

# Welcome!

## The presentation will commence at 9.05...

**Andrew Marty**

MANAGING DIRECTOR

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EXECUTIVE RECRUITMENT • HR CONSULTING • PSYCHOLOGICAL APPRAISAL

# The Stress of COVID-19 and How to Manage It

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# What is SACS?

- Organisational psychology business
  - Psychological testing, Wellbeing surveys, 360 degree feedback
  - Organisational and individual development – change management, coaching, career transition management, workforce planning
- Recruitment process design and delivery
- Scientist practitioner model – mainly Deakin Uni
- Evidence based approach to people management.

# Objectives

- Stressors – Covid-19 and others
- Stress
- What stress does to us
- Acute versus chronic stress
- Are we equally “stressable”?
- Stress into trauma
- Warning signs
- Self management
- Leadership in the world of Covid-19.

# Your objectives...

# Stressors and stress...

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# Life Stressors – 41 major life stressors (Holmes & Rahe, 1967)

| Life event                           | Life change units |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Death of a spouse                    | 100               |
| Divorce                              | 73                |
| Marital separation                   | 65                |
| Imprisonment                         | 63                |
| Death of a close family member       | 63                |
| Personal injury or illness ★         | 53                |
| Marriage                             | 50                |
| Dismissal from work ★                | 47                |
| Marital reconciliation               | 45                |
| Retirement                           | 45                |
| Change in health of family member ★  | 44                |
| Pregnancy                            | 40                |
| Sexual difficulties                  | 39                |
| Gain a new family member             | 39                |
| Business readjustment ★              | 39                |
| Change in financial state ★          | 38                |
| Change in frequency of arguments ?   | 35                |
| Major mortgage                       | 32                |
| Foreclosure of mortgage or loan      | 30                |
| Change in responsibilities at work ★ | 29                |

# Work stressors – two types

- **Challenge demands – “good” stressors:**

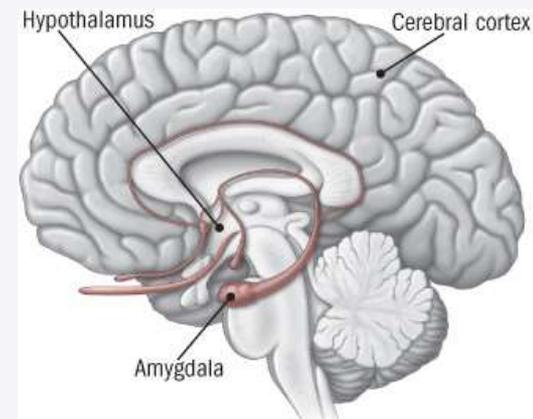
- Pressure of workload
- Pressure of processing lots of information
- Pressure of problem solving.

- **Hindrance demands – “bad” stressors:**

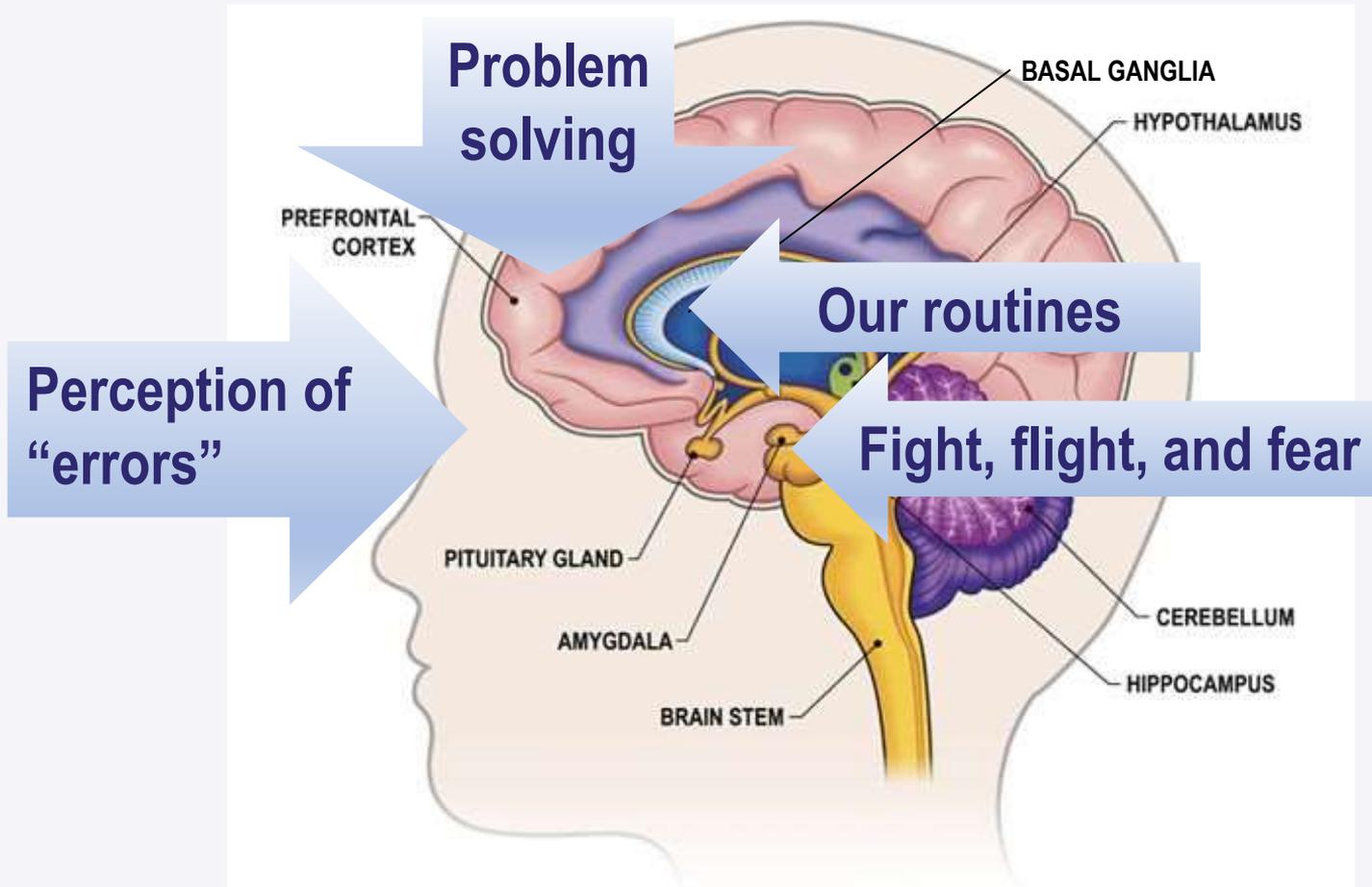
- Lack of social support
- Job insecurity
- Inadequate resources
- Role ambiguity
- Role conflict – contrary requirements from people around you.

