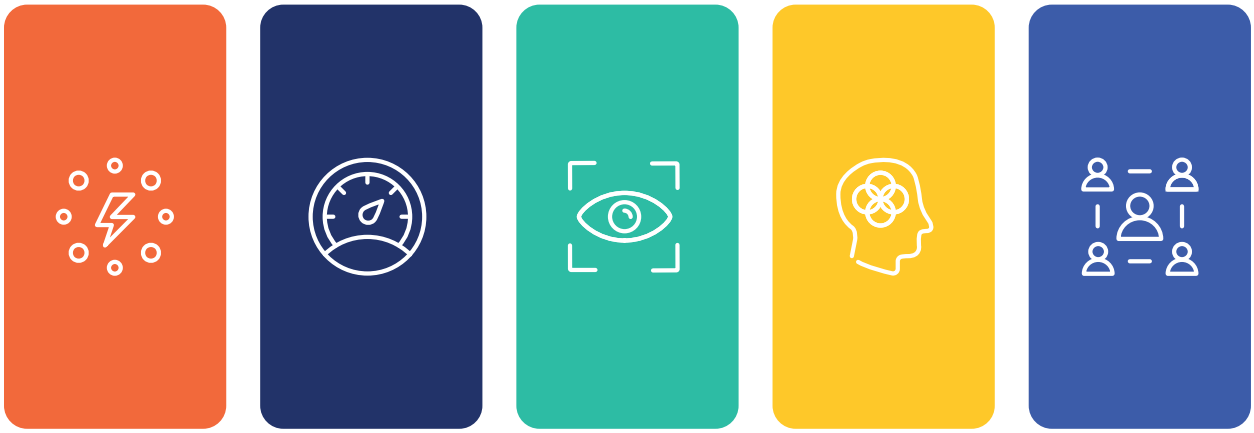
Mastering Resilience

FLEXIBLE THINKING TOOLKIT

Wraw®

Introduction

Wraw is founded on the 5 Pillars of Resilience, a validated and evidence-based model, offering a holistic view of five key elements that support wellbeing:



ENERGY Sustaining and renewing physical energy to have the capacity to keep going through challenging times.

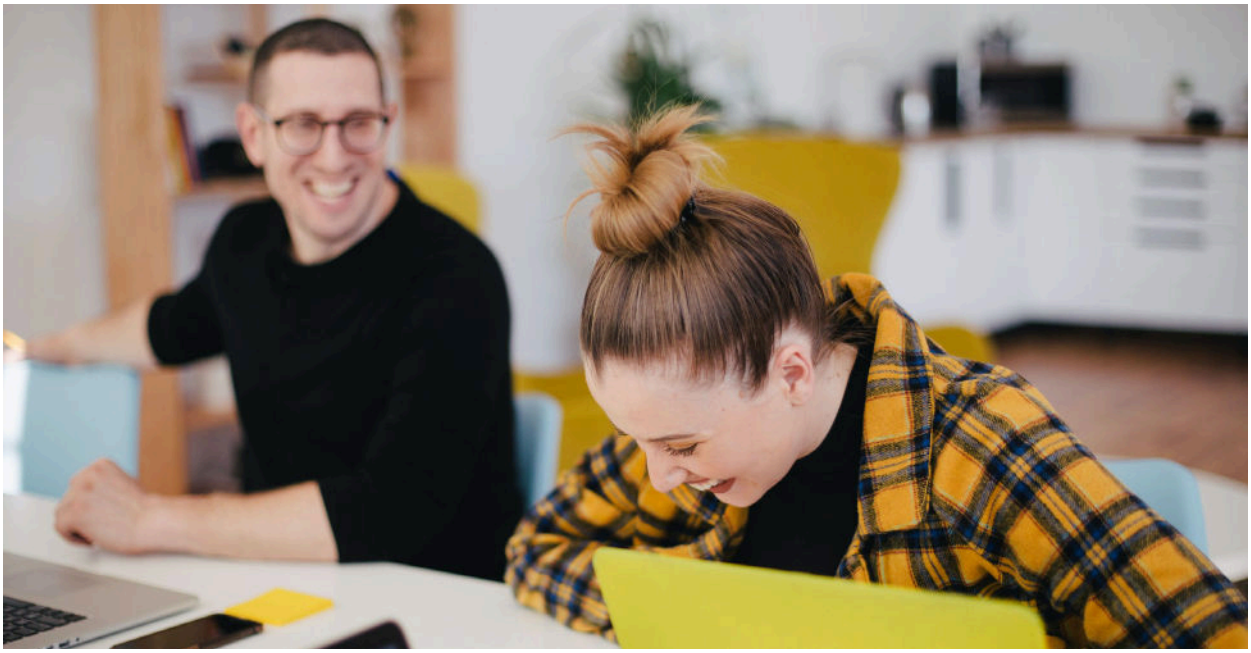
FUTURE FOCUS Having a clear sense of purpose and direction to help to move forwards without getting stuck or feeling held back.

INNER DRIVE Sustaining self-belief when times get tough, displaying confidence, motivation and perseverance.

FLEXIBLE THINKING Having an open and optimistic mindset, enabling a positive and adaptive response to change and challenges.

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS Building open and trusting relationships, and being willing to call on these for help and support if facing a challenge.

We hope you enjoy working through the exercises and reflections in the Energy Toolkit. There is a Toolkit for each of the 5 Pillars.



