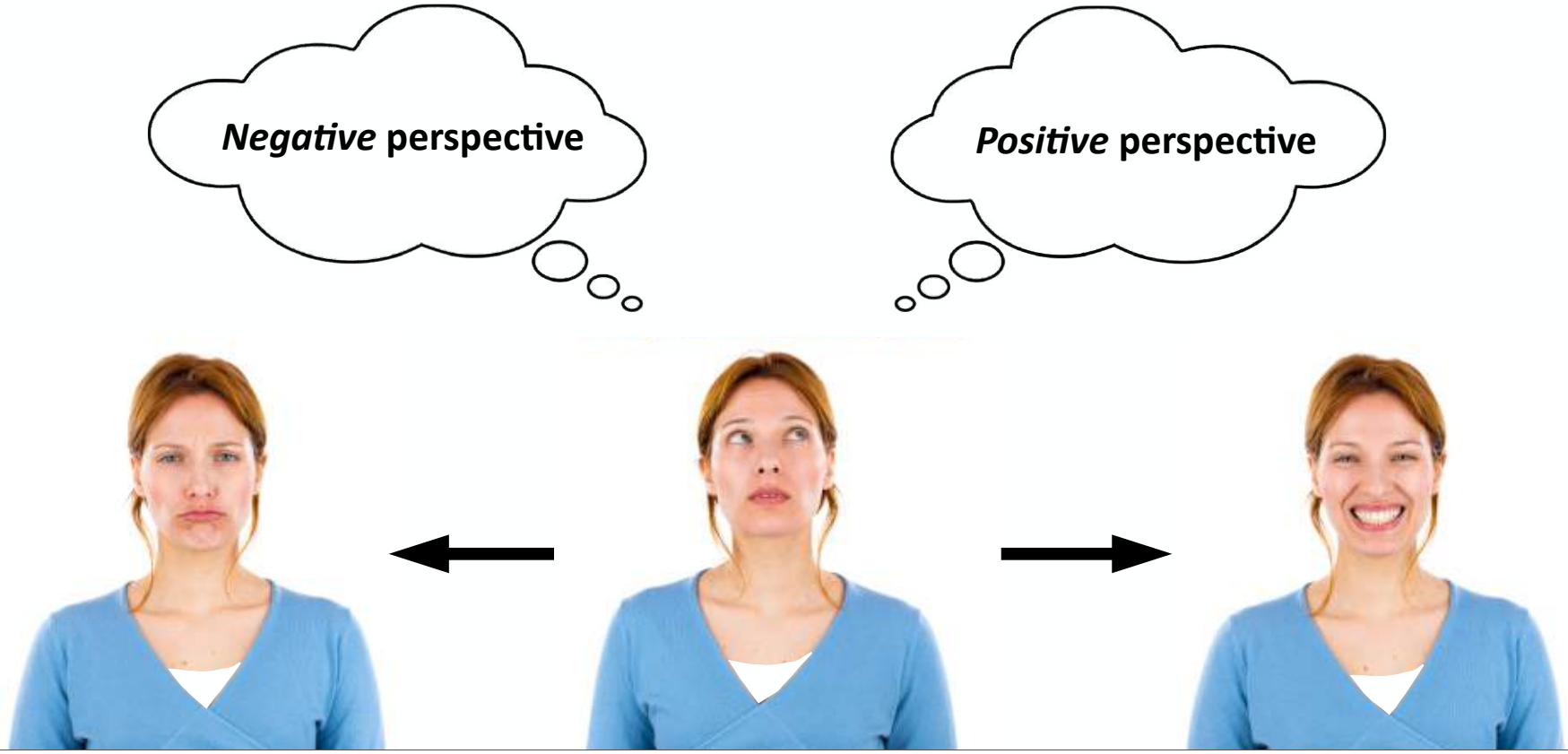
- many of us believe that our **emotional responses result** from **events, experiences** and **situations**

- then, how can **two people** can have **very different responses** to the **same experience?**




"There is nothing
either good or bad
but thinking
makes it so."

# EMOTIONS FOLLOW PERSPECTIVES



1

**CONTROLLING OUR EMOTIONS**
IS KEY TO SUSTAINABLE
HIGH PERFORMANCE

2

A KEY TO CONTROLLING OUR
EMOTIONS IS TO
**CONTROL OUR THINKING**

# THINKING ABOUT THINKING

- **'metacognition'** - a term coined by psychologist John Flavell in 1970s

- **being aware** of our **thinking** and **steering it**

- **key to emotional regulation**





# EMOTIONAL REGULATION - NAME IT TO TAME IT



PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE

*Research Article*

**Putting Feelings Into Words**

**Affect Labeling Disrupts Amygdala Activity in Response to Affective Stimuli**

**Matthew D. Lieberman, Naomi I. Eisenberger, Molly J. Crockett, Sabrina M. Tom, Jennifer H. Pfeifer, and Baldwin M. Way**

*University of California, Los Angeles*

ABSTRACT—*Putting feelings into words (affect labeling) has long been thought to help manage negative emotional experiences; however, the mechanisms by which affect labeling produces this benefit remain largely unknown. Recent neuroimaging studies suggest a possible neurocognitive pathway for this process, but methodological limitations of previous studies have prevented strong inferences from being drawn. A functional magnetic resonance imaging study of affect labeling was conducted to remedy these limitations. The results indicated that affect labeling, relative to other forms of encoding, diminished the response of the amygdala and other limbic regions to negative emotional images. Additionally, affect labeling produced increased activity in a single brain region, right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex (RVLPFC). Finally, RVLPFC and amygdala activity during affect labeling were inversely correlated, a relationship that was mediated by activity in medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC). These results suggest that affect labeling may diminish emotional reactivity along a pathway from RVLPFC to MPFC to the amygdala.*

Putting feelings into words has long been thought to be one of the best ways to manage negative emotional experiences. Talk therapies have been formally practiced for more than a century and, although varying in structure and content, are commonly based on the assumption that talking about one's feelings and problems in an effective method for minimizing the impact of negative emotional events on current experience. More recently, psychologists have discovered that merely putting pen to paper to express one's emotional ailments has benefits for mental and physical health (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Pennebaker, 1997). Although correlational studies and scientific evidence indicate that putting one's feelings into words can attenuate negative emotional experiences (Wilson & Schooler, 1991), the mechanisms by which these benefits arise remain largely unknown.

Recent neuroimaging research has begun to offer insight into a possible neurocognitive mechanism by which putting feelings into words may alleviate negative emotional responses. A number of studies of affect labeling have demonstrated that linguistic processing of the emotional aspects of an emotional image produces less amygdala activity than perceptual processing of the emotional aspects of the same image (Hariri, Bookheimer, & Mazziotta, 2000; Eisenberger, Hariri, Lieberman, Hyemberger, & Bookheimer, 2003). Additionally, these studies have demonstrated greater activity during linguistic processing than during nonlinguistic processing of emotion in right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex (RVLPFC), a region associated with the symbolic processing of emotional information (Cunningham, Johnson, Gatenby, Gore, & Banaji, 2003; Sumara et al., 2001) and with impulsive inhibitory processes (Aron, Robbins, & Poldrack, 2004). Finally, the magnitude of RVLPFC activity during affect labeling has been inversely correlated with the magnitude of amygdala activity during affect labeling in these studies. Together, these results suggest that putting feelings into words may activate RVLPFC, which in turn may dampen the response of the amygdala, thus helping to alleviate emotional distress.

In studies of affect labeling, an emotionally evocative image is usually shown along with two options for categorizing the image. The images in Figures 1a and 1b provide examples of typical affect-label and affect-match trials, respectively. During affect-label trials (i.e., linguistic processing of affect), a pair of affective labels is presented at the bottom of the screen, and the subject chooses the label that best characterizes the emotion displayed by the target face at the top of the screen. During affect-match trials (i.e., nonlinguistic processing of affect), a

Address correspondence to Matthew Lieberman, Department of Psychology, Franz Hall, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563, e-mail: lieber@ucla.edu.