# How the brain responds to stress – flight, fight, freeze

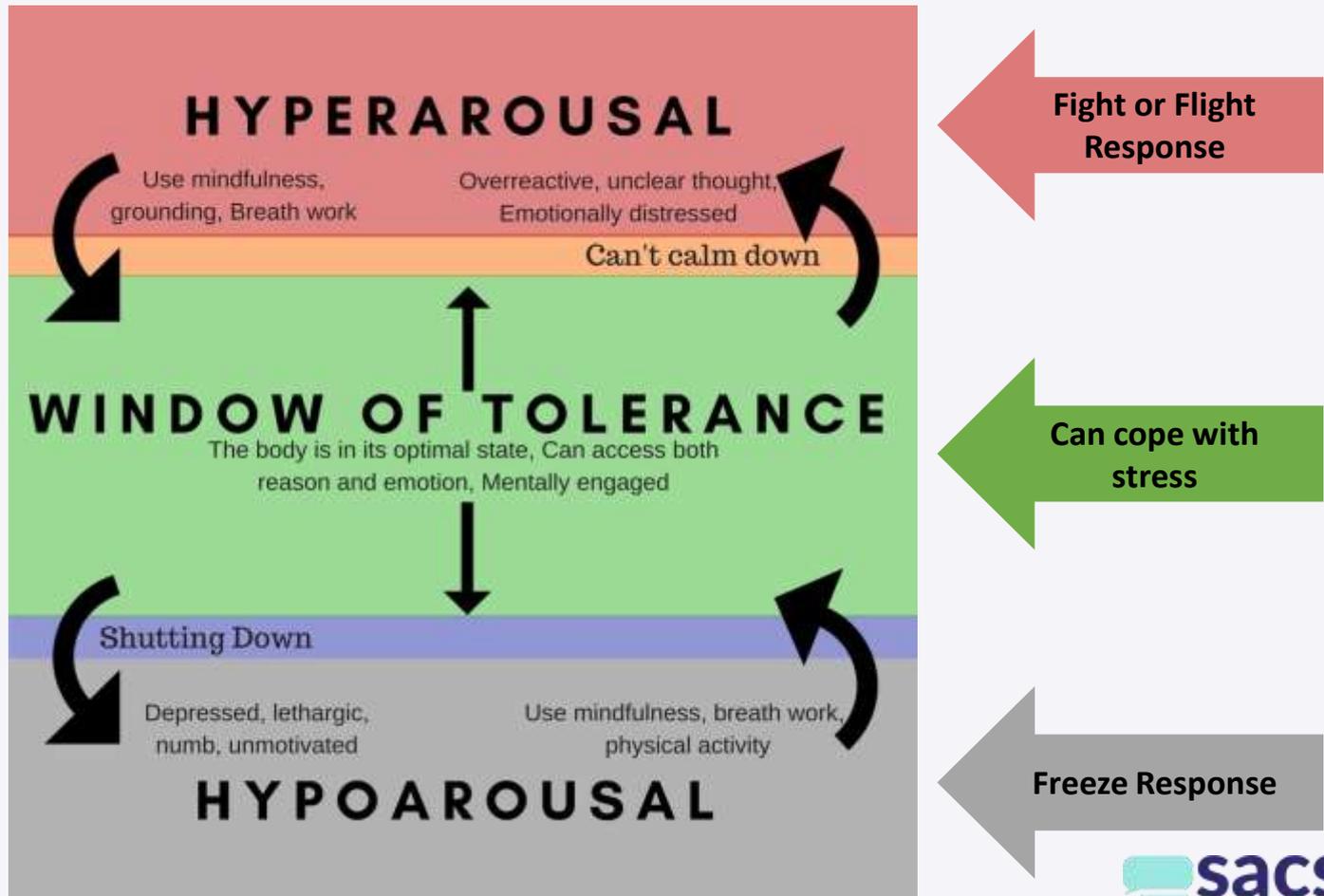
- When a person experiences stress, the amygdala sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus
- The hypothalamus communicates with other parts of the body, triggering the fight, flight or freeze stress response
  - Heart beats faster
  - Dilated pupils
  - Rapid breathing
  - Senses become sharper
  - Rush of adrenaline
  - Immune system suppressed
- Freeze response is fight/flight “on hold”
- When under stress, our brains are less productive and have less capacity to think creatively