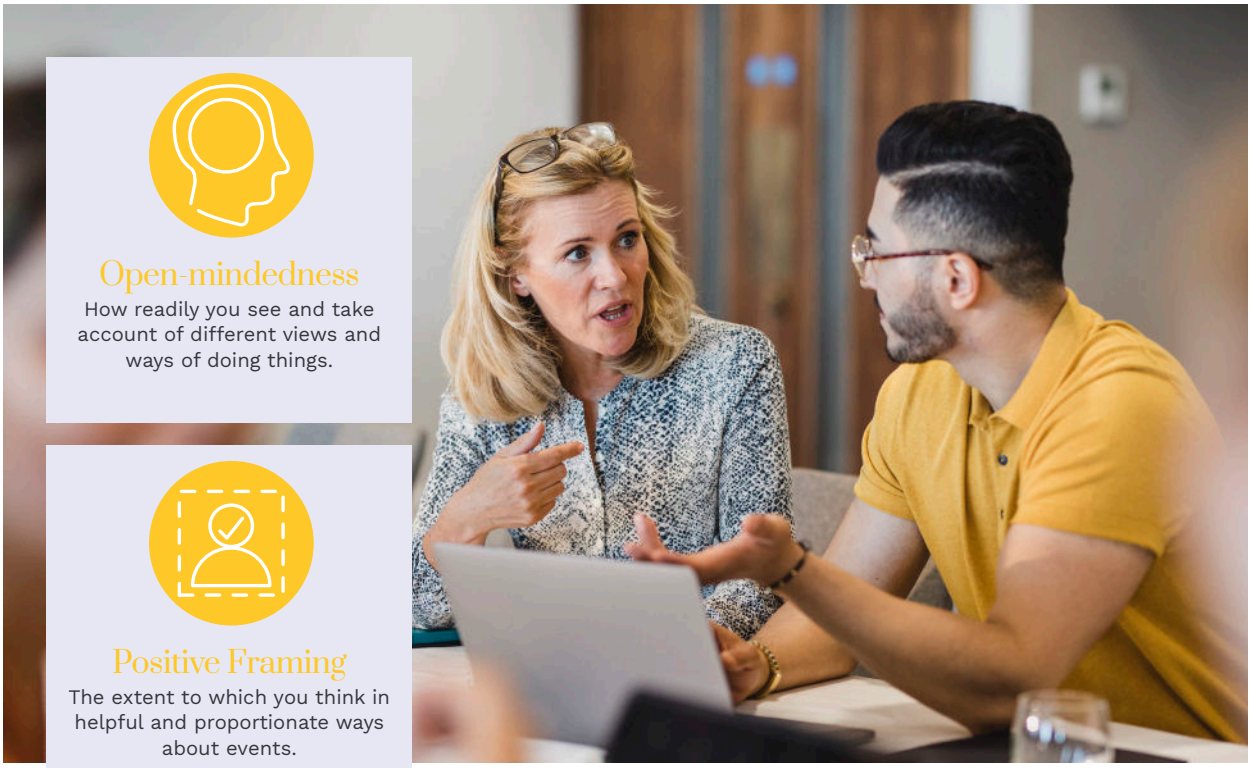
The Flexible Thinking Pillar

Flexible thinking is the ability to see things from different perspectives and find alternative approaches to the challenges and changes we face. Having a flexible and open mindset helps to prevent us from making snap judgements and assumptions about people and situations.

The opposite of flexible thinking is what the psychologist Dr Aaron Beck, widely regarded as the founder of modern cognitive therapy, called 'cognitive distortions.' More commonly referred to as 'thinking traps', they are typically automatic thoughts which are often inaccurate, irrational and over-exaggerated, but because they are automatic, they take hold very easily.

The trouble is that we tend to train our minds to work in quite specific ways. We plough the same neural pathways over and over again until our thoughts, feelings and behaviours become ingrained. We fall into the same thinking traps, make the same assumptions and repeat the same habits. It's a bit like driving on the motorway rather than taking a back route – it's easier, it's more straightforward and we can do it on autopilot.

The good news, however, is that recent neuro-scientific research involving brain scanning proves our brains are highly 'plastic', i.e. we can re-train them given time, application and dedication.



Open-mindedness

How readily you see and take account of different views and ways of doing things.

Positive Framing

The extent to which you think in helpful and proportionate ways about events.

Research has identified that higher levels of optimism predicts greater resilience in first year university students.

Source: M. Dawson and A. J. Pooley, "Resilience: The Role of Optimism, Perceived Parental Autonomy Support and Perceived Social Support in First Year University Students". Journal of Education and Training Studies, v1, n2, p38-49, 2013.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Flexible thinking is a hugely important asset when it comes to resilience. It helps you get 'unstuck,' enables you to come up with different options and approaches and ensures you are able to handle setbacks quickly and effectively. It also helps you deal with the constant change we face in modern times, to be able to see it in a positive light, adapt to the different circumstances it brings and come up with new ideas and ways of working.

Flexible thinking comprises two key areas: open-mindedness and positive framing.

OPEN-MINDEDNESS AND RESILIENCE

Having an open and optimistic mindset can support resilience because it enables a positive and adaptive response to change and challenges. Negative events are viewed as short-term and specific to the circumstances, allowing the individual to adopt a broader perspective and feel less threatened by the situation they are facing.

Being open-minded allows us to recognise that we have choices and options – both in terms of how we think about the situation and how we respond to it. In doing so, we are likely to consider different approaches to resolving a situation and remain more optimistic that a solution can and will be found.

POSITIVE FRAMING AND RESILIENCE

Positive framing allows us to view even potentially negative situations in a more positive light. This reduces our sense of threat and allows us to more actively channel our focus into how we can influence a positive outcome.

Our ability to reappraise and re-frame a situation can influence how we feel about it and therefore how we respond to it. Our approach becomes less emotionally charged, we can access our higher cognitive functions and so think more expansively towards finding a solution.

A positive re-appraisal of neutral or negative situations has been shown to impact on a number of functions associated with the processing of emotions: negative emotions decreased, there was increased activation in areas of the region of the brain related to cognitive control (prefrontal cortex), and decreased activation of the amygdala (involved in the processing of 'raw' emotions and central to the 'fight or flight' response).