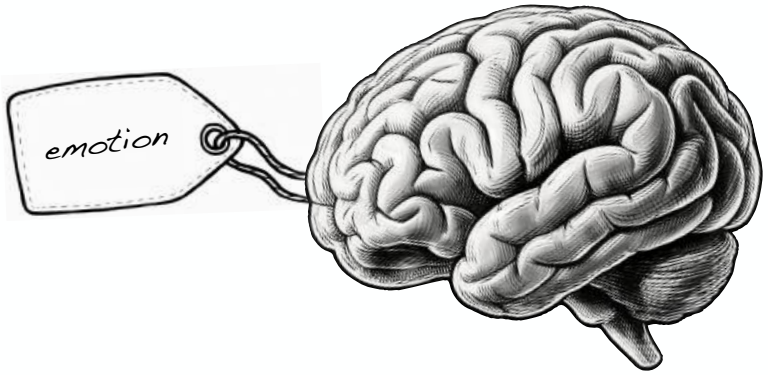
Copyright © 2007 American Psychological Society



- subjects assessed in an **fMRI**
- **affect labeling reduced activity** in the **amygdala**
- **increased activity** in the **prefrontal cortex**

Lieberman MD, et al. (2007). Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity in response to affective stimuli. *Psychological Science*, *18*(5), 421–428.

# EMOTIONAL REGULATION - NAME IT TO TAME IT




- **naming** or **labelling** an **emotion** ('affect labeling') has been shown to help people **manage** it **more successfully**
- labelling works **without deliberate effort or intent** to **regulate**
- the **benefit** appears to come simply from **the act of naming**, not from trying to manage the emotion

Torre JB, et al (2018) Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling as implicit emotion regulation. *Emotion Review 10*(2)116–124

# EMOTIONAL REGULATION - COGNITIVE REAPPRAISAL



Dealing With Feeling: A Meta-Analysis of the Effectiveness of Strategies Derived From the Process Model of Emotion Regulation

- assessment of 300+ experiments
- **attention shifting/distraction**, **cognitive reappraisal**, and **managing the response** after the emotion had arrived (e.g. hiding emotions, pushing emotions away)
- ***cognitive reappraisal*** was the **most effective for emotonal regulation**
- ***looking at the event as from another's perspective*** was the most effective of all

Webb T L, et al. (2012). Dealing with feeling: A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of strategies derived from the process model of emotion regulation. Psychological Bulletin, 138(4), 775–808

# GET SOME DISTANCE



Self-Talk as a Regulatory Mechanism: How You Do It Matters

- those who prepared for a stressful speech or first meeting by talking to themselves using their **own name** (third person) or **'you'** (second person) felt less anxious
- they experienced **higher performance**, and **less rumination**
- **more likely to see the task as a challenge** rather than a threat

Kross E, et al. (2014). Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: How you do it matters. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 106(2), 304–324.


REMINDER

# THE PERFORMANCE PRESCRIPTION



The **stress response** (good and bad)



**Psychological strategies** for **managing stress** more effectively



**Physiological tools** to **manage stress** and our **state**



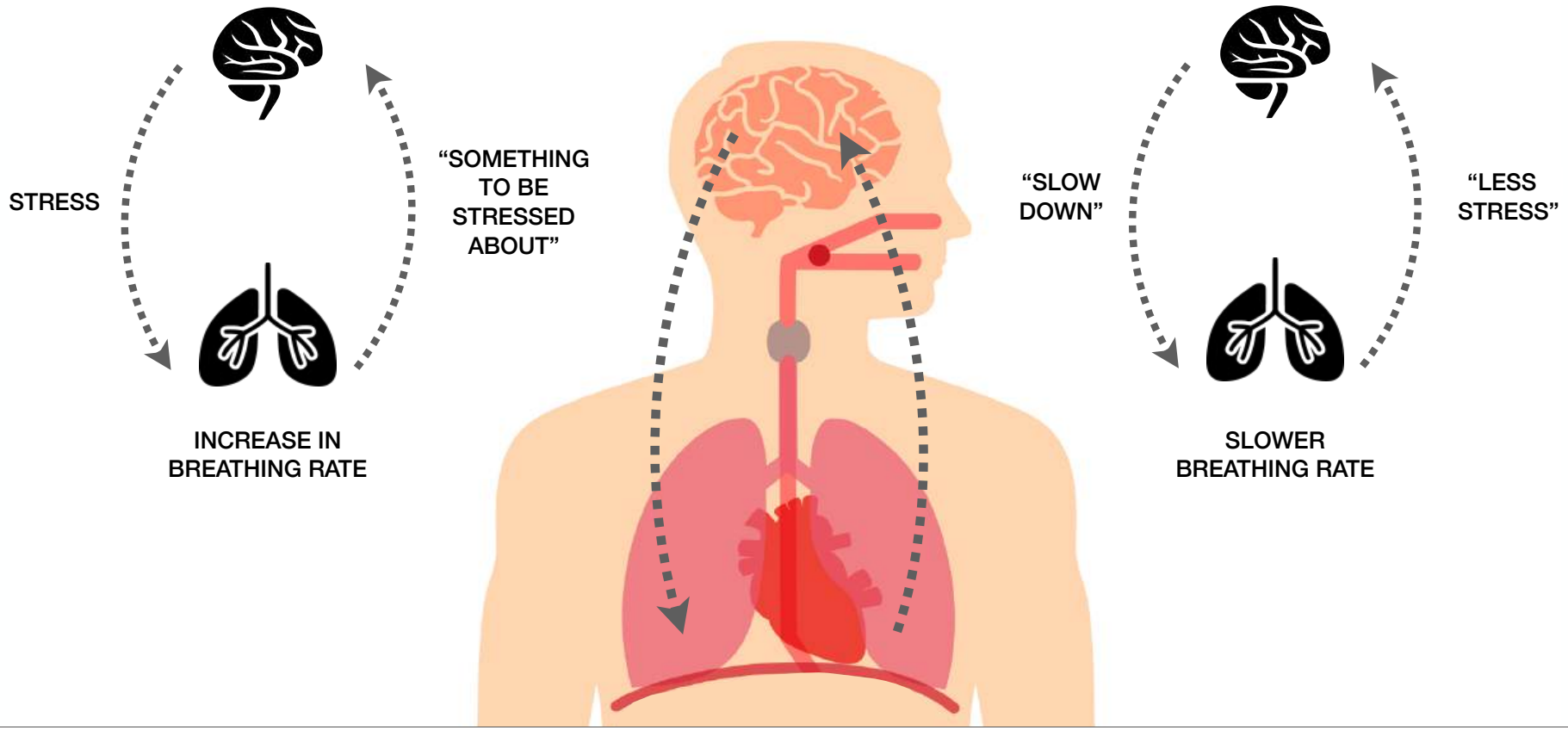
How to **execute effectively, reduce overwhelm** and **boost productivity**