# The stressed brain...



# Is everyone equally “stressable”?



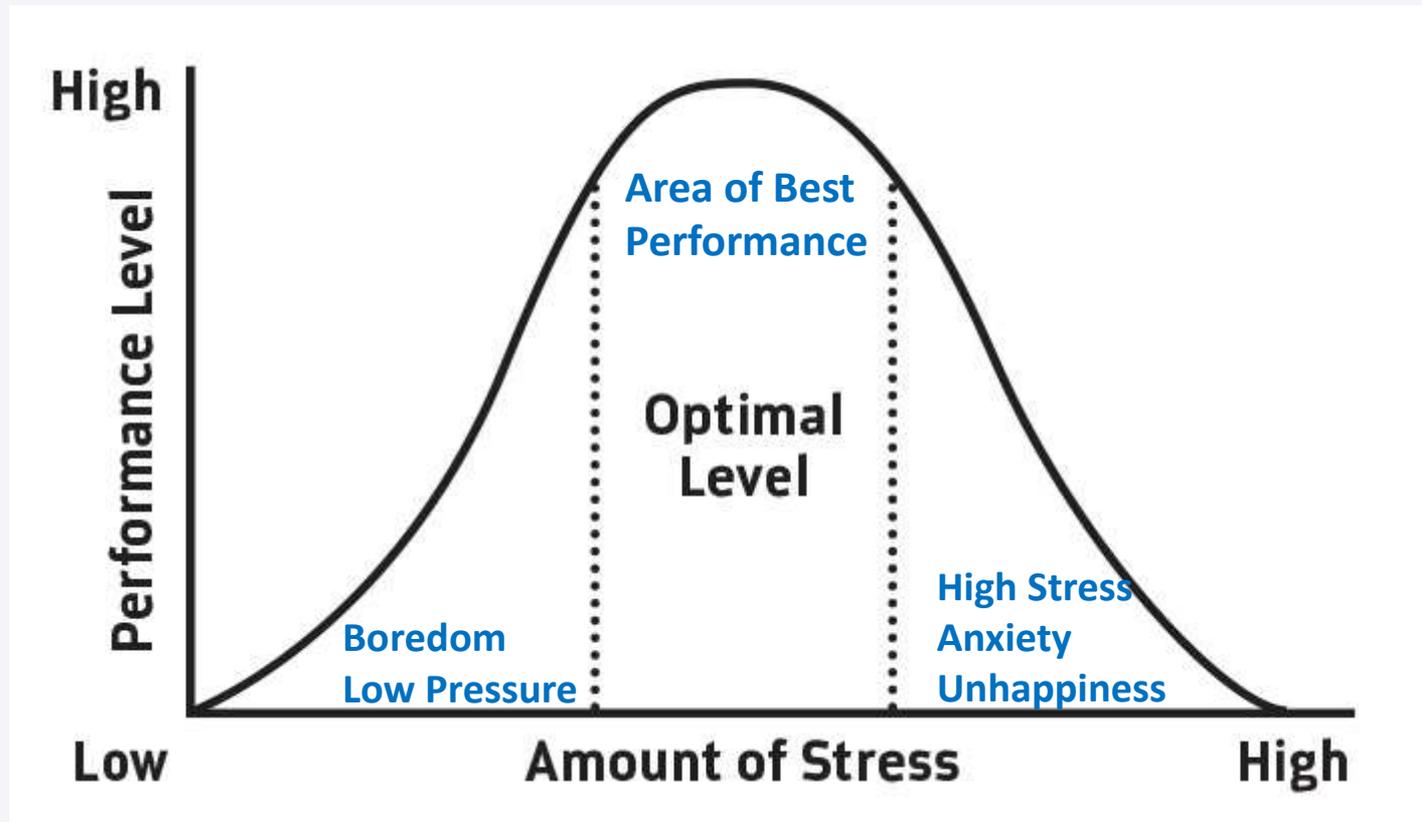
# Window of tolerance

- “Size” of window varies from person to person – We all have windows of what we’re able to tolerate
- Stress and trauma can shrink your window of tolerance
- Mindfulness and positive psychology activities can help to extend one’s window of tolerance.

Ogden, P., Minton, K., and Pain, C. (2006). *Trauma and the body: A sensorimotor approach to psychotherapy*. New York: Norton.