Source: K. Ochsner and S. Bunge, "Rethinking feelings: an FMRI study of the cognitive regulation of emotion", Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience, vol. 14, pp. 1215–1229, 2002.

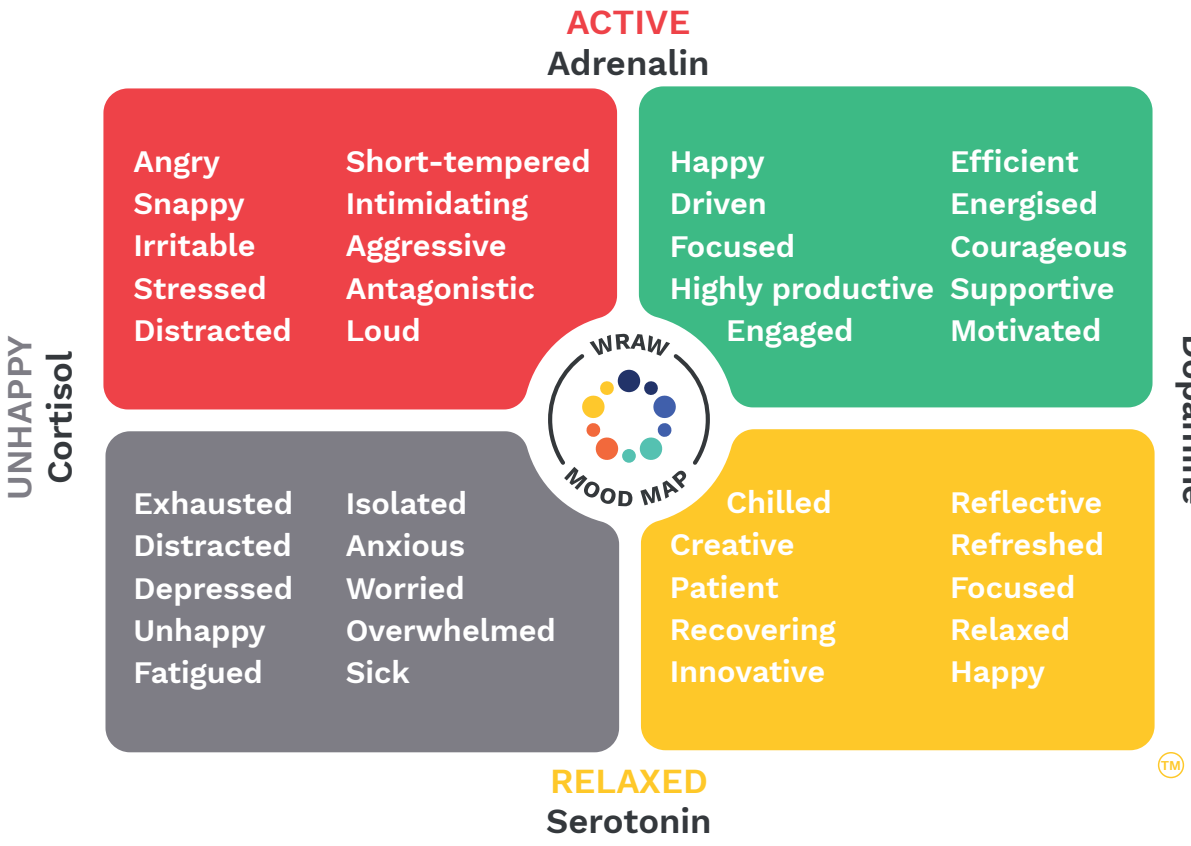
Practical Exercises

EXERCISE 1 – MAPPING AND MANAGING YOUR MOOD

How we feel at any given point in time can play an important role in terms of how we perceive a situation and how we then respond to it.

Our mood can be a 'mediator' between thoughts and actions/behaviours. It is possible and important to create your own 'micro climate' and stabilise your mood – this stability supports clarity of thought and underpins the ability to think flexibly and creatively in times of adversity.

The Mood Map can help us map and manage our mood more effectively.



The moods in these four quadrants are influenced by the quantity of each of the four hormones and neurotransmitters shown on the map that are released into our system in response to our environment and how we are thinking and feeling.

Let's look in more detail at what characterises these four different quadrants:

High Stress Zone

- Too much adrenalin and cortisol
- High energy but not positive energy
- Likely to display negative behaviours
- Hard to maintain positive relationships
- Unlikely to be very productive or efficient

High Performance Zone

- Ideal mix of adrenalin and dopamine
- High positive energy
- In flow, focused and motivated
- Positive influence on people around you
- Highly productive and efficient

Exhausted Zone

- An unhealthy level of cortisol and serotonin
- Low and negative energy
- Different guises – can feel anxious, isolated, overwhelmed, numb and even depressed
- Negative impression and influence on people around you – often shut down or cut yourself off (freeze response from lots of stress)
- Extremely unproductive – no energy, no motivation, no drive

Revived Zone

- Perfect mix of dopamine and serotonin
- Positive energy but calm, relaxed and reflective
- Likely to be at your most creative and solution-oriented
- This time may be spent alone or with friends
- Mentally productive rather than physically productive, though efficiency often soars after time out

When we are operating in the Green/High Performance Zone, we feel energised, productive and engaged. We are performing at our best.

The Yellow/Revived Zone is where we go to 'recalibrate', to chill and reflect while we take stock and re-energise. This Zone is all about rest and relaxation. Accessing this is vital to our long-term ability to access and operate in the Green Zone.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the map, it's a very different story. Here it's about feeling 'tired and wired'. In contrast to the productive and revitalising qualities of the Green and Yellow Zones, the Grey and Red Zones are associated with long term exhaustion and burnout.