Dr.John Briffa

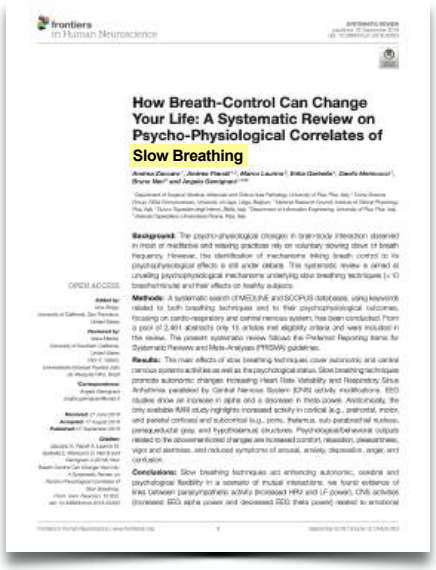
# BREATHING SPACE



# THE NEUROPHYSIOLOGY OF BREATHING



# SLOWER BREATHING IMPROVES STATE



frontiers in Human Neuroscience

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

**How Breath-Control Can Change Your Life: A Systematic Review on Psycho-Physiological Correlates of Slow Breathing**

OPEN ACCESS

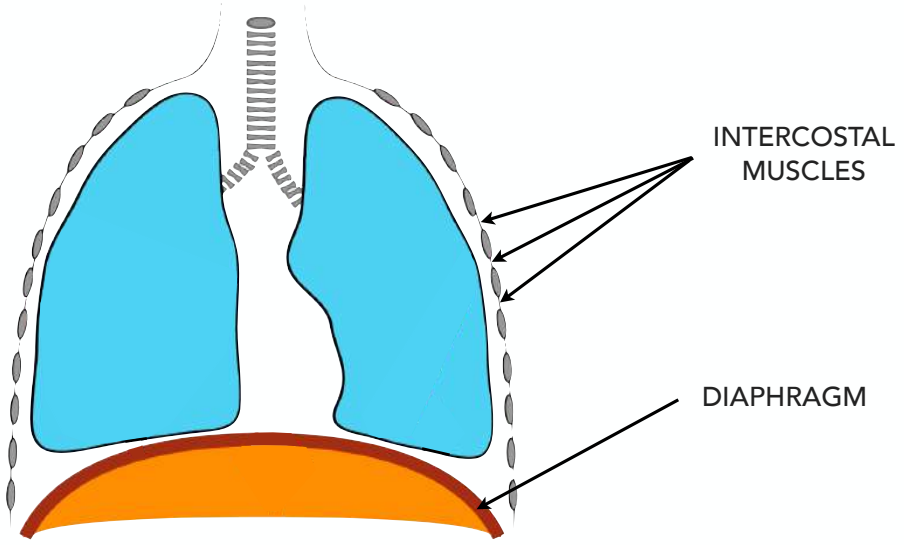
≈ 6 BREATHS/MIN

ENERGY
COMFORT
RELAXATION
PLEASANTNESS
ALERTNESS

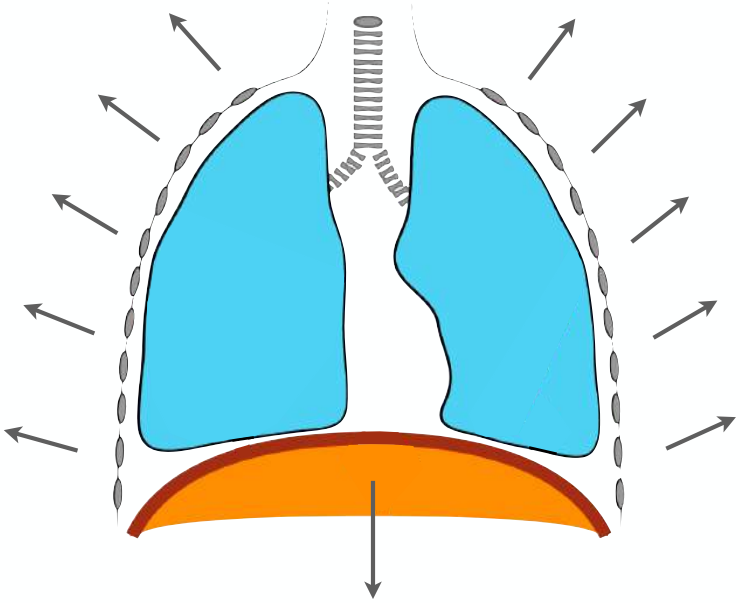
ANGER
DEPRESSION
ANXIETY
CONFUSION

Zaccaro A, et al. (2018). How breath-control can change your life: A systematic review on psycho-physiological correlates of slow breathing. Frontiers in Human Neuroscience, 12, 353

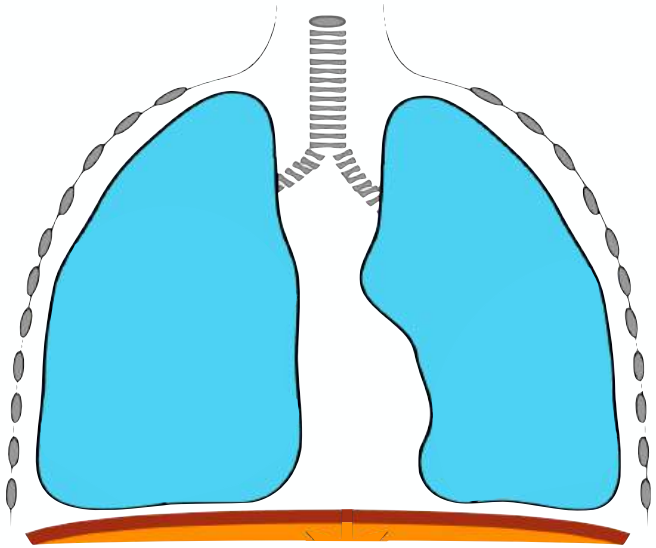
# THE BIO-MECHANICS OF BREATHING



# THE BIO-MECHANICS OF BREATHING



# THE BIO-MECHANICS OF BREATHING



# DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING IS ‘DE-STRESSING’



Effectiveness of diaphragmatic breathing for reducing physiological and psychological stress in adults: a quantitative systematic review

ABSTRACT

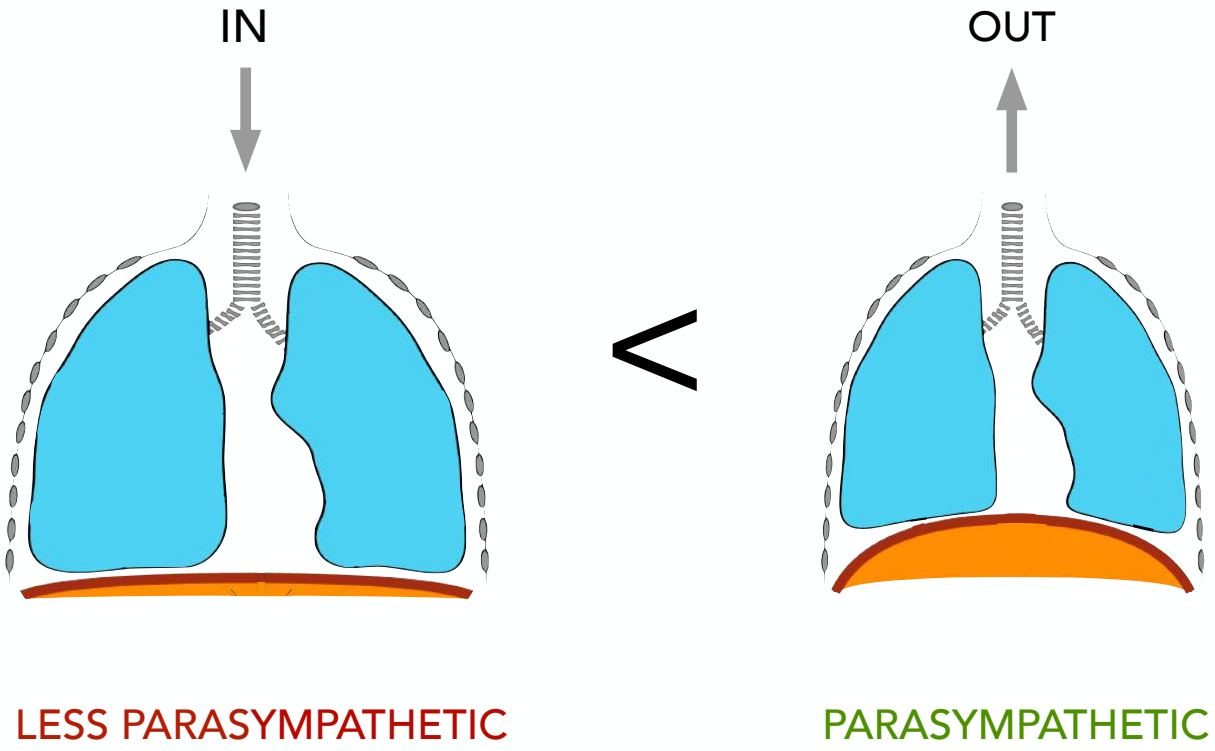
**STUDIES DEMONSTRATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING ON REDUCING STRESS**