Siegel D, J., (1999) *The Developing Mind*. New York: Guilford

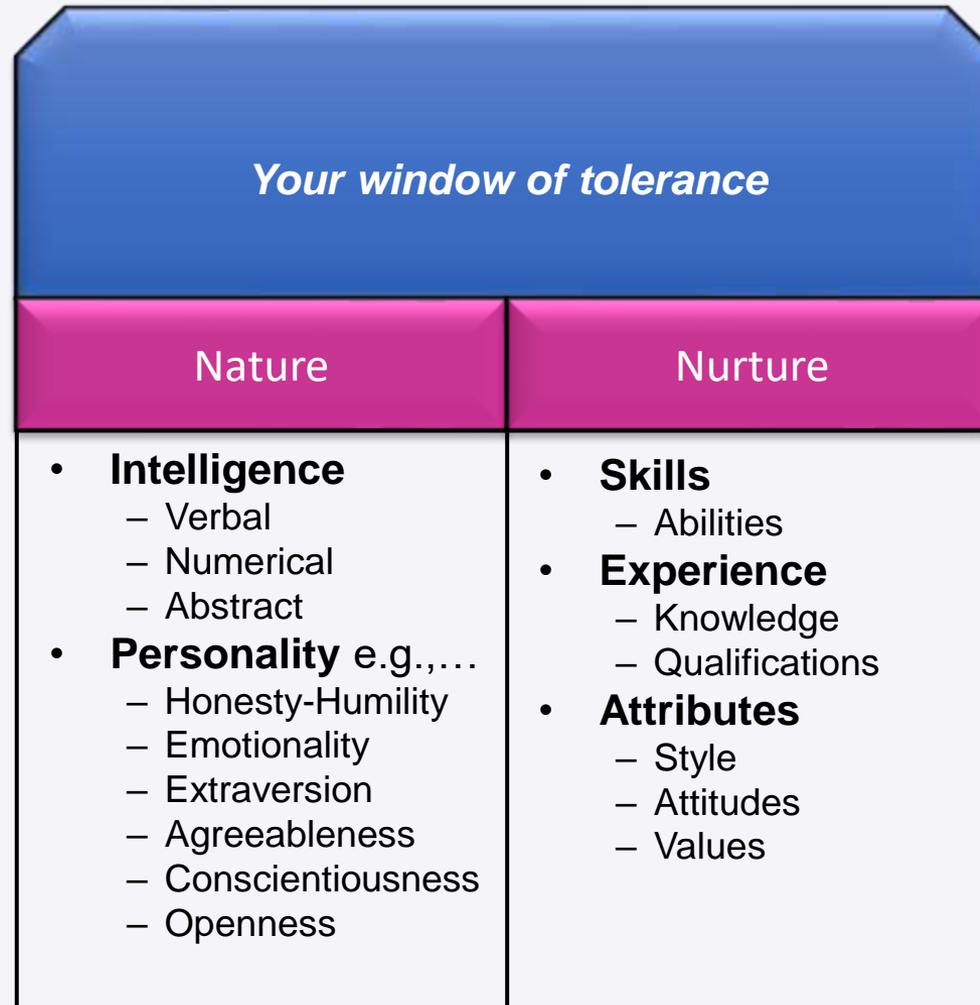
# Stress, performance and wellbeing...



# Surge capacity

- Mental and physical adaptive systems that we use to survive in acutely stressful situations
- We have the capacity to “surge” but this is temporary
- Resilience “bank account” – it can get depleted under certain circumstances/situations
- COVID-19 pandemic – prolonged stress
- How do we restore our surge capacity?

# Nature and nurture



# SACS 6 Personality

|                             |   |                                  |
|-----------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| <b>1: Integrity-Modesty</b> | <b>3: Extraversion</b>                    | <b>5: Conscientiousness</b>      |
| Genuineness                 | Social Confidence                         | Likes to be Organised            |
| Rule Favouring              | Happy to be Center of Attention           | Committed to Hard Work           |
| Absence of Greed            | Likes to be in Company                    | Detail Minded                    |
| Absence of Arrogance        | Cheerfulness and Optimism                 | Makes Decisions Carefully        |
| <b>2: Emotionality</b>      | <b>4: Absence of Anger</b>                | <b>6: Openness to Experience</b> |
| Threat Sensitivity          | Unlikely to Carry a Grudge                | Cares About Appearances          |
| Anxiety                     | Unlikely to be Harsh                      | Curious About the World          |
| Lack of Independence        | Doesn't Have to Have Things Their Own Way | Likes to be Creative             |
| Overly Empathic             | Slow to Anger                             | Comfortable with the Unfamiliar  |
|                             |   | <b>7: (Interstitial scale)</b>   |
|                             |   | Soft Heartedness                 |

# Nature – genetic component to resilience



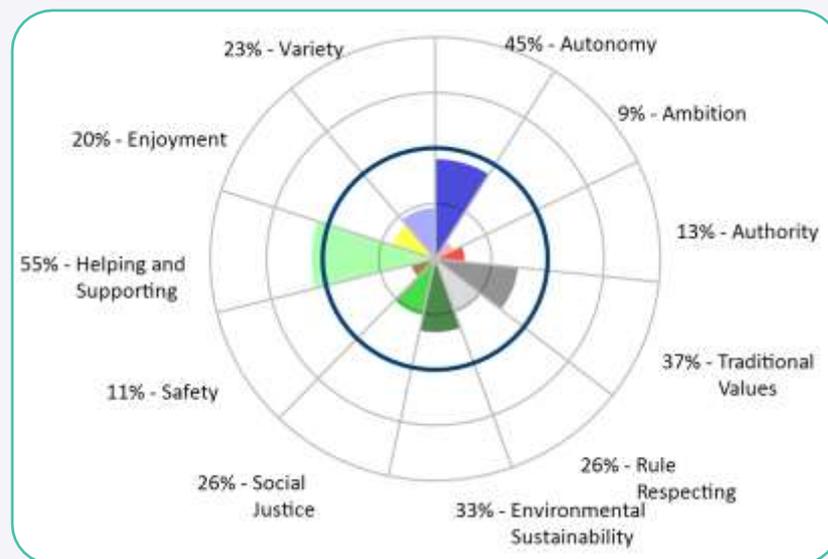
**The base line could be as much as 2 thirds genetic**

# Cognitive ability...

- People with higher cognitive ability have a natural capacity to learn and adopt a wider range of solutions
  - Words
  - Numbers
  - Problem solving
- But, smart people can fret more if they are emotionally unstable.

# SACS Work Values

- Items are focussed specifically on values in a workplace setting
  - e.g. “It is important to me to decide my own priorities at work”
- 11 Values
  - Authority
  - Ambition
  - Enjoyment
  - Variety
  - Autonomy
  - Social Justice
  - Environmental Sustainability
  - Helping and Supporting
  - Rule Respecting
  - Traditional Values
  - Safety



# Resilience Test

## Resilience

Resilience is the characteristic of being able to bounce back from difficult circumstances. People who are high in resilience have a capacity to self regulate their emotions and to recover quickly from emotional setbacks.

| Prediction of Resilience |                | Score | Meaning |
|--------------------------|----------------|-------|---------|
| Resilience               | High is better | 64    | High    |

**Resilience Risk: Low** Options are Low, Medium, High - Low risk is better

Candidates with high levels of resilience are lower risk hires. Research suggests that they bring a number of positive characteristics. They:

- Are often psychologically healthier
- Can be better at problem-solving
- Are good at building their own coping strategies
- Do better in jobs where they need to interact with other people

Resilient employees tend to remain resilient and employees who are low in resilience will tend to carry this limitation with them throughout their career without specific coaching.