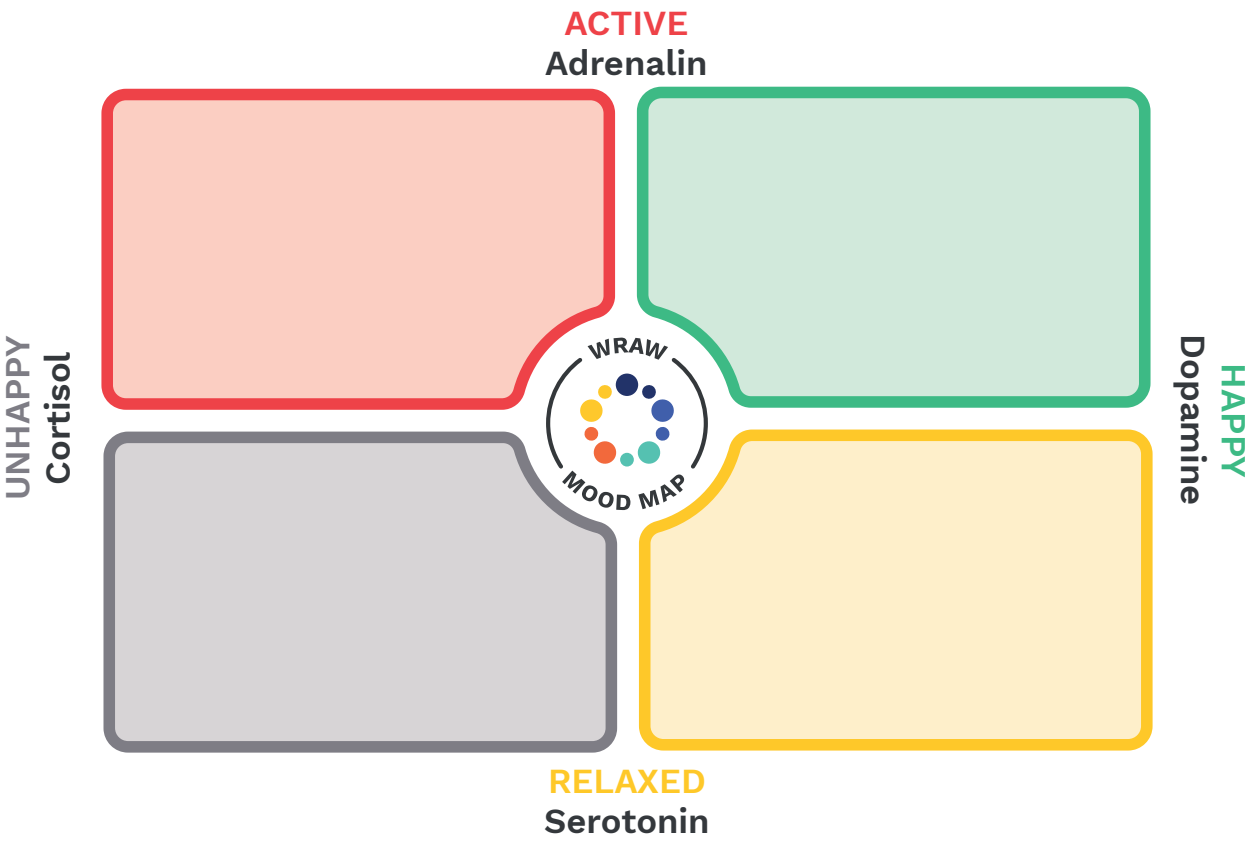
In the Red/High Stress Zone, we are generally operating in terms of a fight/flight response. Our stress hormones are in full flow and this will be reflected in feelings of frustration, anger and irritability.

Finally, the Grey/Exhausted Zone may be where we find ourselves when we have spent a prolonged time in the Red Zone, and nowhere near enough time in the Yellow Zone.

ACTIVITY

Use the prompts below to consider your own moods:

During a typical week, what percentage of your time do you spend in each zone? Use the blank Mood Map below to make a note of these:

