

An aerial photograph of a person walking across a zebra crossing. The person is wearing a bright yellow jacket and dark pants. The crossing is marked with thick black and white stripes. A large blue rectangular box is overlaid on the top left of the image, containing white text.

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Extreme Agile Survival Guide: Building
Our Resilience in Uncertainty

APRIL 8TH 2020



The alarm goes off. You open your eyes. For a second or two, everything feels like a normal Monday morning. Then – suddenly – it all floods back. This is not the world we woke up in even one month ago when ‘Climate Change’ fed news headlines around the world. ‘Coronavirus’, ‘Covid-19’, ‘death tolls’, ‘infection rates’, ‘hand washing’, ‘panic buying,’ ‘furlough’ - we are dominated by a consistent stream of information or conversation about what to do, what not to do, how to be, how to cope. We are being asked to do pretty much everything differently and so it is little wonder that we may be left feeling overwhelmed, disorientated, anxious - or possibly even excited, hopeful and optimistic depending on your circumstances and lens on the world.

Everything is uncertain and we don’t know how long it’s going to go on for. Plans both personal and societal are changing and new government advice on a daily basis will continue to change our trajectories. Every single one of us is experiencing a range of emotions right now, and whilst there is no magic wand to wish all this away, there are some simple things we can all do to help ourselves understand how our mind and bodies are responding to this uncertainty and take control of our own response to this situation.

Our aim in this survival guide is to distil our science-backed recommendations into a set of easy and pragmatic do’s and don’ts. And explain why these are important. As well as giving you 20 specific tools, we include a selection of useful links and reading that we and our MCM colleagues are finding useful right now.

The Science: Our Brains are Wired for Safety First.

Once we understand how we are wired, how you might be feeling (and our recommendations!) will make more sense.

In this highly simplified model, our brains can be broadly thought of in three ways.

