



Elizabeth A. Stanley Ph.D.

The Search for Security and Resilience

STRESS

How to Help Both Brains Feel Safe During Coronavirus

Part 2: Balancing the information-seeking and safety-seeking parts of the brain.

Posted July 14, 2020



Because our thinking brain and survival brain are at odds during the coronavirus pandemic, many common choices intended to calm ourselves actually exacerbate our stress and anxiety. This post explains what we can do instead.

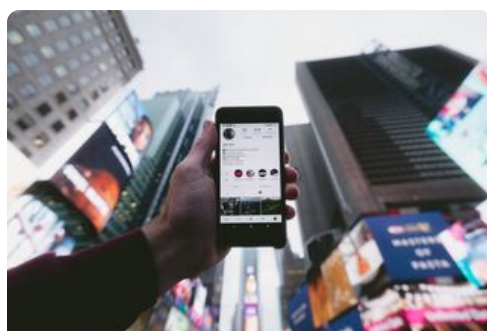
The thinking brain tends to quiet its anxiety by trying to reduce uncertainty. Spending a lot of time on social media, watching the

feel like it's taking control, but these choices can trigger the survival brain to turn on *more* stress arousal—as my [previous post](#) explained.

So, what can we do?

One straightforward solution is getting intentional about our consumption of news and social media. To help avoid unnecessary stress arousal, we can set boundaries about when and how often we check the news and our social media feeds. Unless our work requires it, for instance, we can choose to avoid these sources first thing in the morning, because they're more likely to set us on an anxious path for the day.

Even better, we can go directly to the source of our stress and anxiety by helping our survival brain feel safe.



Source: Jakob Owens/Unsplash

Remember that where we direct our attention—consciously *or* unconsciously—has tremendous ripple effects through our survival brain, nervous system, and body. That's why googling about the soar-

ing number of coronavirus cases can cause our survival brain to turn on stress.

With this in mind, we can train ourselves to notice where our attention is directed in any moment. It might be focused externally (such as listening to someone talk) or internally (such

can observe what's happening in our body. Because the survival brain isn't verbal, we must look to physical sensations to interpret and understand the survival brain's cues. My previous post identified the sensations associated with stress arousal and anxiety. Sometimes our (conscious or unconscious) attentional focus is making us calmer, but sometimes it's making us more stressed.

During this attentional inventory, if we realize that our survival brain has turned on stress and anxiety, we can choose to redirect our attention in ways that help the survival brain feel safe. This sets the conditions for true recovery.

For instance, focusing attention on places of contact between our body and its surroundings—such as the pressure and heaviness of our butt in the chair—helps the survival brain feel stable and grounded. (You can download a basic five-minute guided audio exercise from my [website](#). My book *Widen the Window* offers an advanced-move exercise to help the survival brain discharge stress arousal and return the body back to baseline.)

Building a Thinking Brain-Survival Brain Alliance

There are several other strategies we can learn and practice to help our thinking brain and survival brain be allies, instead of adversaries. *Widen the Window* explores five resilience-building habits we can practice regularly—and how and why they work. Several strategies are common knowledge, although *why* they are so important is often misunderstood. For instance, getting eight hours of sleep is one of the most im-

body to discharge excess stress hormones.

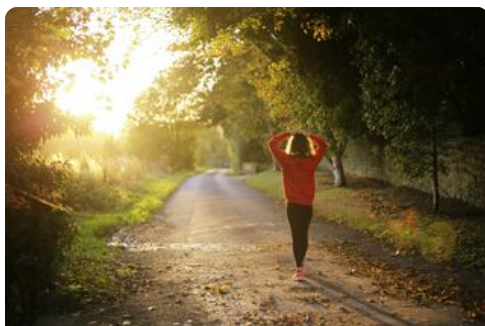
Here are two other non-obvious techniques for building a thinking brain-survival brain alliance. First, we can diagnose our current stress arousal by noticing the level of intensity we're being drawn to in this moment. To be effective, the re-regulating tool we then select must align with our survival brain's truth in this moment. Say, for instance, we're hyper-aroused with anxiety or anger. In this case, we can't expect calming music, positive reframing, or meditation to work, when what our survival brain and body actually need is to expend excess energy.

THE BASICS

[What Is Stress?](#)

[Take our Burnout Test](#)

[Find a therapist to overcome stress](#)



Source: Emma Simpson/Unsplash

Second, once we've learned our survival brain's truth, we can take an action that shows it that we're listening and responding to its cues. Say, for instance, when we tune in to our body, we

discover that we're feeling tense and restless: What the survival brain is begging for right now is some physical move-

take a 15 minute walk outside. At the very least, we can al-
ways choose to take at least 60 seconds to stand up and
stretch.

Any choice we make that's informed by our survival brain's
current cues shows it that we've heard its message. Knowing
its message has been received, our survival brain can stand
down—helping to guard against any additional stress arousal.

Even more importantly, anytime we make choices informed
by the survival brain's cues, we also help our survival brain
access a sense of agency. Why does this matter? Remember
that if the survival brain perceives itself to be *helpless*, *pow-
erless*, or *lacking control*, it will turn on traumatic stress.
Therefore, whenever we make choices that build survival
brain agency, we're also creating our best possible protection
from experiencing trauma.

Share this post

 Facebook



 Bluesky

 LinkedIn

 Email

**Don't miss an update! Get posts from
Elizabeth A. Stanley Ph.D. direct to
your inbox**