If a person is just under population average then skilled and targeted coaching may cause the person to improve to the point where they should be able to cope reasonably well. If a person's score is significantly below average, say 40 or less, then this is a significant risk.

# Stress – acute or chronic?

- We evolved to deal with short term stressors
- Stress can become “chronic” after only 6 months.

Hammen, C., Kim, E. Y., Eberhart, N. K., & Brennan, P. A. (2009). Chronic and acute stress and the prediction of major depression in women. *Depression and anxiety*, 26(8), 718-723.

# Chronic stress – how does it affect the brain?

- Stress can kill brain cells

Thomas, R.M., Hotsenpiller, G., and Peterson, D.A. (2007). Acute psychosocial stress reduces cell survival in adult hippocampal neurogenesis but not initial proliferation. *Journal of Neuroscience* (27) 2734-2743.

- Changes in brain structure

- Imbalances in gray and white matter

- Chronic stress generates myelin-producing cells and fewer neurons

- Can cause excess of white matter – this disrupts the balance and timing of communication within the brain

- We make worse decisions.

Chetty, S., Friedman, A., Taravosh-Lahn, K. *et al.* (2014). Stress and glucocorticoids promote oligodendrogenesis in the adult hippocampus. *Mol Psychiatry* (19) 1275–1283.

# Chronic stress – how does it affect the brain?

- Evidence that persistent stress may actually rewire the brain
- Changes in the process of memory – particularly the hippocampus & amygdala. We forget things more! Particularly words and spatial relations.
- Mood disorders – e.g. depression
- Other mental illnesses
- Effects on the GI system. Significant digestive problems.

# How stress turns into trauma

- Traumatic stress can be caused by a prolonged traumatic experience
- If this continues, your nervous system remains “stuck” – intense symptoms linger
- May start to feel worse – symptoms interfere with daily life
- PTSD can develop after a prolonged traumatic experience
  - Intrusive symptoms such as nightmares
  - Avoiding certain situations
  - Negative changes in emotions and beliefs
  - Hyperarousal – e.g. difficulty sleeping or concentrating.

# Is it all bad?

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# Post-traumatic growth

- “A positive psychological change in the wake of struggling with highly challenging life circumstances”

Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological inquiry, 15*(1), 1-18.

- SARS epidemic – research found that this brought on some positive impacts e.g. better family and social support, healthier lifestyle and mental health awareness

Lau, J. T., Yang, X., Tsui, H. Y., Pang, E., & Wing, Y. K. (2006). Positive mental health-related impacts of the SARS epidemic on the general public in Hong Kong and their associations with other negative impacts. *The Journal of infection, 53*(2), 114–124.

- COVID-19 pandemic may foster this kind of growth
- A “steeling effect” – exposure to stressors builds resilience.

# Post-traumatic resilience

- A form of behavioural adaptation to stress and a style of personality functioning
  - Recovery from PTSD to optimal states of functioning
  - Psychological “immunity” to psychological injury or illness
- Associated with personality characteristics such as extraversion, self-esteem, assertiveness, hardiness and an internal locus of control.
- Associated with “ego resilience” – flexibility, energy, assertiveness, humour and affect regulation.

# Warning signs...

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# Stress indicators

- Are you stressed?
  - Feeling overwhelmed or frustrated
  - Feeling guilty or unhappy
  - Being irritable
  - Losing confidence and being indecisive
  - Thinking negatively
  - Having racing thoughts
  - Memory problems
  - Excessive worrying.

# Are your colleagues stressed?

- Do they seem more anxious than normal?
- Are they losing their temper more quickly than they used to?
- Are they noisier than usual when you speak to them – needing to talk more?
- Are they quieter than usual?
- Have they lost their sense of humour?
- Are they less confident than usual – hesitant to try things or asking for help more often?
- Are they avoiding you?
- Are they overcontacting you?

# How to explore...

- RUOK is the obvious one, but sometimes it is difficult for a person to say – vulnerability
- Feedforward rather than feedback
- Alternatives – make it future focussed...
  - Anything I can do to help make this work as well as possible?
  - Let's talk about anything which is getting in your way at the moment so that I can help you get on top of it
  - Do you have any suggestions about how to make these arrangements as successful as possible?
- Making these future focussed turns on the new brain and leads to optimism and problem solving
- Decide when you need help. These issues can become clinical – EAP.

# What can we do about it?

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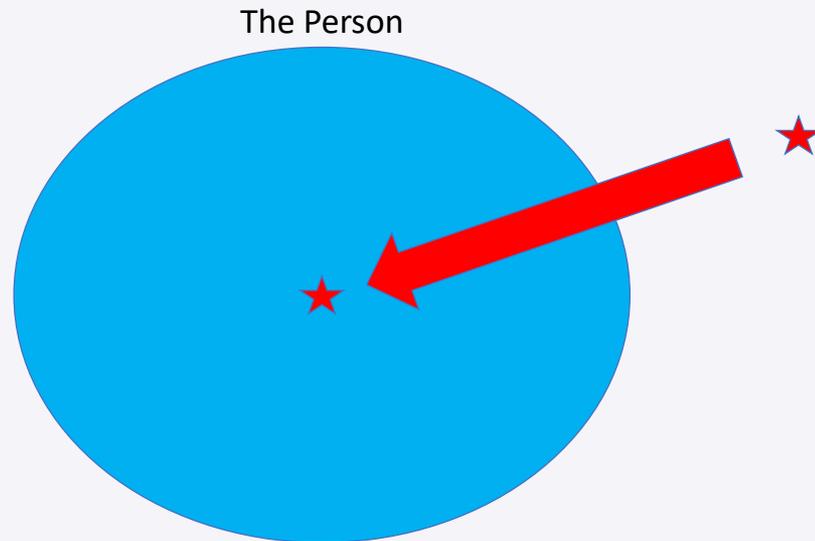