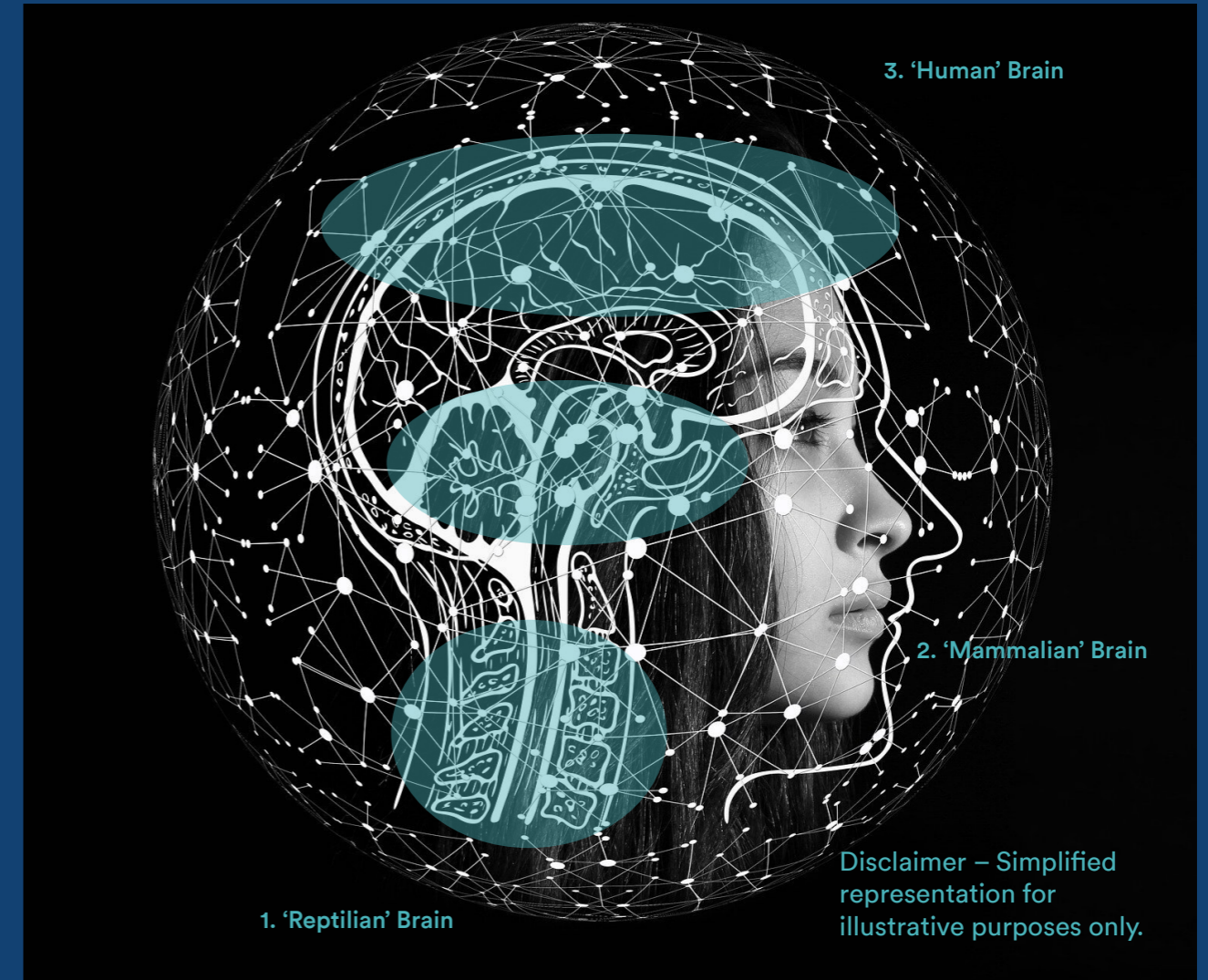
- 1. Our Reptilian brain.** The most primitive and basic part of us. It's shared with all animals and is designed to keep us alive. It's completely unconscious and is the "fight or flight" that kicks off involuntarily if we are threatened. Triggers can be physical and real, such as facing off to a mountain lion, or personal and perceived threats, such as public speaking or being asked to go on furlough. Any stimulus starts in this part of the brain.
- 2. Our Mammalian brain.** Centre of our emotions, memories, habits and decision making, shared with other mammals. As humans, we like to code as much here as possible. It's efficient. That's why you often hear "it just feels right"/ "it just feels wrong". If we've repeated a behaviour enough, it goes into our "autopilot". Have you ever got to work and wondered how you got there? That's because a regular daily commute is easily wired into our autopilot. We don't have to think about it. We can just do it.

- 3. Neocortex.** The part of the brain that makes us human and sets us apart from most of the animal kingdom. The neocortex controls things like willpower, planning and concerted effort. It's our rational, logical mind. This is the part of our mind we like to believe is in control...

...but it's not.

That's why understanding this model is important. It's survival first. If we are feeling threatened, our flight or fight gets triggered which interrupts the neocortex or 'logical mind' which effectively shuts down. We cannot access it and the resources it gives us; it makes sense from an evolutionary perspective. Now is not the time think about why the bear might be at the mouth of the cave – you just need to beat it in order to survive.

Remember a time when you've been in an argument or are highly stressed and can't think straight? You were in fight or flight mode, and as you are likely to have experienced, this is not something we can over-ride, push through or think our way out of it. To re-engage our rational mind, we need to feel safe. The good news is that once we know how, we can consciously switch this on.



System 1

1. Brain-stem & cerebellum **2. Limbic System**
Fight or flight | Autopilot

System 2

3. Neocortex
Language, abstract thought, imagination, consciousness, reasons, rationalisation



Survival Tip 1: Practice Emotional Hygiene.

Just as we've all become exceptionally good at washing our hands, we now need to become exceptionally good at noticing when we are in 'animal brain' vs 'rational brain'.