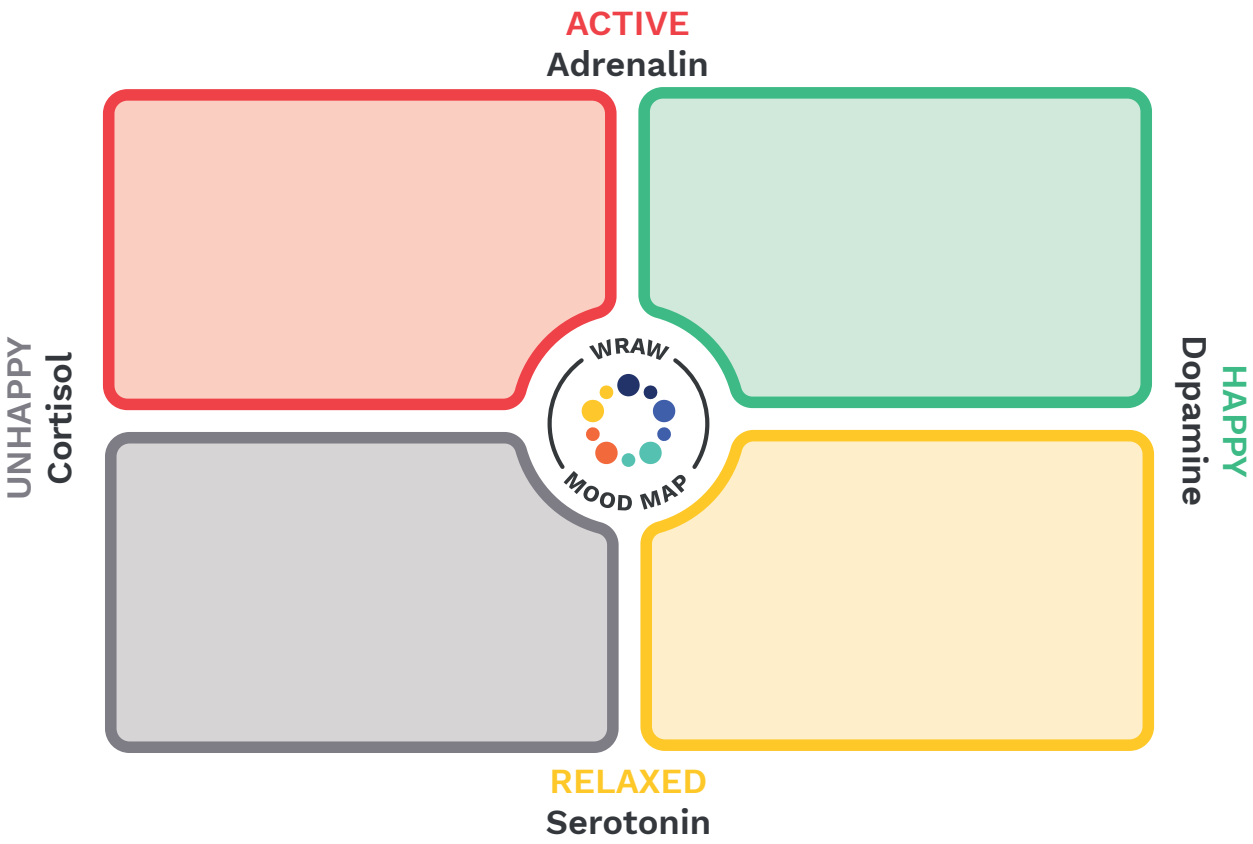


Are you happy with the percentages that you have?

If you're happy, it's important to know how to maintain this balance through challenging times. If you're not happy with your current percentages then it's about recognising the actions and thoughts that will help to move you into the zones where you want to spend more time.

ACTIVITY

Take a moment to consider what sort of activities get you into the moods represented by each zone.



In the Green Zone, for example, it might be working with a colleague that you really rate, having good feedback from your line manager or doing a task that you know you are good at. In the Yellow Zone it might be listening to certain types of music or spending relaxing time with friends or family, and so on.

So, how did you get on?

Were some zones easier to fill in than others?

What does that tell you?

It's interesting to note that people often find it easier to list activities that might put them on the left-hand side of the Mood Map.

If you're operating from the left-hand side of the Mood Map, what does this mean for your thoughts and behaviours?

What might this mean for your resilience?

In order to build resilience, it's important to understand what helps you to occupy the right-hand side of the Mood Map.

When you operate from the right-hand side of the Mood Map, you tend to be more resourceful, more open-minded, more able to respond positively to challenge, setbacks or adversity.

The reality is that we regularly operate across all four zones of the Mood Map. The key to long-term resilience and to being able to access and enjoy all the benefits of the righthand side of this map is to focus on ensuring that we regularly access the Yellow Zone.

How can you build more Yellow Zone into your week/month?

How can you choose to spend more time on the right-hand side of the Mood Map? What can you aim to do more of?

How can you ensure you access the Yellow Zone, both at work and at home?

As with any system or machine, our body and mind need to recalibrate at regular intervals. It is vital to our longer term mental and physical wellbeing that we do this.

The value of accessing the Yellow Zone:

- Boosts 'recovery' of our mental and physical processes, helping to restore homeostasis
- Helps protect our body from health conditions such as high blood pressure, heart attacks, stroke
- Protects our immunity and minimises the risk of falling ill
- Helps ward off spiraling, unhelpful, negative thoughts and emotions
- Helps us make better decisions and think more clearly
- Increases our creativity and ability to be more open-minded

There can be times when we find ourselves operating from the Red/Grey Zones of the Mood Map. This can mean that our ability to think flexibly and creatively is less than optimal. In such circumstances it can be useful to know what our real-time resets are which will allow us to access some much-needed Yellow Zone. This will help us to recalibrate and regroup in real time.

Everyone will have their own ways to approach this. The key is to identify what will help you to relax and press pause.

When time is short, what helps you to switch off and reset?

Being able to access some quick-fixes during a busy day can help ensure you regularly tap into the benefits of the right-hand side of the Mood Map.