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# The crucial role of focus

- Everyone has the choice of focus
- “The secret of life is what you focus on”
- Optimism and positivity rather than pessimism and negativity. Diary research
- “Self efficacy” rather than “don’t worry, be happy”.
- A focus on solutions rather than emotions
- A focus on the future
- A focus on what you can control and consciously directing focus away from what you can’t control.

# Where is your “locus of control?”



# Self management tips...

- Exercise – it's nearly the healthiest thing you can do for mental and physical health.

Fetzner, M. G., & Asmundson, G. J. (2015). Aerobic exercise reduces symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder: A randomized controlled trial. *Cognitive behaviour therapy*, 44(4), 301-313.

- Seek to connect – people, activities. Consciously avoid isolating yourself
- Look after yourself – eat healthy, non refined foods.

Okereke, O. I., Reynolds III, C. F., Mischoulon, D., Chang, G., Cook, N. R., Copeland, T., ... & Manson, J. E. (2018). The VITamin D and Omega-3 Trial-Depression Endpoint Prevention (VITAL-DEP): rationale and design of a large-scale ancillary study evaluating vitamin D and marine omega-3 fatty acid supplements for prevention of late-life depression. *Contemporary clinical trials*, 68, 133-145.

- Avoid drugs and alcohol.

# Mindfulness...

- Practicing focus management
  - Becoming conscious of your focus
  - Consciously focussing on something helpful
  - Practicing this
- Not jumping to conclusions:
  - “She hates me” becomes
  - “Let me think of some reasons she might have acted like that. Maybe she’s stressed”
- Mindfully responding to life situations:
  - “This is really bad” becomes
  - “What are my options and what am I going to do?”

# A simple model of mindfulness

100 potential  
units of mental  
energy

“Narrative”



?



“Here and now”



?



# How leaders can contribute during COVID-19

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# Measure it...

## Stress



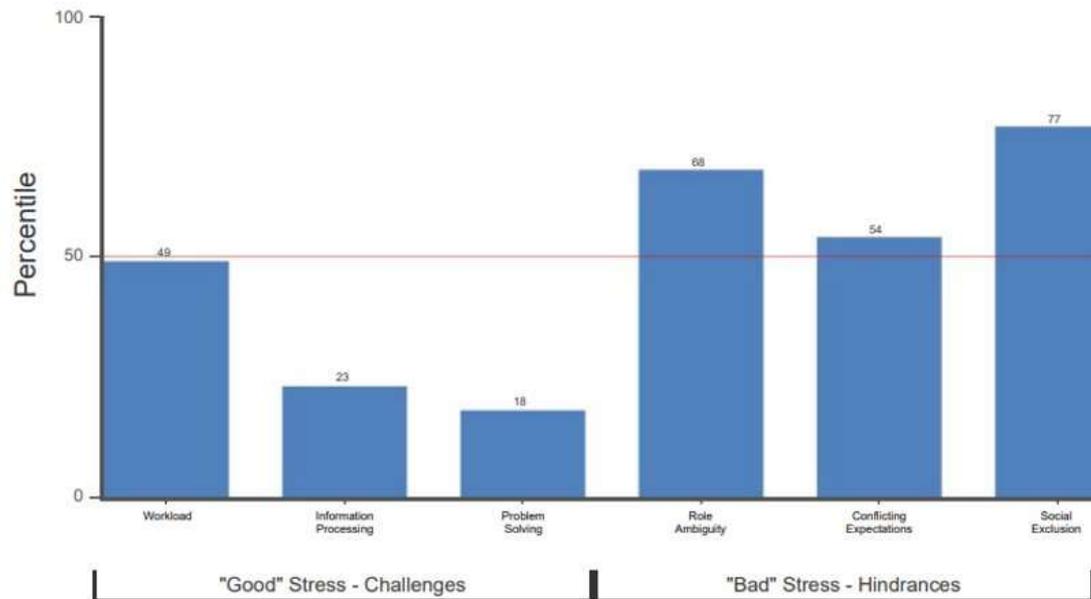
Your employees overall stress scores put them at **56th percentile** relative to the norm group.