Clues might be:

- Reduced cognitive functioning or feeling 'overwhelm'
- Tiredness, exhaustion
- Fuzzy-headedness, difficulty concentrating
- Executive functioning drop-off: not able to 'think'
- Sudden mood 'eruptions' or changes
- Distracting or 'numbing' behaviours (reaching for technology, food – particularly sugar, alcohol etc.)
- Extreme behaviours to get 'needs' met (barging people out the way to get to the toilet roll for example...)
- Sleeplessness OR sleepiness
- Difficulty digesting food
- Feeling flat/numb/confused

As already stated, don't try and battle through it: you just can't. 'Flight or fight' is also known as the activation of our Sympathetic Autonomic Nervous System. The antidote? To activate its counterpart, the Parasympathetic Autonomic Nervous system, or 'rest and digest', to help our brain to realise – 'its ok, I'm safe' How do you do that?

Here are our top tips to consciously soothing your nervous system.

Tool #1 Burn it off.

The obvious one when you are full of adrenaline and cortisol; the hormones realised during flight or fight – use them! More than 20 minutes of cardio-vascular exercise of any kind will burn it off and by doing so return you to ‘rest and digest’ Add in some upper body work in place of the ‘fight’, and your shoulders and neck will thank you for it. If you’re struggling for motivation, many fitness pros are now uploading workouts or live-streaming classes that you can join for free.

Tool # 2 Shake it out.

If running or HIIT is not your thing, fear not: dancing it out has the same effect. Specifically, ‘shaking’ it out. Imagine an animal in the wild after running away from a predator, afterwards they’ll ‘shake’, which acts as a way to release all that fear and tension, it’s a natural somatic response. Great if you’re housebound and who doesn’t like a living room party?! Get breathless and make sure your heart rate is up – aim for 20 minutes. Pick upbeat power tunes and you’ll feel the shift in no time.

There are a number of TRE (Tension and Trauma Release Exercises) on-line which deliberately trigger this response if you want to explore this more.

Tool #4 Breathe.

One of the quickest ways to self-regulate and often integrated into some of the relaxation practices above, using the breath is equally as powerful as a stand-alone tool. There are lots of versions out there, but essentially, the aim is to slow your breathing down, ensure the outbreath is longer than the inbreath, and pause between inhale and exhale. One simple technique is ‘square breathing’ where you inhale for a count of four, pause for four, exhale for four and pause again for four before repeating and gradually begin to extend the outbreath until you reach account of seven. Exhaling with a gentle ‘HA’ sound as you do so helps you breathe into your belly. There are lots of guided solutions and apps out there should you want more structure.

Tool # 5 Limit the triggers.

It helps to reduce triggers in the first place. Start to notice what sets you off and think about how to better manage your exposure. Bear in mind Covid-19 and Corona Virus has already been mentioned approximately £2.1 BILLION times in the media (as of March 24th, 2020).

At the very least we would recommend giving yourself an allotted time each day to check the news.

Try turning notifications off on devices to help you take control of what you read, when. Fear is contagious thanks to pheromones, be aware of the impact of others and pro-actively manage your own response.

Emotional hygiene is important to practice when you notice you’ve been triggered, but our recommendation is to also build it in to your habits for optimal benefits, and to help you out for those times when you aren’t consciously aware. Some of us are used to highly normalised states of stress, so you need to build it in!

Additional Resources

- [Watch psychologist Guy Winch’s introduction to emotional hygiene via Ted Talks.](#)
- [Check out crocodile breathing, - a great way of engaging your core and increasing spinal mobility; Alternate Nostril Breathing; and the Hof breathing method. Plenty of videos available on You Tube.](#)





Survival Tip 2: Help Your Brain Be Lazy.

Our brains are very efficient. They like to create patterns to have efficient short cuts in thinking – it's that 'Mammalian' part of the brain we referred to that creates habits, memories and other mental shortcuts. It saves time. If you already KNOW that blue is your favourite colour and jeans suit you, it makes choosing your outfit that much simpler. If you had to consider what you thought and felt about blue or denim each time you got dressed it would be highly inefficient and wasted brain power.

The conscious mind can hold and work with between four and seven pieces of information at any one time. Your unconscious can process millions, so once you have done something consciously a few times, your brain moves it to unconscious which means we can do it without needing to think about it too much. Like when you learn to drive and it's all clunky and awkward; yet a year later you could do it whilst having conversations with passengers and eating a sandwich. (Definitely not recommended!)

