

Are you in the Red Zone?

How to Minimise Stress Without
Losing your Oomph!



Sarah Alexander

Hello and welcome to my e-book *Are you in the Red Zone? How to Minimise Stress Without Losing Your Oomph!*

The aim of this e-book is to offer tools and techniques to help minimise the stress in our lives. Our focus in this e-book will be on 3 key areas:

1. What is Stress and the Red Zone?

2. Understanding the Long-Term Impact of the Red Zone

3. Getting into the Green Zone: Tools and Techniques to Minimise Stress and Maximise Understanding in Interpersonal Relationships

But first – a quick question for reflection:

What have glue and water pouring through a sieve got to do with your brain?

Answer: The brain naturally absorbs negative experiences, and these stick in our long-term emotional memory like **glue**! Scientists call this the **negativity bias**.

By contrast, positive experiences – unless they are very intense – pass through our brains almost without our registering them, like water going through a **sieve**.

If you reflect on your life experiences to date, I am sure you will recognise this innate bias at play in your life... more on this later.

1. What is Stress and the Red Zone?

Stress is the mind and body's response to threat. I call this the **red zone**. The red zone has three distinct traits:

1. *A Swift Response in the Body*

The stress response is our primal, immediate and rapid response to any outside stimulus that we interpret as a threat. This 'fight or flight' response is inherited from our Stone Age ancestors who, for their own safety, needed to be able to react swiftly and effectively to dangers in their environment.

However, with its ongoing pressures, fast-paced existence, intensity and excitement, our modern life leads many of us to experience stress on a permanent basis. This is because stress is caused not only by outside events that seem threatening to us, but also by our constant anticipation of future events that could arouse our fear or anger.

The body responds to this stress by activating the sympathetic wing of the autonomic nervous system, our fight or flight response. We experience the effects of sympathetic nervous system activation whenever we are pushed for time, pulled in too many directions, irritated by circumstances, worried or anxious, and whenever we feel physical pain or emotionally upset. At such times, the powerful red zone symptoms that arise are designed to enable us to fight, run or freeze:

- Increased heart rate
- Increased breathing rate
- Raised blood pressure
- Dilated pupils
- Sweating and skin cooling
- A rise in blood sugar
- Blood is diverted from the interior of the body to power the muscles of the arms and legs, causing key processes such as digestion, reproduction and immune system function to be suppressed
- The brain is primed for active responses: stress hormones are released, including adrenalin and noradrenalin and glucocorticoid hormones – especially cortisol

2. A Swift Response in the Mind

We experience negative emotions, predominantly fear and/or anger when we are in the red zone. Coupled with the negativity bias in the brain, our tendency to continually scan our present and future for threats – and so keep triggering negative emotions – inhibits our ability to function at optimal level. Consequently, we over-estimate problems, anticipate the worst and lose sight of how to respond positively and resourcefully.

3. An Increased Sense of Self

When we live from inside the red zone, we become self-focused. Much of our inner self-talk hinges on ‘what this means about me’. Negative beliefs are easily triggered from this position, and we can become hopelessly preoccupied by how situations affect us personally – for instance, by how ashamed, worthless, unsuccessful, insecure or anxious we feel.

The Three Stress Triggers: Unfulfilled Basic Needs

We all have basic needs. When these are fulfilled, it is relatively easy for us to deal with challenges and issues. But let’s look at how easily we go into the red zone when our three basic needs are unfulfilled:

1. Safety

We have a basic need to feel safe and secure in our environment. However, life often throws up unexpected events – such as financial difficulties, insecurity in new career circumstances, the prospect of losing a job, serious health issues (our own, or those of a loved one), and other major challenges. At such times, our need for security can prompt us to respond primarily in negative ways. We may experience anxiety, worry, helplessness or perhaps anger – at the person whom we believe to be the cause of the challenge, or anger at ourselves.

This leads us to perhaps regard ourselves as small, inadequate, not good enough, or unimportant.

2. Satisfaction

We all crave satisfaction – from a job well done, a goal achieved, a deadline met, the success of a project, or an accomplishment fulfilled. But this can wreak havoc in our minds when, for example,

we face a tight project deadline, are multi-tasking and get frequently interrupted. Under such pressure, our dissatisfaction may surge – including frustration, a sense of being burdened, of disappointment at ourselves, failure and loss, and a growing conviction that life is not good.

Paradoxically therefore, our focus on satisfaction can lead us to picture ourselves as unsuccessful, and even consider ourselves to be failures. Our inner talk can become self-denigrating, and prevent us from enjoying the fruit of our labour.