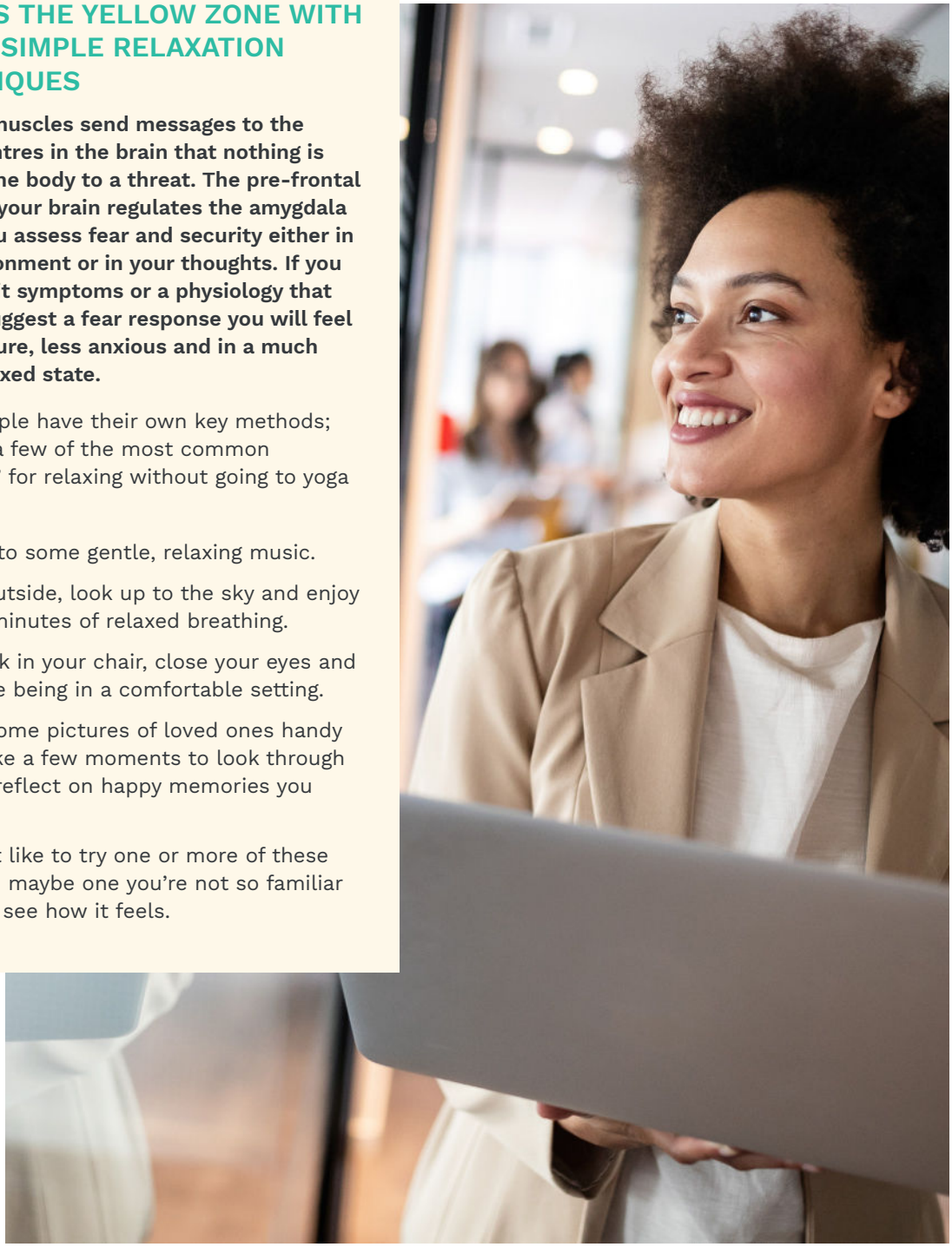
ACCESS THE YELLOW ZONE WITH THESE SIMPLE RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Relaxed muscles send messages to the alarm centres in the brain that nothing is alerting the body to a threat. The pre-frontal cortex in your brain regulates the amygdala where you assess fear and security either in the environment or in your thoughts. If you can feed it symptoms or a physiology that doesnt suggest a fear response you will feel more secure, less anxious and in a much more relaxed state.

Many people have their own key methods; here are a few of the most common "quickies" for relaxing without going to yoga camp:

- Listen to some gentle, relaxing music.
- Step outside, look up to the sky and enjoy a few minutes of relaxed breathing.
- Sit back in your chair, close your eyes and imagine being in a comfortable setting.
- Keep some pictures of loved ones handy and take a few moments to look through them; reflect on happy memories you share.

You might like to try one or more of these right now, maybe one you're not so familiar with, and see how it feels.



EXERCISE 2 – THOUGHTS, FEELINGS AND BEHAVIOURS

Most people don't appreciate that our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are very closely linked.

For example, it isn't an event that makes us feel stressed and therefore prone to verbal outbursts (Red Zone of the Mood Map) or cutting ourselves off (Grey Zone); it's our response to that event: the thoughts we have about the event – our personal interpretation - and the assumptions we make as a result.

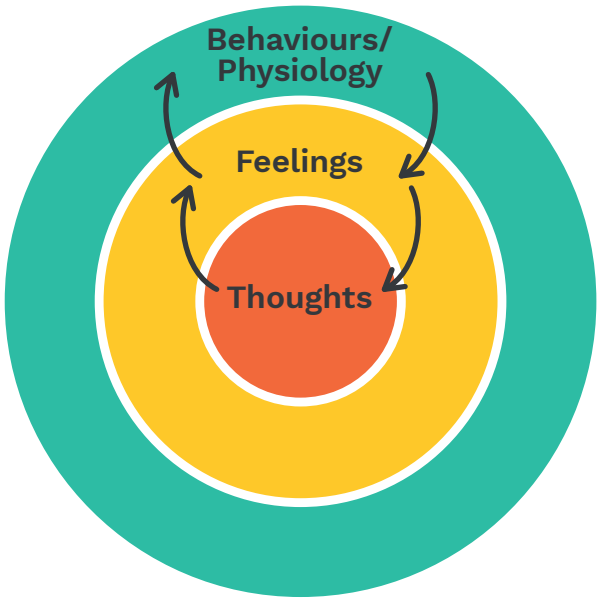
A good example is when we're running late for a meeting. Running late isn't what makes us worried or stressed - it's the internal dialogue we have running in our heads, the thought that the client might be really cross, that we'll look bad or unprofessional, that we might lose the business as a result and so on. These thoughts make us feel stressed and result in physical symptoms such as a racing heart, shallow breathing and sweating. These in turn result in certain behaviours; for example, we might rush into the room loudly excusing ourselves and apologising for being late which might well be entirely inappropriate and make us look worse.