Thinking back to your average day at the end of 2019, you probably operated in unconscious mode to go about most of your day: getting ready for work, your commute, your routine when you got in to the office, getting set up, who you chatted to, who you ate with, and where.

Trouble is, right now all our usual habits are scrambled. Our comfortable and familiar routine has been taken away. The social conventions by which we operate have been disrupted, meeting our basic needs for food and connection have changed and there is ambiguity about what is and isn't allowed. Our brains are having to work several times harder now because all the 'short cuts' are broken. It requires more energy (cue sugar cravings) more time (everything takes longer) and more bandwidth than before (it's why we are more prone to overwhelm right now).

Here are some ways you can help yourself:

Tool #6 Recreate what you can.

It might be an interesting novelty to stay in PJ's, lay in until five minutes before work starts and start drinking wine at 4pm, but unless you had these habits previously, they may be compounding your brain-fog! Choose a few habits you had before and replicate them at home. Perhaps it's your waking time, sipping a coffee whilst doing e-mails, or even reading on your commute which now translates to an armchair before moving to your desk.

Layer in some rhythms and rituals that your brain will find familiar. Creating a rhythm or routine to your day and your

week will prove ultimately soothing to your brain by bringing comfort in familiarity.

Tool #7 Create a 'work' cue and a 'home' cue.

Rather than 'work/life balance', we are experiencing a 'work/life blur', where our responsibilities and tasks for both may be over-lapping and even clashing. Create 'cues' for your brain that signal 'this is work time now' and 'it's home time'.

These can be simple:

- A physical space that is 'work' even if it's a different chair at the same table, set it up with a plant, your stationery, a 'work mug' for your tea. Pack up your stuff at the end of the working day and put it to one side.
- A ritual, a series of activities you repeat before 'doing work' and 'going home'.
- Clothing, putting on a jacket, a scarf, some lipstick.

Music, either back-ground when you are working, or an 'arrive at work' song and a 'going home' song.



Tool #8 Group activities and tasks that require similar cognitive energy.

Even if you are at the office it's obvious that it requires a different kind of concentration to get a document or spreadsheet finished than it does to be on video conferencing calls.

It takes a significant amount of time for the brain to refocus. Rather than jumping in and out of different types of tasks – likely due to a constant stream of notifications and interruptions – group them and do them in batches.

A morning of focused tasks and then an afternoon of calls. Play to your strengths as to where your energy is best (this paper was mainly written and edited between 5-7am for one author, and between 9 – 11pm by the other!).

Tool #9 Create boundaries around your time, availability and preferences.

You may notice that as people take advantage of working to hours and times that suit them, the risk is you are 'on call' for longer than you were before. If you are having to juggle caring or home-schooling responsibilities on top, this very quickly becomes exhausting.

Firm boundaries, clearly articulated and communicated, will help. Chunk time down into 45min or hour slots if it's helpful - and stick to them. 'I'm not available between 9-11am because I'm home schooling' is very clear. Don't then be tempted to check e-mails in between. Compartmentalise. It's ok to switch off Teams/Skype/ Hangouts and email to go 'off grid' if you need to concentrate or recharge.

Tool #10 Streamline your incoming and outgoing comms.

It's great to have multiple options to communicate, but if you need to check across three or four different channels for information it can be a real energy sapper! Use different communication channels for different things, e.g., keep Teams, Slack or WhatsApp for chat, and access work-related activity through your inbox. Work colleagues, family and friends may be feeling the same, so instigate a conversation to try and agree a common approach – they'll thank you for it!



Survival Tip 3: Don't Confuse Certainty with Safety.

Our minds are constantly 'making meaning' out of what comes to us through our senses. When something – good or bad - happens, our brain processes the information, using all the limbic system's shortcuts to 'filter' and help us make sense of how we think and feel about it. As we've described, our brains are merely trying to keep us 'safe'. It's only doing its job getting us to focus on all the uncertainty and to try and make sense of it. Psychological and physical safety are two fundamental human needs and, depending on our childhood experiences, our genetics and our world views, we all have different strategies for making sense of what is going on around us.