Hopper SI, et al. (2019). Effectiveness of diaphragmatic breathing for reducing physiological and psychological stress in adults: A quantitative systematic review. JBI Database of Systematic Reviews and Implementation Reports, 17(9), 1855–1876

# THE ART OF BELLY BREATHING

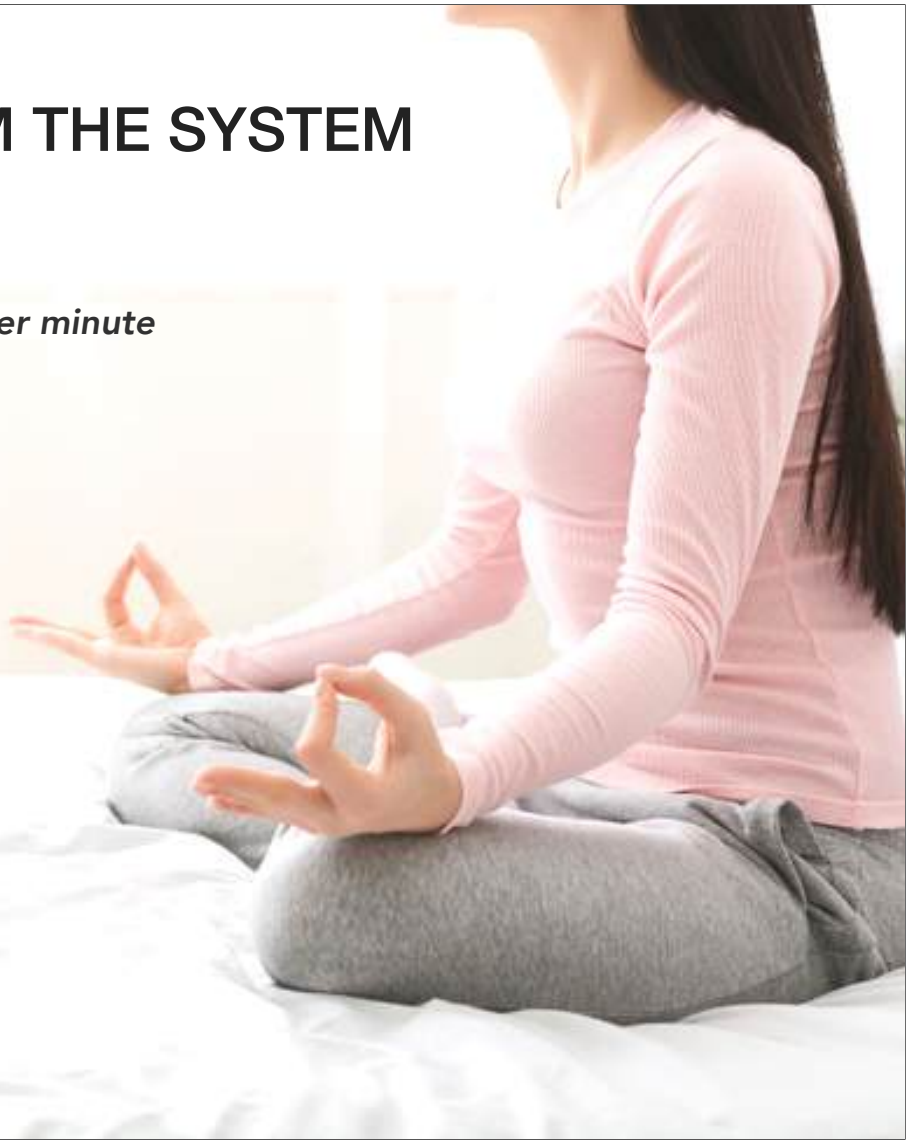


# THE NEUROPHYSIOLOGY OF BREATHING



# BREATHING TO CALM THE SYSTEM

- ***slow*** your **breathing rate** to about ***6 breath cycles per minute***
- breathe ***into the abdomen*** from the **diaphragm**
- ***extend*** *the* ***exhale*** relative to the inhale
  (e.g. inhale over 3s in, exhale over 7s)



# THE AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

## SYMPATHETIC

***INCREASES*** BREATHING RATE,
HEART RATE, BLOOD PRESSURE

'ACCELERATOR/GAS'



## PARASYMPATHETIC

***LOWERS*** BREATHING RATE,
HEART RATE, BLOOD PRESSURE

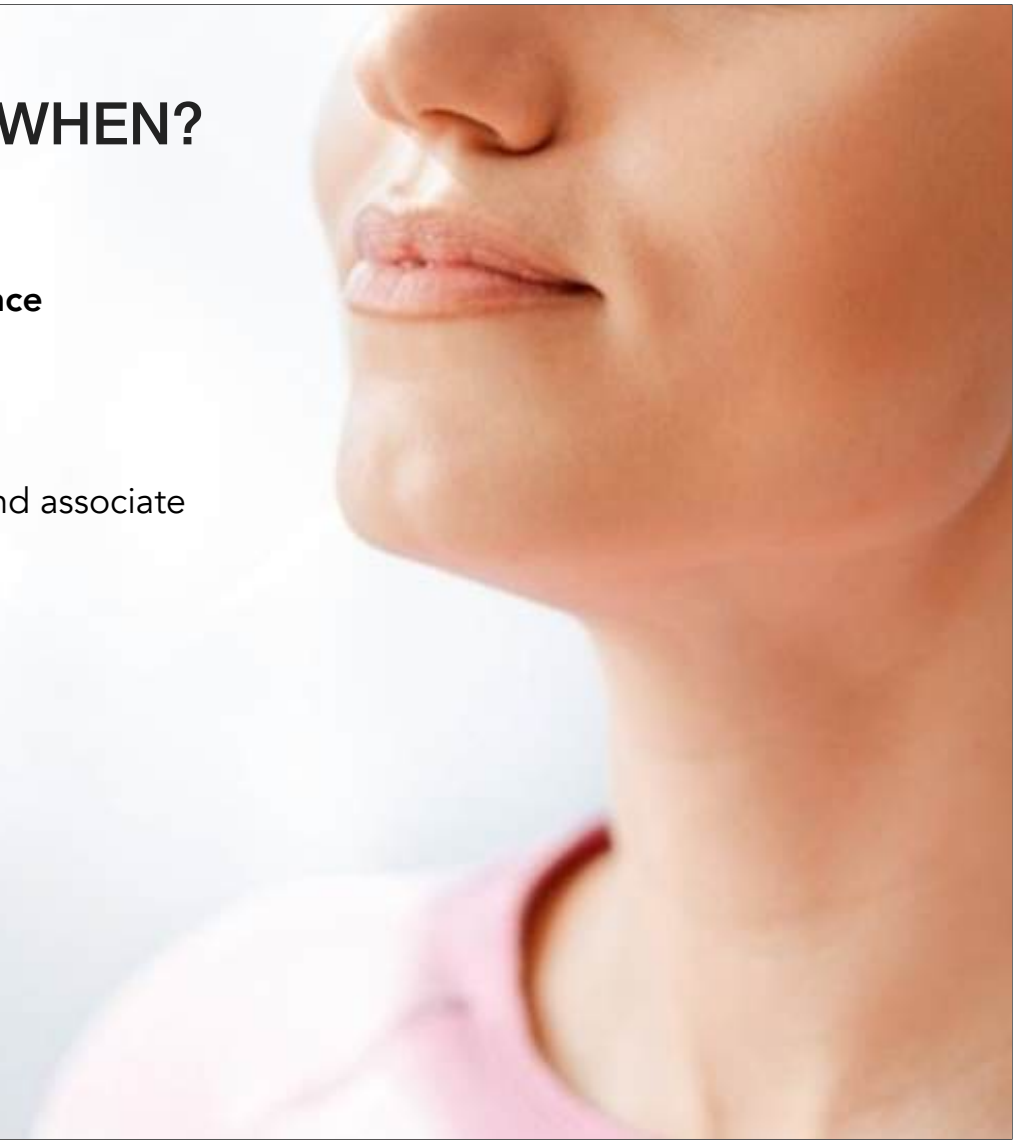
'BRAKE'