3. Belonging

Humans have a deep need to belong, and to feel a sense of connection to others. For their survival, our hunter-gatherer ancestors had to stay part of the groups that they lived in. To be excluded meant certain death, which is why the loss of belonging is a primal fear.

We still have remnants of this profound fear in our psyches. To feel that we do not belong is a painful experience. For example, if we imagine that we have been put down, ignored, left out, discounted or rejected, be it at work or at home, then negative emotions are likely to be triggered in us. We experience feelings of loss, rejection, inadequacy, worthlessness, and shame. We may start to feel that we are, in some way, 'damaged goods'. We may develop the sense of being an outsider, believing that we don't belong, or feeling unwanted. In this way, our need to belong can also lead to self-attack.

An accumulation of all these issues brings long-term stress. Unless they are properly understood, the effect of prolonged stress is insidious, and so may remain mostly unseen until it has serious consequences. This is why it is very helpful to understand what happens if we accumulate stress in our lives.

2. Understanding the Long-Term Impact of the Red Zone

Our sympathetic nervous system is activated as a response to stress. This system automatically takes energy away from other areas, not least from the immune system, the digestive system and the reproductive system. Having been activated, it takes time for all systems to return to normal, even after the threat has passed.

Long-term activation of the sympathetic nervous system places a heavy burden on the body in the following ways:

- Gastro-intestinal challenges including ulcers, colitis, IBS
- Cardiovascular issues, including heart attacks – especially if combined with strong anger
- Risk of Type 2 diabetes – especially if stress is combined with sugary and refined food diet
- Weakened immune system: we are less able to fight off diseases – even common colds
- Decreased sex drive and risk of impotence

Long-term stress also affects the brain in the following ways:

- The amygdala, the stress alarm bell in the brain, becomes more reactive to fear and threat, making us more anxious

- We see life through dark-coloured glasses as our memories grow increasingly tainted with negativity
- We adopt new negative beliefs all too willingly
- The hippocampus – the memory centre in our brain that records our experiences without the distortion of fear – becomes atrophied, thereby reducing our ability to accurately represent events in our minds
- Depression becomes more likely as our positive-state-inducing neurotransmitters reduce: this means that even those with cheery dispositions can become prone to low moods.

Stress Caused by Interpersonal Relationships

Relationships can propel us into the red zone because of the challenges that they tend to produce.

Within our hearts, we all have two fundamental and opposite energies, which we can think of as love and hate. Or, to put it another way, people trigger in us one of two reactions: our understanding or our resistance. We might imagine these as two wolves inside us, hungry to be fed through our thoughts, words and actions. Depending on which one we choose to feed, either one or the other of these energies, or wolves, will grow within our hearts and minds. This makes it important to consider what focus we give to our thoughts, words and deeds.

When we have thoughts of hostility, prejudice, exclusion or dislike, and whenever we indulge in various forms of ill-treatment of others, we cultivate the energy of resistance. Whenever we consider anyone to be outside of our natural circle – be it through race, religion, political leanings or difficult behaviour – we deem it acceptable to treat them badly and to devalue them in our minds.

By contrast, our thoughts of loving kindness, of compassion, benevolence, generosity, forgiveness and inclusiveness foster a greater humanity among us all, and promote wellbeing and understanding.

Every person we interact with, or even think about, triggers one or other of these two reactions in us. If, by cultivating benevolent thoughts, words and deeds, we can maximise the energy of understanding, then the stress that we associate with interpersonal relationships will be reduced. It is even possible to remain in our calm centre, the **green zone**, during relational challenges.

3. Getting into the Green Zone: Tools and Techniques to Minimise Stress and Maximise Understanding in Interpersonal Relationships

When we are in the green zone, we live from that place within our mind that scientists call our 'natural brain'. This place is:

- Calm, centred and peaceful, fulfilling our need to feel safe
- Content, fulfilling our need to feel satisfied
- Caring, altruistic, kind and loving, fulfilling our need to feel connected
- Creative and intuitive

Furthermore, sages and saints of every religious tradition point to our fundamental nature as one of benevolence, radiance, purity and wholeness. When we are in touch with this part of ourselves, we become free of our thoughts of littleness, and able to sense our own magnitude. This is a place of magnificence from which we can respond effectively (instead of reactively) to all situations – including situations that seem difficult or unpleasant.