In such a situation, we may well be prone to cognitive distortions, or thinking traps. These are essentially unhelpful ways of thinking that may either hold us back or lead to us interpreting a situation in a particular way. How we think about a situation or event can influence how we respond to it:

1. Catastrophising – assuming the worst-case scenario
2. All or Nothing Thinking – black and white i.e. this or that with no options
3. Personalising – wrongly blaming yourself for things
4. Over-generalising – drawing general/false conclusions from a single event
5. Labelling – yourself and others, e.g. 'I'm useless', 'He's just a bully'
6. Discounting the Positive – turning it neutral/negative, e.g. 'I was just lucky'
7. Jumping to Conclusions – making assumptions without relevant data, e.g. mindreading or judging people
8. Fortune Telling – looking into your crystal ball
9. Mental Filtering – biased by your beliefs
10. Emotional Reasoning – treating feelings as facts
11. Making Demands – I/we/he should, must, ought to
12. Low Tolerance – believing the tolerable is intolerable

Negative and unhelpful thoughts trigger our sympathetic nervous system, causing cortisol and adrenalin to be dumped into the bloodstream, changing the biochemistry of the body and making us react in a particular way (most likely from the left-hand side of the Mood Map).

When we think about something positively, it's the para-sympathetic nervous system which is triggered. In this instance DHEA, serotonin, dopamine and endorphins are released into the bloodstream making us feel great (right-hand side of the Mood Map).



Thus, simply changing the way you think about things will change the biochemistry for better or for worse.

It also works the opposite way around – we can work from the outside in. Undertaking a deep breathing exercise will slow our heart rate (physiology) making us feel calmer (feelings) and allowing us to think more objectively (thoughts). This in turn will trigger the para-sympathetic nervous system, releasing positive hormones and neurotransmitters into the body, helping us improve our mood and shifting us across to the right-hand side of the Mood Map. We therefore have far more control over our day-to-day mood than we generally think we have.

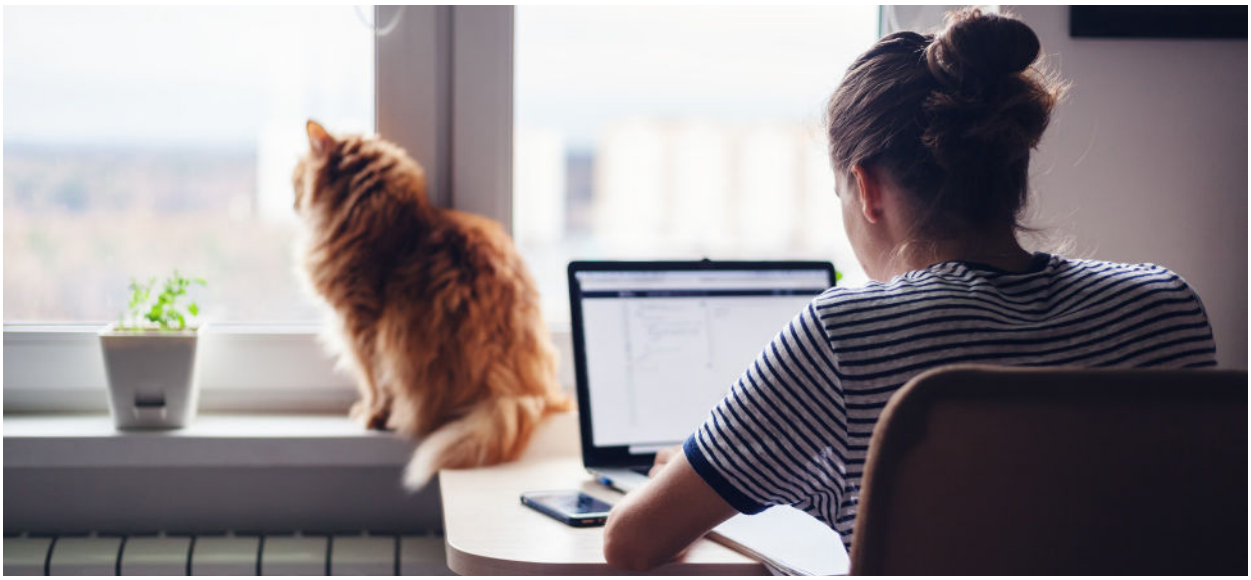
In Dr Karen Reivich's excellent book 'The Resilience Factor' she talks about 'real-time resilience' – how you can practice resilience in the moment, i.e. when these negative or intrusive thoughts start to take over your mind. In such instances, it's possible to counteract these by:

1. Coming up with alternative outcomes
2. Finding counter-evidence which would support another outcome
3. Identifying most likely implications

So, when you notice your thoughts, feelings and physiology/behaviour spiralling downwards, consider pressing pause and take a moment to reflect:

1. My current thinking on this may not be true because ...
2. A more accurate way of seeing this is ...
3. A more likely outcome is ...
4. And I can deal with it by ...

At first, this approach may feel a little clunky. However, practice makes perfect – training your brain to explore alternatives can help prevent unduly negative thoughts from taking hold, allowing you to retain clarity and ensure a more balanced perspective.