Some of us are wired to look at all the worst-case scenarios: our strategies are worrying and thinking through all possible contingency plans. Others are wired to look for all the opportunities, to search for greater meaning in all this. Some may find the strong emotions this uncertainty elicits so uncomfortable that they prefer to deny the situation entirely or make light of it, or 'numb and distract' with other things. Or we move between all these possibilities in a single day!

The unique story we tell ourselves shapes our mood, impacts how we physically feel, and drives our actions and behaviours.

There is good news: Thoughts, feelings and behaviours are intrinsically linked, for better or worse. So, if we can reframe the story we're telling, we can improve the way we feel, both mentally and physically.

Tool #11 Become AWARE and CONSCIOUS of what your brain is doing for you.

Noticing the stories you tell yourself and how they make you feel helps you notice how they might be shaping your behaviours. For example: 'Yes, I notice I am focusing on all the things I am missing out on right now and that is making me feel sad' or; 'OK, I notice I'm focusing on having more time for exercise and that is making me feel excited' or; 'I notice I have thoughts about all my family being ill in hospital... and that make me feel scared'.

With awareness, you'll notice patterns and can ask yourself whether they are serving you well.





Tool #12 Build on your ability to separate yourself from your thinking.

The common thread in martial arts, much religious and philosophical thinking, great leadership and profound personal success is the ability to 'master the self'. That starts with taking a position of 'watching' your thoughts and feelings, and noticing that these are separate from you, NOT intrinsically you. Introducing mindfulness to your daily routine is a great way of helping you 'do this. It's a skill that requires practice, but there are plenty of resources out there (see below).

Tool #13 Accept that emotions are just feelings.

Allow ALL thoughts and feelings. Let them flow...and then let them go. Remember, you cannot select which emotions you can and can't feel - it's outside of your control. Just allowing yourself to notice the way you are feeling without judgement will make you feel better. Many of our behaviours are unconsciously trying to save us from 'feeling' something unpleasant, if you allow the feelings, you can be in more conscious control of your behaviours.

Do accept that a fear-based response is completely normal right now – recognise your brain's good intention in trying to keep you safe.

Tool #14 Honour others' responses.

The stories we create to make sense of events are unique to us. Everyone will think and feel differently– and that's ok. Bad behaviours, on the other hand, are not!

Do try and show understanding though, bad behaviour does not automatically mean someone is a bad person. Accept that they are probably in 'fight or flight' mode and reacting to their particular trigger in that moment.

Tool #15 Be real about your behaviours and how they are serving you.

Are you finding yourself panic-buying? Drinking too much? Binging on sugary treats? Judging others? Shouting at your partner/ the kids/ the dog?

Notice what habits or behaviours are showing up for you right now. Ask yourself what they are trying to do for you and whether there is a better way of meeting this need. What could you do instead?

Also notice what might be triggering them. Is it an external trigger? A feeling? Or trying to avoid a feeling?

Try and recognise the positive intention behind the behaviour, such as providing reassurance, and take control: CHOOSE how you would like that need met in a way that serves you better.

Awareness in itself is curative.

Additional Resources

- A myriad of Apps, many of which are free to download. Try Headspace or Calm as a starting point.
- Accredited mindfulness practitioners, such as Tara Bach and Jack Kornfield (one of the key teachers to introduce Buddhist mindfulness practice to the West), have created easy to access resources specifically targeted at helping us navigate our way through the coronavirus pandemic. A quick search in your usual web browser should do it.



Survival Tip 4: Build Connection and Maintain Your Tribe.

We are wired for social connection and our biology is still set to 'belong' to a tribe. We know our normal routines have gone out of the window – including the ways we usually we connect with our friends, family and work colleagues. Some of us are home alone. Others are trying to balance demands from their children with working in close proximity to a significant other. And anyone in a shared house right now will be trying to juggle the relative pros and cons of crowded communal space with staring at the walls in the sanctuary of their own bedroom. Regardless of how many people we're actually locked down with, we probably at times feel isolated, alone or a bit of out the loop.