# Measure it...

## Stress

Number completed = 44

### Results



# Where does wellbeing come from?

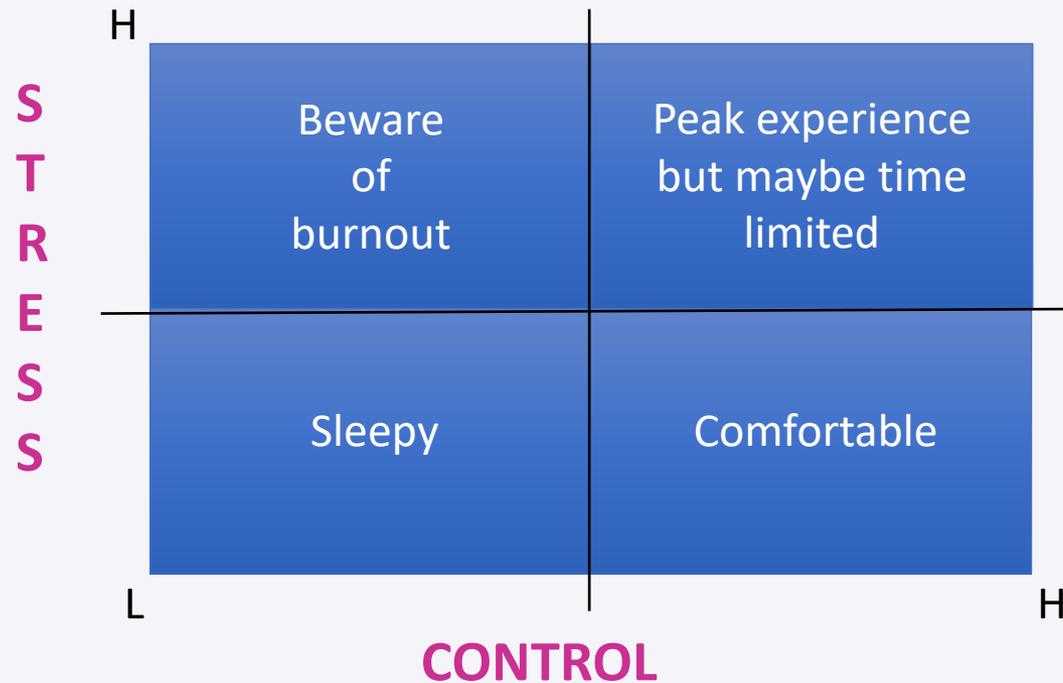


Cotton, P. & Hart, P. (2011). 'Positive Psychology in the Workplace', Australian Psychological Society, 33(2).

# Lead for focus...

- A focus on a destination. “Let’s get together and decide where we want to be in 6 months time. Let’s make a plan to get there
- A focus on what we can control, ignoring what we can’t
- A focus on the positive – “Let’s talk about the good things which we’ve achieved”
- A focus on solutions rather than emotions. “Let’s get together and come up with our best way of doing this”
- A focus on self efficacy – “I know we can do this”.

# The relationship between stress and control



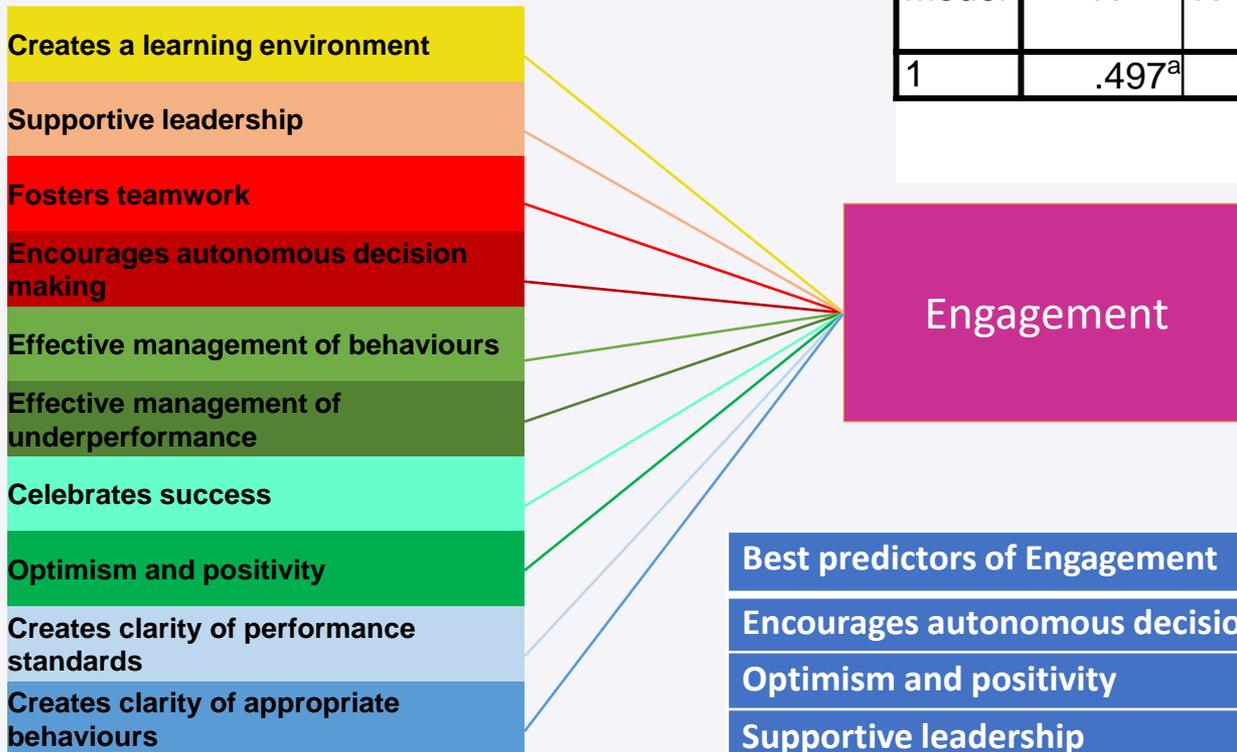
Levels of leader support are also crucial

Van der Doef, M., & Maes, S. (1999). The job demand-control (-support) model and psychological well-being: a review of 20 years of empirical research. *Work & stress*, 13(2), 87-114.