EXERCISE 3 – RE-FRAMING MATRIX

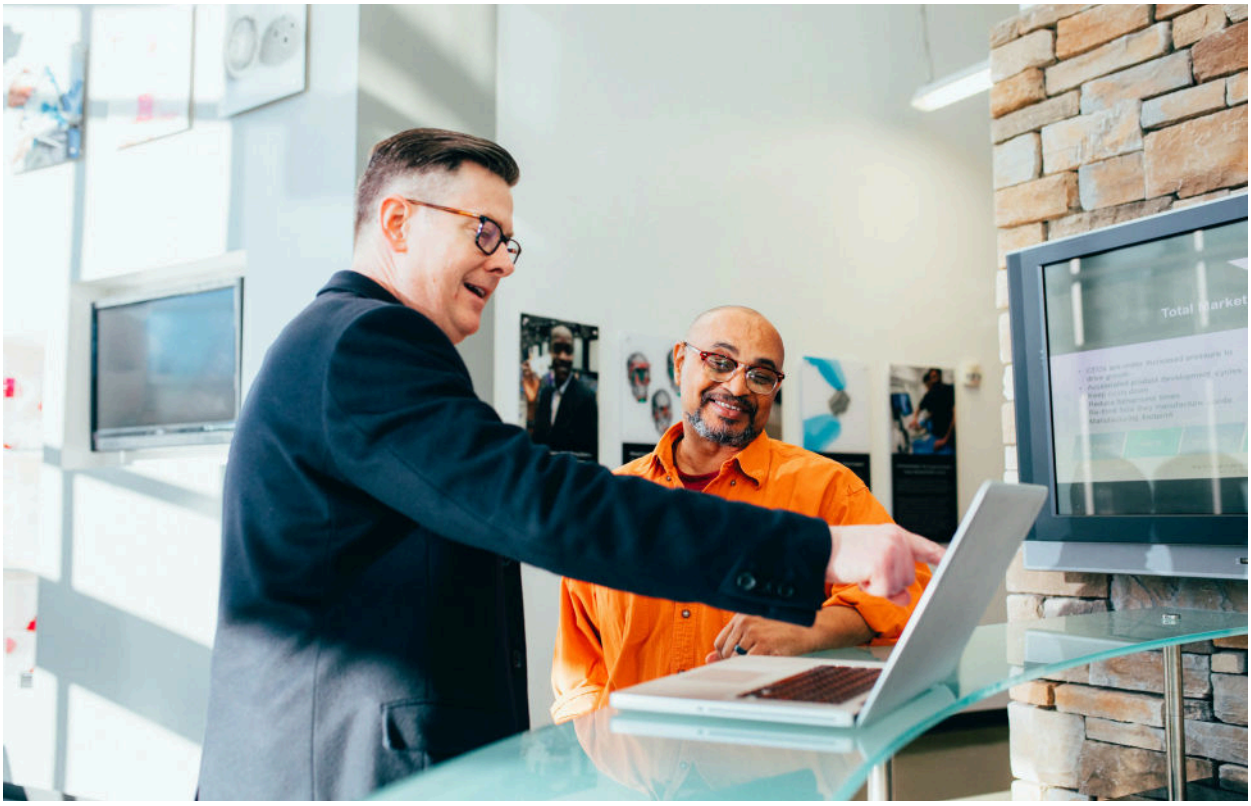
One really useful way to encourage more flexible thinking is to try and re-frame the challenge or issue, i.e. to look at it from different perspectives. This helps you to step out of the problem emotionally and look at it more rationally and logically.

ACTIVITY

For this exercise, consider a current problem you are grappling with and write it in the middle of the matrix below. Then consider it from the four different perspectives cited here:

1. How someone else might view it. Consider three specific people and what they'd advise you.
2. How important or major it really is. If it's really important it demands top priority; if it works out to be unimportant it'll be easier to let go.
3. How important it will seem in the future, e.g. a week, a month or even a year from now.
4. How it might actually be a positive thing, e.g. a new way of working, a new skill learned, next time the problem arises you'll know exactly what to do and so on.

Write down at least three alternative perspectives in each box and then notice how your thoughts about the problem have changed.



Others – how might other people view this? What would they say?

Context – how important is this in the wider scheme of things?

Problem

Content – when/why/how might this actually be a good thing?

Time - how big a deal will this be in a week/a month/a year?

When we challenge ourselves to explore new ways of thinking, we disrupt unhelpful, limiting thinking patterns. We open up our mind to alternatives and this sense of 'choice' can help restore a sense of control – we have options as to how we view the situation; by extension we have options as to how we adapt and respond to it.

TOP TIPS FOR STRENGTHENING YOUR FLEXIBLE THINKING

- Notice your typical thinking patterns/traps and ask yourself: how is this helping me and how could I look at it differently?
- Try to see your challenge from different perspectives. Go for a walk or imagine you're looking down on it from above, as if you're in a helicopter.
- Talk to someone in order to get a different point of view – you don't have all the answers!
- Break typical habits and do things differently, e.g. take a different route to work or sit in a different place in your meetings.

SUMMARY

The ability to think flexibly, laterally and creatively is one of the most important factors in building and maintaining resilience. It's impossible to be resilient if we are stuck in a negative pattern of thinking for any length of time. We will benefit from being able to step outside the problem, put it in a different frame, see it from different perspectives and thereby come up with lots of potential solutions and ways forward. Flexible thinking not only enables you to deal efficiently with problems, it unlocks creativity, helps you embrace change and improves your relationships. A skill definitely worth practicing and mastering!

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The Resilience Factor: 7 Keys To Finding Your Inner Strength And Overcoming Life's Hurdles, by Karen Reivich (Broadway Books, 2003)

The Resiliency Advantage, by Al Siebert, PhD (BK Publishers Inc, 2005)

The Chimp Paradox, by Prof. Steve Peters (Vermillion, 2012)

How To Have Kick-Ass Ideas (What If), by Chris Barez-Brown (Harper Element, 2006)

The 7 Habits Of Highly Effective People, by Stephen Covey (Simon and Schuster, 2004)

Brilliant CBT: How To Use Cognitive Behavioural Therapy To Improve Your Mind And Your Life, by Stephen Briers (Pearson, 2012)

Elastic: Flexible Thinking In A Constantly Changing World, by Leonard Mlodinow (Allen Lane, 2018)

TED Talk: The Art of Misdirection, by Apollo Robins
https://www.ted.com/talks/apollo_robbins_the_art_of_misdirection#t-4298

TED Talk: Do We See Reality As It Is? by Donald Hofmann
https://www.ted.com/talks/donald_hoffman_do_we_see_reality_as_it_is

TED Talk: Are You Open Minded? by Paul Sloane
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=4vgl3v8rjj8

TED Talk: Creative Thinking, by Giovanni Corazza
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEusrD8g-dM

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