1, 2, 3, 1,
2, 3, 4, 5,
6, 7…

# CALMING BREATH - WHEN?

- **during** or **prior to** a **challenging experience**
- **before sleep** (helps embed it as a habit and associate the exercise with sleep)
- if you are finding it **difficult to sleep**
- if you ***wake in the night***



# THE PERFORMANCE PRESCRIPTION



The **stress response** (good and bad)



**Psychological strategies** for **managing stress** more effectively



**Physiological tools** to **manage stress** and our **state**



How to **execute effectively, reduce overwhelm** and **boost productivity**

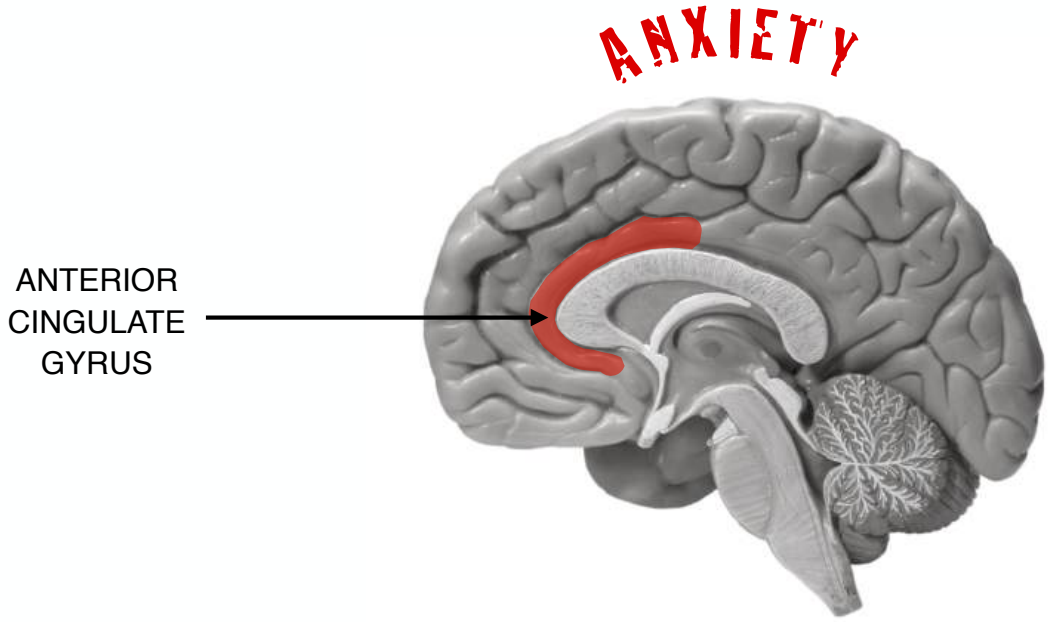
Dr.John Briffa

# GETTING THE JOB DONE





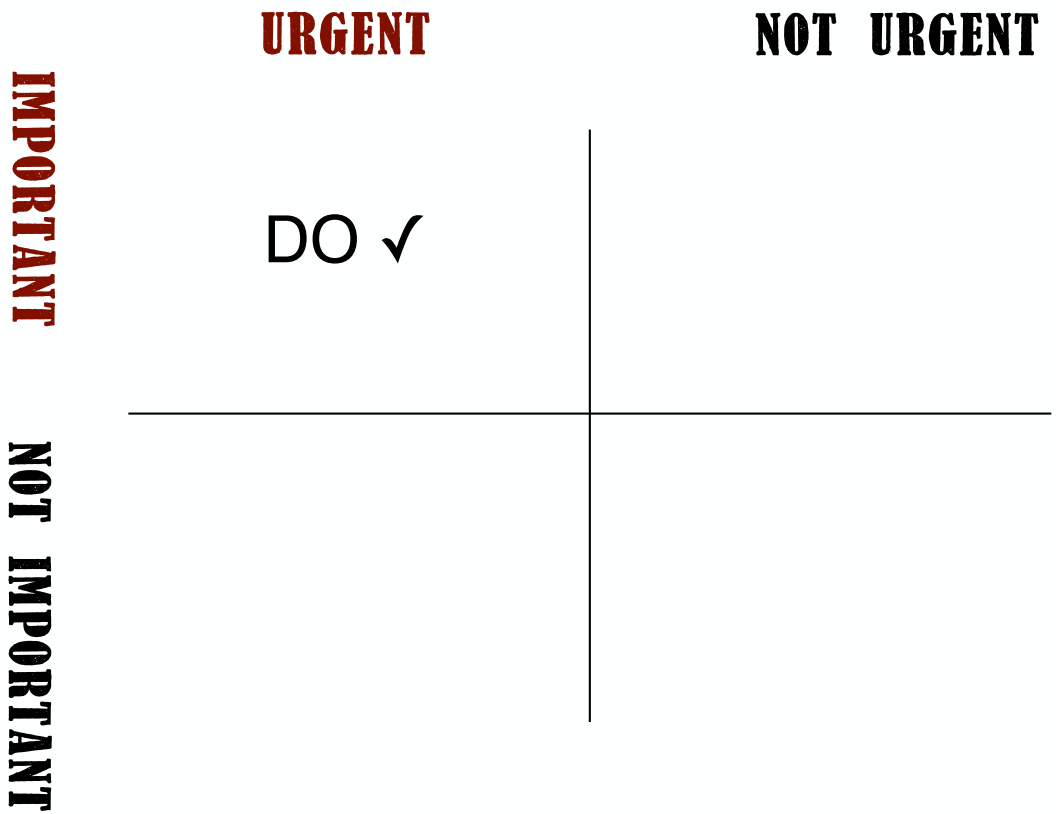
# DECISIONS, DECISIONS…






PRIORITISE
PRIORITISATION

# THE EISENHOWER MATRIX



GIVES CLARITY AND REDUCES ANXIETY

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT AND URGENT THINGS I NEED TO DO TODAY/TOMORROW?

PRACTICAL AND PRODUCTIVE

PROVIDES RELIEF, SATISFACTION AND REWARD

REDUCES DISTRACTING THOUGHTS



GIVES CLARITY AND REDUCES ANXIETY

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT AND URGENT THINGS I NEED TO DO TODAY/TOMORROW?

PRACTICAL AND PRODUCTIVE

PROVIDES RELIEF, SATISFACTION AND REWARD

REDUCES DISTRACTING THOUGHTS



# THE ZEIGARNIK EFFECT



Bluma Zeigarnik 1901-1988



# OUT OF YOUR HEAD



Consider It Done! Plan Making Can Eliminate the Cognitive Effects of Unfulfilled Goals

E. J. Masicampo and Roy F. Baumeister
Florida State University

Unfulfilled goals persist in the mind, as asserted by ample theory and evidence (e.g., the Zeigarnik effect). The standard assumption has been that such cognitive activation persists until the goal is fulfilled. However, we predicted that contributing to goal pursuit through plan making could satisfy the various cognitive processes that usually promote goal pursuit. In several studies, we activated unfulfilled goals and demonstrated persistent goal activation over time. Unfinished goals caused intrusive thoughts during an unrelated reading task (Studies 1 and 5R), high mental accessibility of goal-related words (Studies 2 and 3), and poor performance on an unrelated assignment task (Study 4). Allowing participants to formulate specific plans for their unfulfilled goals eliminated the various activation and interference effects. Reduction of the effects was mediated by the naturalness of participants' plans. Those who ultimately executed their plans were those who also exhibited no more intrusive (Study 4). Moreover, changes in goal-related situations did not appear to be a necessary component of the observed cognitive effects (Studies 1A and 5R). Committing to a specific plan for a goal may therefore not only facilitate attainment of the goal but may also free cognitive resources for other pursuits. Once a plan is made, the drive to attain a goal is suspended—allowing goal-related cognitive activity to cease—and is resumed at the specified later time.