The good news is that through technology, there has never been a better time to create belonging and sustain meaningful social connection whilst safely maintaining spatial distance.

Tool #16 Recognise different personality types have different needs.

Extraverts typically draw their energy from external sources whereas introverts recharge by spending time alone.

Where do you personally get your energy from? How do you relate to your friends/family/colleagues? What's right for you in our new normal might not work for someone else. Have a conversation and agree ways of supporting each other that are mutually beneficial.

See the resources section below to pick up some useful tips on how different personality types can survive lockdown.

Tool #17 Nurture existing routines in different ways alongside building new ones.

A stalwart of your local Saturday night Pub Quiz? Join one of the many virtual quizzes now popping up on line. Or even better, embarrass your teenage children by gate-crashing Houseparty!

Missing your usual family get-togethers? Instigate a regular dinner together over Zoom or Skype, or a competitive board game such as Scrabble® GO. Kids longing to see their grandparents?

Set Nana and Grandad up to read the little ones a bedtime story from afar. They get to spend time together and you get some precious time to recharge – it's a win-win. (Especially if you're a frazzled parent trying to work AND home-school!)

Tool #18 Connect via 'The gift of giving'

Giving makes us feel good, so create different kinds of connections and feel that helper's high. Ring an elderly relative, write an old-fashioned letter to a friend, collect a neighbour's shopping...every time we do something for someone else our brain releases the feel-good chemicals serotonin, dopamine and oxytocin. Another win-win.

Tool #19 See this as an opportunity to connect with work colleagues on a more personal level

Build in time to talk properly – dedicate the first ten minutes of every meeting to non-work-related discussion. People are trying to make sense of what is happening and their experience of it. They may NEED to talk to process it. Don't try and short cut this, facilitate it and then move the conversation into work-task territory.



Keep the social side of office life running – schedule virtual coffee breaks or drinks after work and look to switch real life activities to online, for example swap out lunchtime run club for a virtual step challenge.

Tool #20 Connect with yourself.

Self-care is ultimately that – look at this opportunity to connect and care for yourself. It might be as small as an extra-long soak in the bath, ordering a delicious new book to read – or finally getting around to reading the one on your shelf. More time for baking, for your hobby, to start that exercise programme. Deliberately ‘loving’ and looking after yourself, the same as loving and connecting with others, releases oxytocin and dopamine, the perfect antidote to an over-adrenalised system.

Additional Resources

A guide for Introverts: <https://www.type-pro.com/the-introverts-guide-to-surviving-the-lockdown/>

A guide for Extroverts: <https://www.type-pro.com/the-extraverts-guide-to-surviving-the-lockdown/>





So, there is actually a lot we can do to help ourselves right now. It all starts with acknowledging the reality and how you're feeling. And that we are all in it together.

A quick poll around the MCM team threw up many of the themes that we have addressed here. We're collectively overwhelmed and anxious, exacerbated by a suddenly unstructured and fluid day, with increasingly blurred work and domestic boundaries.

Our emotions are all over the place. We're exhausted but unable to sleep. Our heads are fuzzy, and we just can't focus or concentrate on the simplest of tasks.

We're swapping stories of tears, irrational outbursts and bizarre compulsions to stockpile fruit (or toilet rolls) even though we know we don't really need them. We admit we're numbing these uncomfortable feelings with wine or chocolate. And we're giving ourselves a hard time for thinking and feeling like this.

Let's acknowledge our collective reality. It's ok to recognise that what we are all feeling is normal. Accept that it's your brain doing its job.

Be kind to yourself. Stay connected in the way that's right for you. Proactively seek help and support if and when you need it.

We are dedicated to bringing our expertise to the table to help, so please do not hesitate to contact us if we can provide support in any way for you or your organisation.

Once again, wishing you clarity in chaos and support in the field.

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Helping Organisations Adapt to Change.

If you want to know more, please get in touch.



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