



New techniques to build resilience

An inevitable aspect of living and working in the 21st century is dealing with change. Wellbeing and workplace resilience expert **Michelle Bihary** provides the latest on applying neuroscience to skills to cope with change.

In our increasingly disrupted work environment, continual change and adaptation has become necessary for organisational survival and success.

Workforce restructuring, and technological changes may be necessary for organisations, but they generate levels of uncertainty and ambiguity that are challenging for the workforce. The impact of change can be further intensified when the workforce undergoing change is dealing with work that has a high 'emotional wear and tear' factor. In complaint handling, the unpredictable emotional responses of customers require a high degree of self-awareness and self-management skill amongst the workforce.

Humans don't always respond well when it comes to change.

At a fundamental level, humans need a balance between stability and change. If life stays too much the same, it is likely to feel stagnant and constraining. Challenges and novelty, provide opportunities for us to develop and grow. However, if the balance is tipped to the other extreme, where change is continual, and especially when change is sweeping through both one's professional and personal life, it can be overwhelming and even feel threatening.

When dealing with challenging times, our understandable reactions can make it harder to access our usual resources and strengths. This can be extremely frustrating and disempowering. The very time we need every ounce of our strengths, they can seem so elusive.

Recent advances in neuroscience, gives a greater understanding of what is occurring in our brain at these times. It also guides as to how we can improve our functioning. This is useful to understand so we can optimise our brain functioning to build our capacity to cope with change and also continue to deal with the cognitively and interpersonally demanding elements of one's role.

Understanding and harnessing our brain provides strategies to cope better with change and emotional wear and tear.



IN A SIMPLIFIED WAY, WE CAN BREAK THE BRAIN INTO 3 KEY PARTS

The executive brain, emotional brain and survival brain. At different times, fluctuating throughout the day, each part of the brain can dominate our functioning.

- 1 The executive brain**, especially the part behind our forehead (the middle prefrontal cortex) is where we do our highest thinking, our most strategic, lateral and creative. When this part of our brain is in charge, we make our best decisions, have the cognitive and psychological capacity to see situations from different perspectives and look for win-win solutions. We are most able to be 'present', listen and connect with others.
- 2 The emotional brain** (limbic system or middle brain) is where we process and store emotions and lay down memory. When we experience strong emotions, this part of the brain, may be more dominant. It can be harder to think clearly, and we may experience our emotions hijacking us.
- 3 The survival or reptile brain** (brainstem) is designed to keep us safe. Although we may not be aware of this, the reptile brain continuously scans our environment to ensure there are no risks to our safety, physically or psychologically. If this part becomes more dominant, we go into survival mode, become more focussed on safety, defending and protecting ourselves. This limits our ability to think strategically. We are more reactive and have less capacity to think about others and their points of view.

BUILDING RESILIENCE USING NEUROSCIENCE

When we are faced with significant change, and feel overwhelmed or uncertain, it may be harder to stay anchored in our executive brain. The lower parts of our brain are likely to become more active, making it harder to think as clearly. At these times we may be less strategic, less able to problem solve or make decisions. This is why we may feel more off balance. At these times, we are also more vulnerable to less functional habits to take hold, like drinking or eating too much or taking our frustrations out in road rage. Which also means our usual capacity to deal with emotionally demanding interactions may be reduced.

Neuroplasticity teaches us that the brain is quite plastic, continually changing throughout our lives.

Our repetitive patterns of thinking and some of our behaviours contribute to wiring and sculpting our brain. This can work for us, or against us.

If our thinking is often negatively focussed, we strengthen the wiring to the lower parts of our brain, especially to the reptile brain. Feeding the reptile brain with negative thoughts creates a tendency to keep thinking negatively; it creates a negative feedback loop.

If our patterns of thinking are more solution oriented, we are feeding the executive brain, which strengthens the neural pathways in a more productive way.

So, how does this help us deal with change and interpersonal challenge?

We may have to accept that we may not be able to influence the external change process or change the way our customers deal with their complaints. However, we do have the power to influence ourselves, our brain and how we respond and react to change. This is where we can build our resilience and tool kit to cope with change.

WHAT WE CAN DO FROM A BRAIN PERSPECTIVE

1 SOOTHE THE REPTILE BRAIN

Simple activities that soothe our brainstem and more primitive nervous system include:

- Simple deep breathing exercises – 5 slow, deep breaths x 5 times per day
- Mindfulness or meditation – apps like 'Calm' was the app of the year is free and excellent. Even 15-30 seconds use can be useful x 4-5 times per day
- Stepping outside into the fresh air – blue (sky or water) or green (nature) space
- Lifestyle aspects – exercise, eat well, lots of water, less processed food and sugar
- Reduce repetitive negative thinking, by being more aware of your thinking patterns

2 EMOTIONAL BRAIN

- 'Name it, to tame it' – write things down to offload your emotions when there is a lot going on, maybe try journaling if you have a lot of emotions to process
- Use your EAP service or personal counselling to talk through and process your emotions
- Spend time with people with whom you feel validated and appreciated

3 EXECUTIVE BRAIN

- Positive practices like gratitude – acknowledging or writing down each day the things you are grateful for
- Spend time with people who are good at strategic thinking or support you to maintain optimism
- Looking for the positives and learning opportunities in the challenges
- Being aware of your values help you anchor in your executive brain. Write down a few values that are important to you and then write about a time when you were able to use one of those values.
- Increasingly employees need well developed skills in being adaptable and responsive to change, rather than defensive or avoidant of change. It is a key skill for resilience at a time when organisations are undergoing change and transformation.
- Learning to be aware of and manage our brain gives us a clear pathway to navigating change and build our resilience to cope with the emotional and psychological challenges of this work.

Michelle Bihary is an expert in workplace resilience. With a background in neuroscience, mental health, and decades of clinical, leadership and training experience, Michelle has built programs for workplaces to build resilience and wellbeing and presents the SOCAP Wellbeing and Professional Resilience for Complaints Handling. Sessions available from July. Check the website socap.org.au to book, or call 02 8095 6426.



Michelle's latest program *Our Strong Foundation* – helps leaders, teams and workplaces strengthen their professional performance through the latest research in neuroscience, wellbeing and peak performance.