Keywords: goal pursuit, self-regulation, plan making, motivation

The human mind is remarkably well designed for goal pursuit. Attention (Maslowitz, 2002), perception (Bruner & Goodman, 1947; Lambert, Solomon, & Watson, 1949; Maner et al., 2005), thoughts (Klinger, 1977), and attitudes (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004) all become tuned to help one pursue a goal. The mind vigorously promotes this intense focus on a goal, protecting it from distractions (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002) and resuming it after it has been interrupted (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). Even when one is not consciously working toward a goal, the mind keeps the goal active in the unconscious (Klinger, 1975; Zeigarnik, 1927), maintaining vigilance for opportunities to fulfill it (Goschke & Kuhl, 1993; Moskowitz, 2002).

Thus, once a goal is chosen, the mind has many processes to promote its pursuit. At what point do these subside? The obvious answer is that they cease when the goal is attained. This has been favored in theories of goal pursuit (Klinger, 1975) and has found support in empirical research (Förster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005). However, the present investigation tested the hypothesis that many goal-promotion processes cease long before attainment, in particular, when a plan is made.

Planning has been studied recently in the form of implementation intentions, which are highly specific prescriptions for what to do under what circumstances (Gollwitzer, 1999). Such plans turn control of goal pursuit over to automatic, unconscious processes, which can resume goal pursuit at the appropriate time or place specified in the plan. Once a plan is made, the unconscious knows how and when to act, and so in a sense the uncertainty of the unfinished task is resolved. The implication for the current work is that a plan may render many of the cognitive activities related to the goal unnecessary. We hypothesized that making a plan for a goal would therefore stop various goal-related cognitive processes, even though the goal remains unfulfilled.

## Making Plans for Action

If most human behavior were guided by one or two goals, it might be effective for mental processes to promote each goal until attainment. But at any given time, the average North American student reports 15 ongoing personal projects (Little, 1998), not to mention the more short-term goals, such as getting dressed and brushing teeth. Even if the unconscious mind has the capacity to promote all 15 goals simultaneously (Dijksterhuis, Aarts, & Smith, 2005), the limited resources of the executive function cannot pursue multiple goals at once (Inzlicht, 2009). Even more important, when the executive is working toward one goal, it cannot function effectively if it is frequently bombarded with distracting reminders

E. J. Masicampo and Roy F. Baumeister, Department of Psychology, Florida State University.

This research was supported in part by a grant from the Templeton Foundation. Thanks to Teresa Clemmer, Samantha Finch, Kayla Finch, Shaun Harkin, Mike Horton, Kelsey McAloon, Maggie Murphy, Jessica Pate, Allison Ross, Kayla Sedgwick, Erin Sweeney, and Chris Thorstenson for their suggestions and help with data collection.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to E. J. Masicampo, who is now at the Department of Psychology, Tufts University, Medford, MA 02155. E-mail: ej.masicampo@tufts.edu

## DISTRACTING THOUGHTS CAN GENERALLY BE SHUT OFF BY…

## …PLANNING WHEN TASKS WILL BE DONE

Masicampo EJ & Baumeister RF (2011). Consider it done! Plan making can eliminate the cognitive effects of unfulfilled goals. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 101(4), 667–683.

# TASKS NEED TO BE CAPTURED OUTSIDE OUR BRAIN…



Notebook




Remarkable 2



MS One Note



Apple Notes



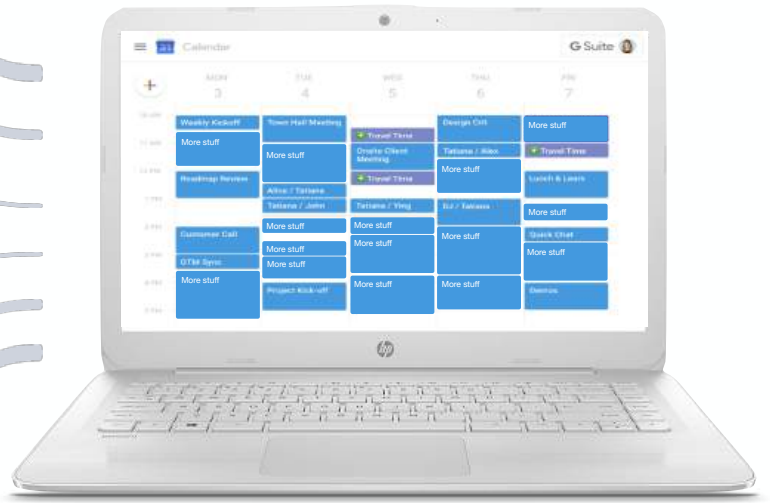
Todoist



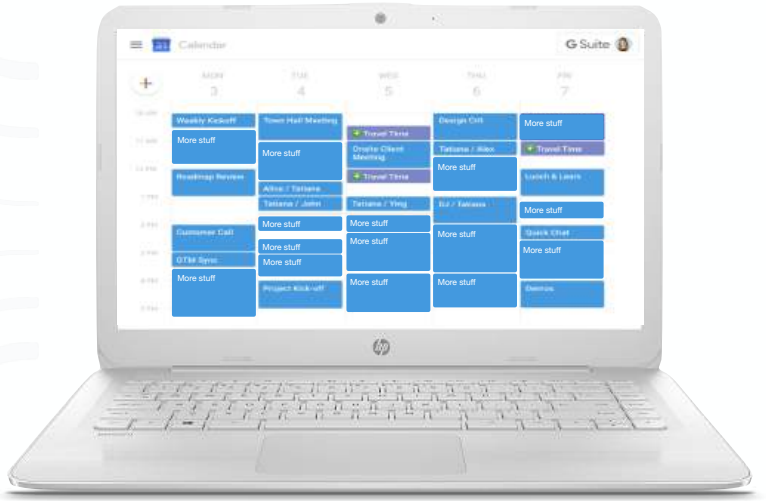
Tasks (Mac)