# Leader Behaviours predicting Engagement

**Model Summary**

| Model | R                 | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|-------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1     | .497 <sup>a</sup> | .247     | .241              | .93058                     |



| Best predictors of Engagement         | Beta weights |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| Encourages autonomous decision making | .246         |
| Optimism and positivity               | .172         |
| Supportive leadership                 | -.136        |
| Creates a learning environment        | .117         |

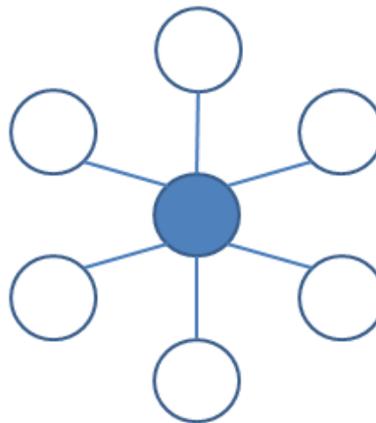
# Leadership Options

1



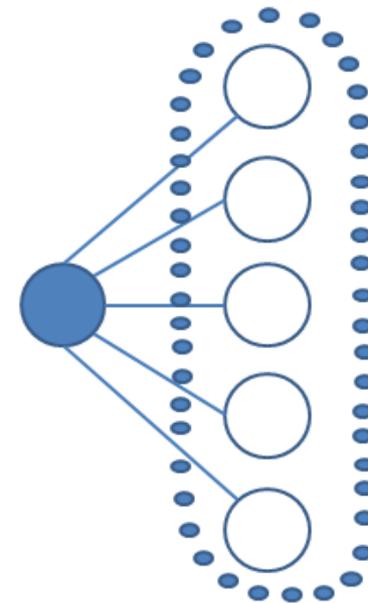
**Top Down**

2



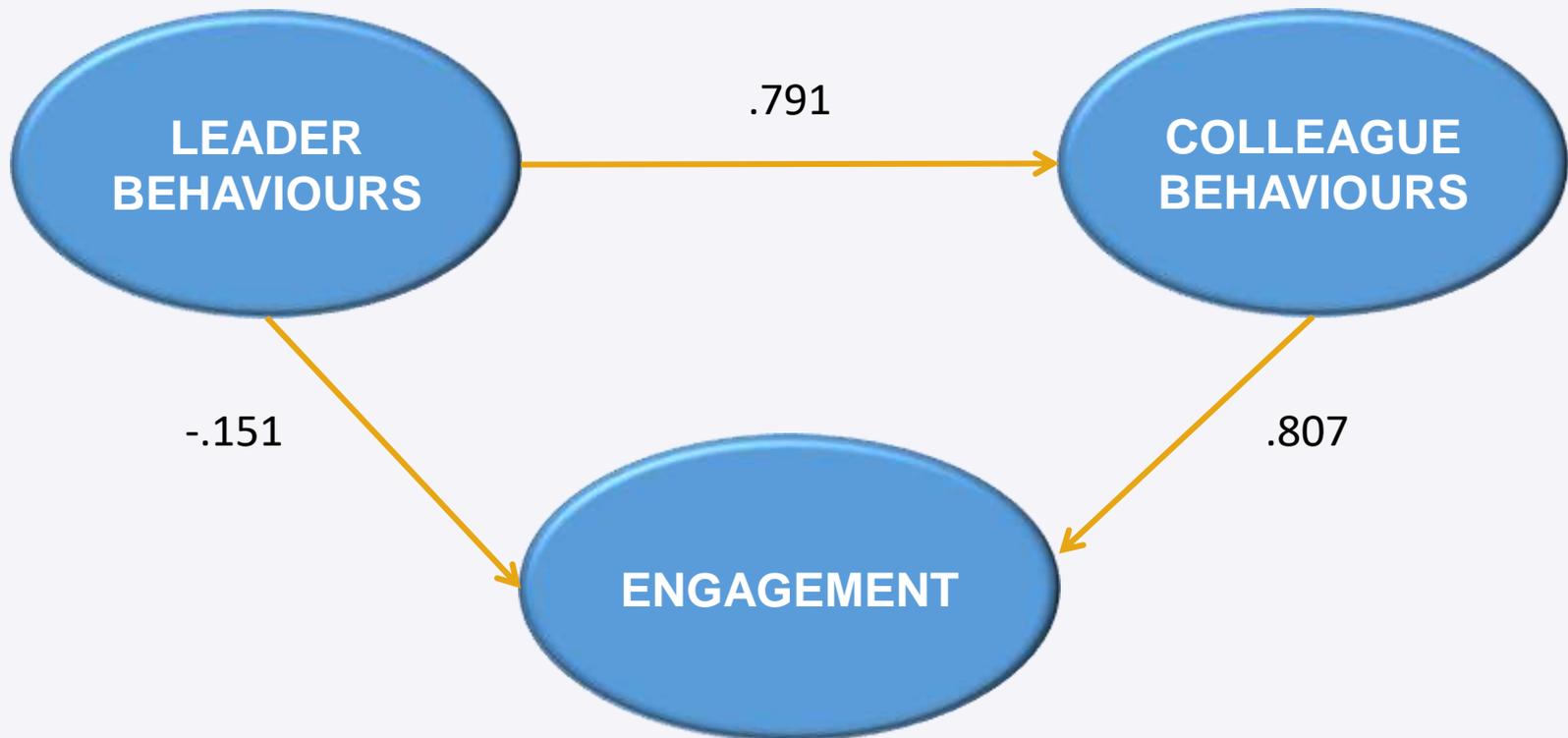
**Consultation**

3



**Facilitation**

# The Path to Engagement



# Conclusions

- It is a good idea to recruit resilient staff
- Take care of your own wellbeing – basic healthy lifestyle and the power of focus
- Develop the skills to assess the wellbeing of your colleagues
- Lead for focus
- Lead for support
- Lead for empowerment
- You can't do much about life stress, but you can make a big impact on work related stress
- Know when to send for the experts.