# AND THEN *SCHEDULED*



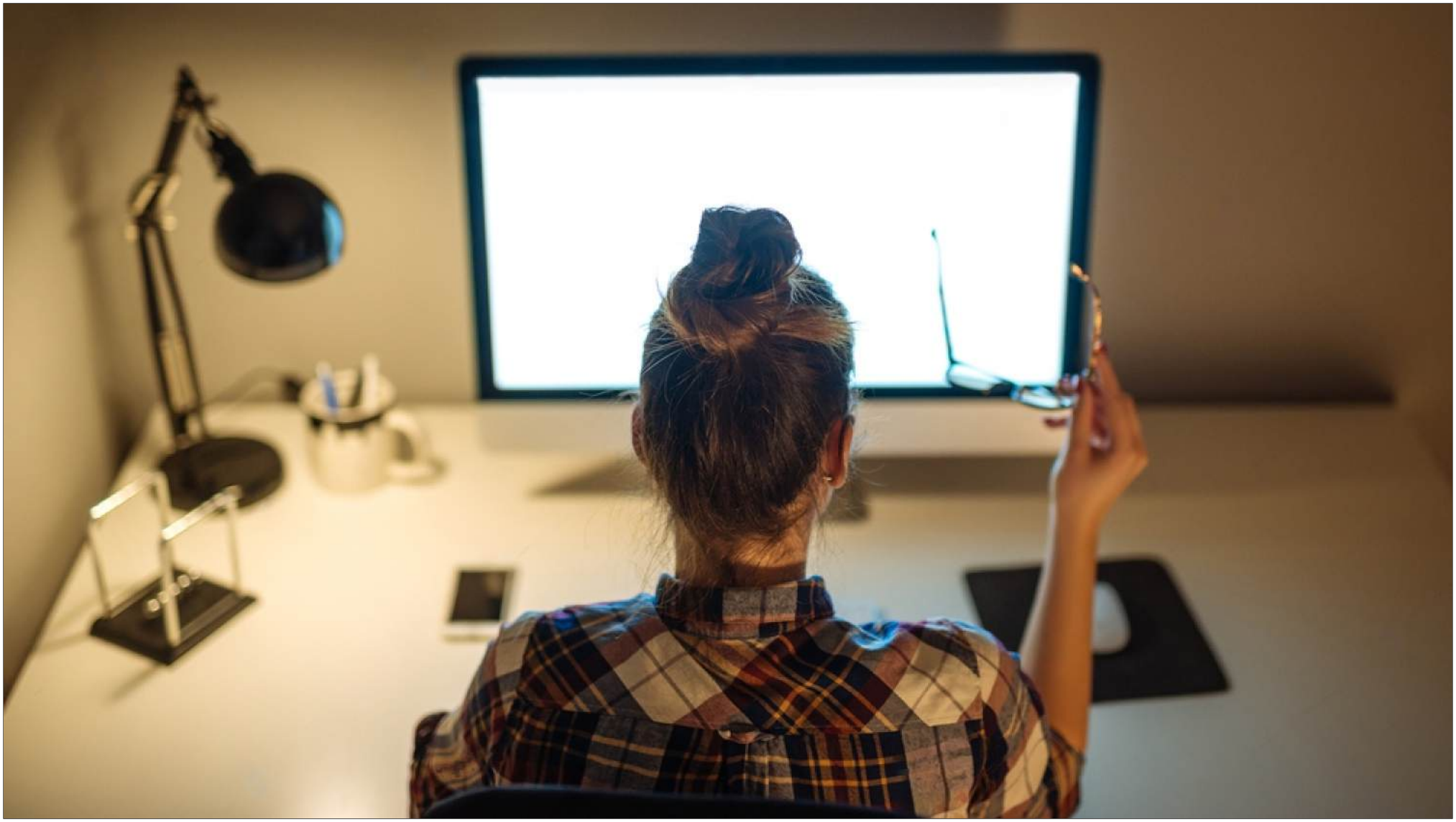


# THE PROBLEM




2021


In Tray
Out Tray



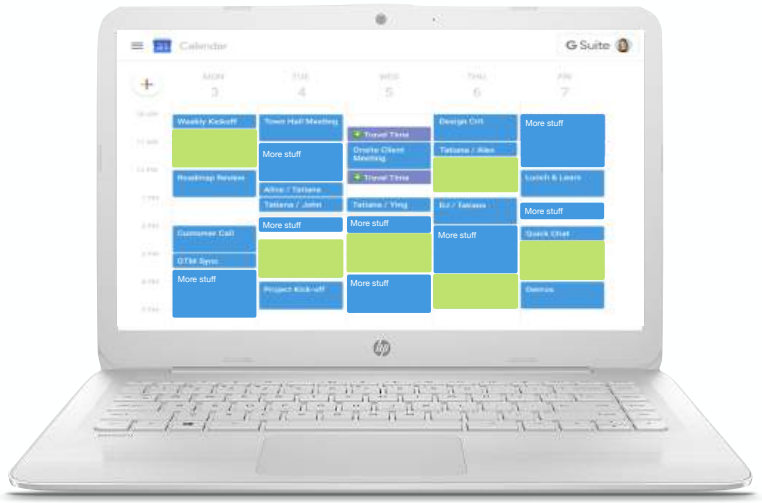
# THE PROBLEM -v- THE SOLUTION



# THE PROBLEM -v- THE SOLUTION



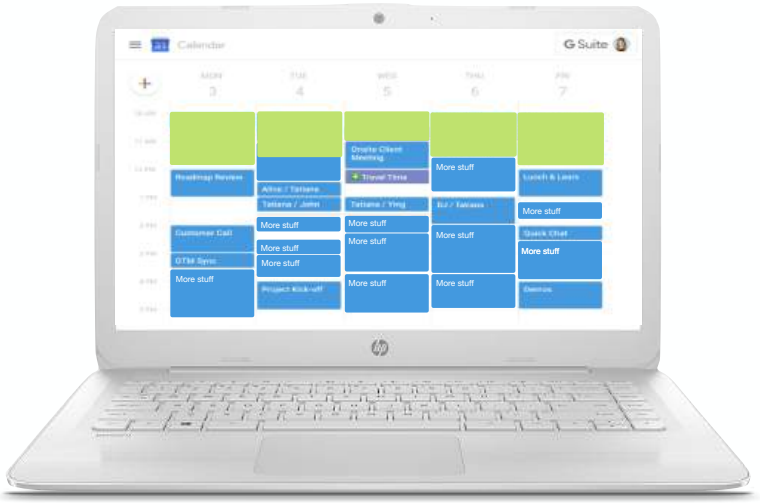

-V-



# THE PROBLEM -v- THE SOLUTION

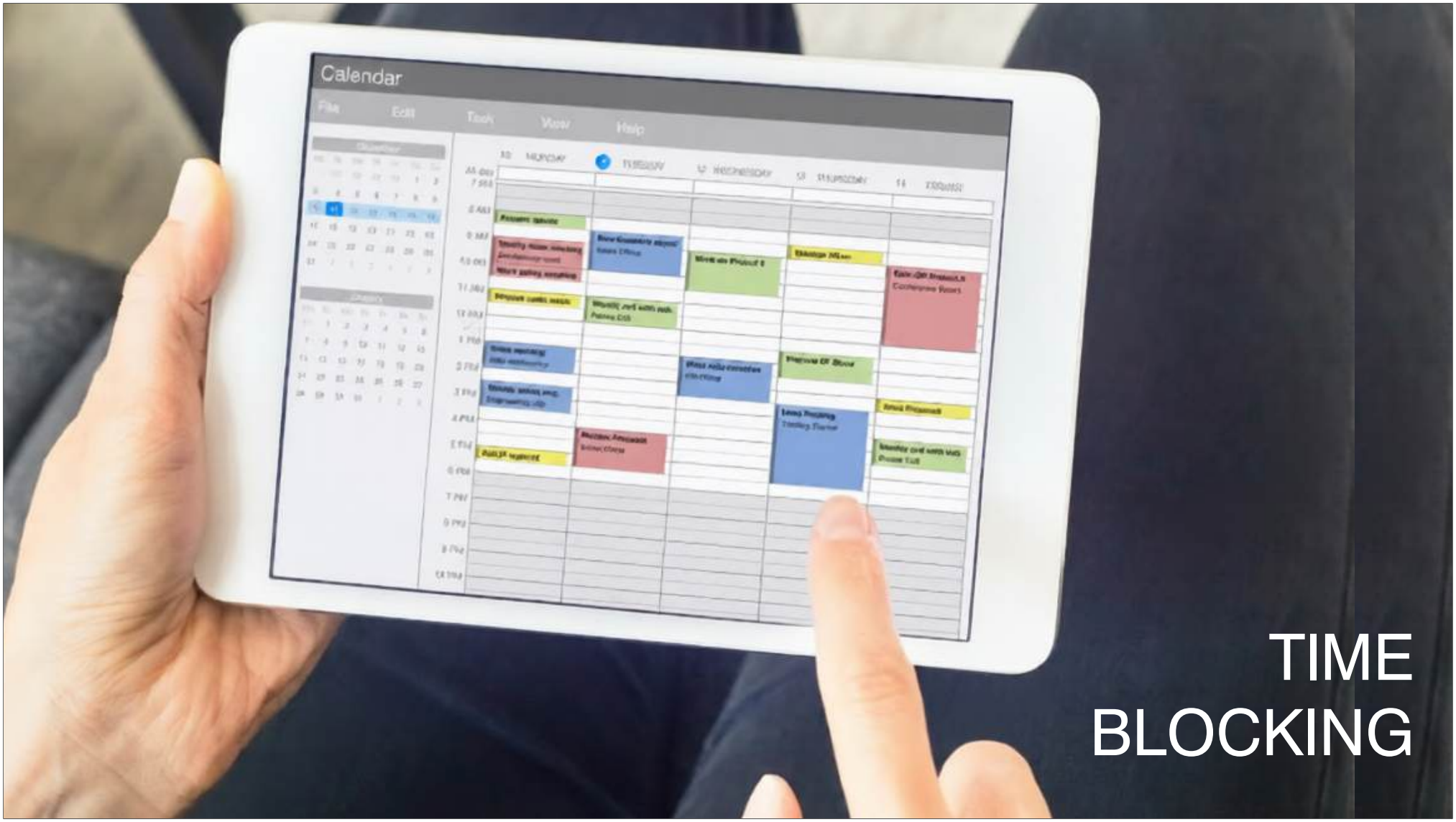



-V-

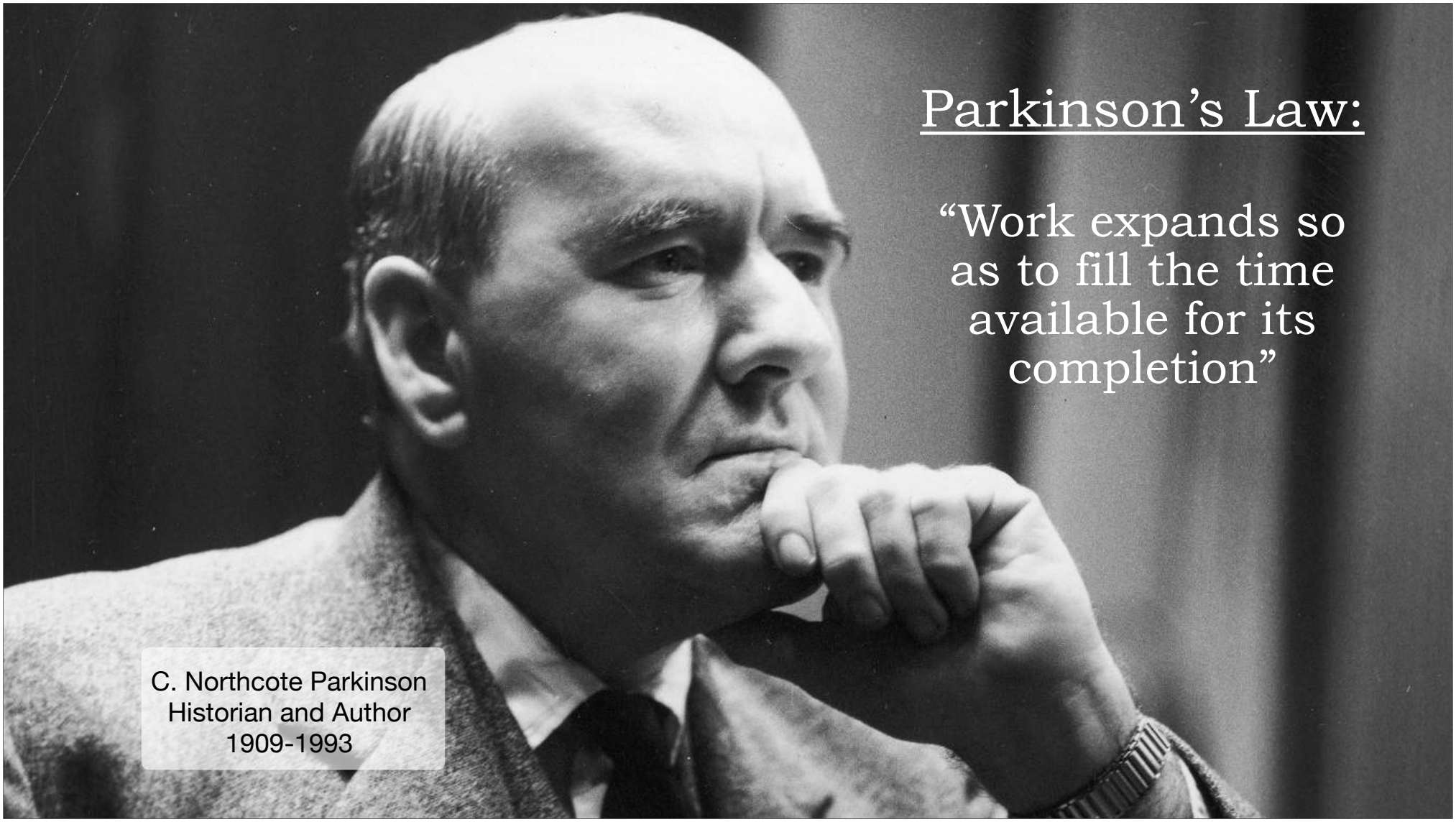


# ≈ 2 HOURS/DAY

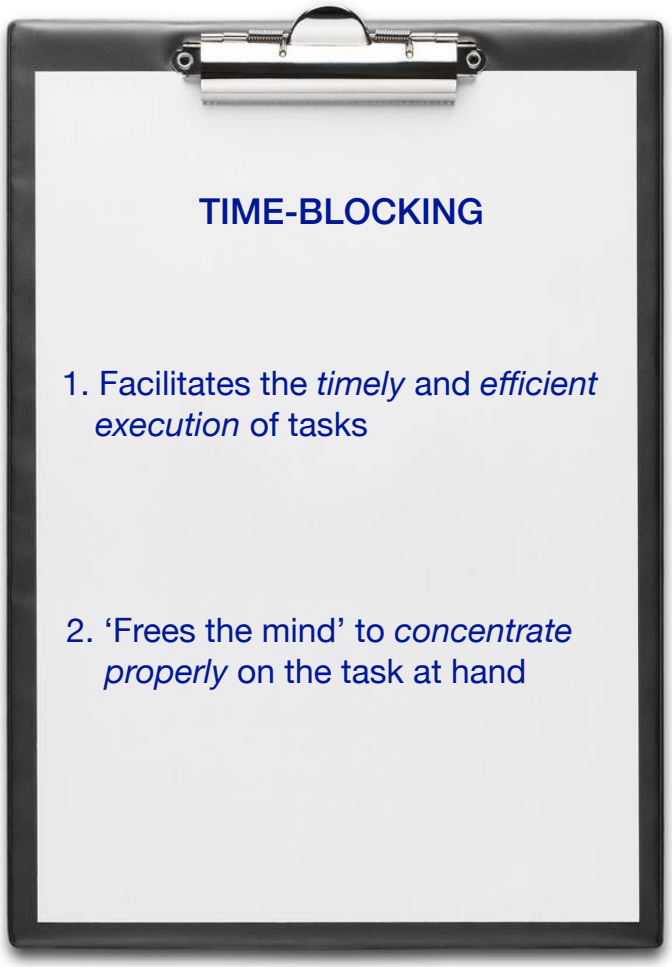



Calendar
File
Edit
Tools
View
Help
TIME
BLOCKING




Parkinson's Law:
"Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion"
C. Northcote Parkinson
Historian and Author
1909-1993




TIME-BLOCKING
1. Facilitates the *timely* and *efficient execution* of tasks
2. 'Frees the mind' to *concentrate properly* on the task at hand

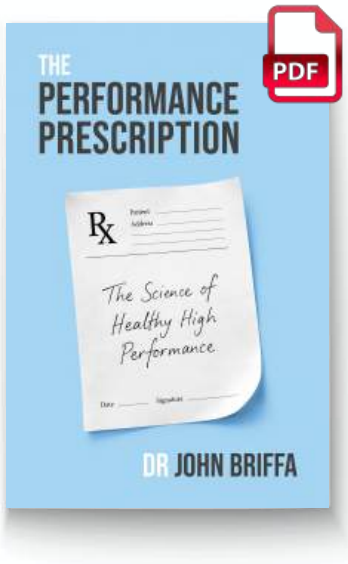

*PRIORITISE* AND
*SCHEDULE*
TASKS
? AT THE *END*
OF THE
*WORKING DAY*







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# About Dr John Briffa



Dr John Briffa BSc MB BS (Lond) is a medical doctor, speaker, faciliatator, coach and author with 30 years experience in supporting wellbeing and performance with organisations globally. Clients include Deloitte, PwC, Barclays, HSBC, Bank of America, A&O Shearman, Clifford Chance, IBM, Mastercard and Schroders.

Dr Briffa graduated with honours from University College London School of Medicine, where he also earned an intercalated BSc degree in Biomedical Science. In addition to his corporate work, he has more than three decades of experience as a practising doctor, specialising in lifestyle-oriented and functional medicine.

Dr Briffa is a widely-published journalist and former columnist for *Men's Health,* the *Daily Mail* and *The Observer.* He has contributed more than 800 articles and columns to mainstream newspapers and magazines and is a recipient of the UK's Health Journalist of the Year award.

He is the author *The Performance Prescription: The Science of Healthy High Performance* (Pinnacle Press, 2026), and nine other books

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