By utilising the brain's capacity to change and evolve, it is possible to train our brain – and correspondingly, our mind – to stay in this place. This scientifically-proven ability of the brain to re-shape itself and build new inner resources is called neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is based on the evidence that what flows through your mind shapes your brain. In other words:

1. Thought creates neural activity
2. Repeated neural activity creates neural structures in the brain
3. New neural structures lead to new inner resources – both good and bad!
4. These neural structures lead to character traits within us, that we can utilise for our own greater well being

Glue in Positives

We talked earlier about the negativity bias in the brain that primes us to absorb difficult experiences. It leads us to look out for bad news, become overly sensitive to threats, and react too strongly to perceived challenges. In order to counteract this bias, we must make a conscious, daily effort to become aware of, and take in, positive and empowering experiences, as follows:

- Bring your full awareness to the positive facts in any situation, and make them experiences or emotions that you feel in your body, for in excess of 30 seconds. These can be experiences in the present moment or memories from the past.
- Intensify the good experiences or emotions, as if turning up their volume in your mind and body.
- As a sponge absorbs water, consciously absorb into your mind and body the positive elements of a situation, so that they can be stored in your long-term emotional memories.

In other words, if you want to feel calmer, then practise noticing and absorbing experiences whenever you already feel calm; if you want to feel happier, practise taking in experiences when you already feel happy; if you want to feel loved, take in experiences when you know you are loved... even by a pet!

Benefits of Regular Green Zone Practice

There are many benefits to practising the art of staying in our green zone – otherwise known as meditative practice. These benefits include:

- Calming the stress response of the sympathetic nervous system, and activating the 'rest and digest' response of the parasympathetic nervous system
- Reversing all of the physiological effects of stress in the body

- Giving you the opportunity to step back from the world, and 'be' rather than 'do'

According to neuroscientist Dr Rick Hanson, this practice produces a positive effect on the brain by increasing the grey matter in the following areas:

- **Insula**, which regulates your sense of self, your self-awareness and builds empathy for others
- **Hippocampus**, which calms the amygdala and the production of cortisol; it also establishes context and visual spatial memory
- **Pre-frontal cortex**, which guides attention and self-control and can be changed in 10 – 12 hours

Such practice also reduces cortical thinning in the brain due to aging.

Therefore, building up your inner musculature with daily green zone practice is essential if you want to become resilient to stress. Even 5 minutes spent every day focusing on your breath will begin to pay dividends after a short period of time.

Quick and effective measures for acute stress

- Take in a full deep breath, pause, and let the breath out slowly (the out-breath activates the parasympathetic nervous system)
- Take 3 – 10 breaths, ensuring that your out-breath is double the length of your in-breath
- Relax your eyes, tongue, jaw and belly
- Visualise yourself in a beautiful and safe place

Additional resources

Here is a series of guided meditations which you can use for free from [my website](#)

I suggest that you start with the first meditation, and go on from there. If you want to grow the energy of understanding within you, I recommend the 'Loving Kindness' meditation drawn from the Buddhist tradition.

A few tips:

- Set an intention for the practice. How do you want it to help you? For example, do you see it as part of a long-term plan to counteract stress? Do you wish to use it to become more compassionate and understanding?
- Focus your attention on your breath, or the sounds around you, or listen to a guided meditation. Attention acts rather like a powerful Hoover, drawing whatever you focus upon into your brain. So focus as precisely as you can upon your chosen subject.
- Be compassionate with yourself: have a non-judgmental approach to your practice. Recognise that your mind will wander: it will have lots of other things to think about, so just keep gently bringing it back to your practice without self-criticism.

- Aim for mind-emptiness, not mind-fullness! The ideal state is a tranquil, still mind in which thoughts flow by to a background of inner quietude.

Growing the Wolf of Understanding within you in Challenging Situations

- **Always speak from your calm centre:** have dignity and nobility, and be respectful when you speak
- **Be mindful of your tone:** keep it free of irritation, anxiety or impatience
- **Clarify, before you start, the result that you would like.** Challenging circumstances often produce many wrongs that we hope to right, but it is most effective to deal with one issue at a time, and work towards a positive result step by step. Concede, too, on small areas of friction, so as to gain your bigger result. The temptation during a communication is to press on so as to get another issue put right, but moving too fast can re-instigate hostility.
- **Practise the art of Non-Violent Communication.** This set of communication skills shows us to speak from a place of personal responsibility, drawing on awareness of our own inner feelings and deeper needs. It offers ways to create relationships based on collaboration and compassion.

The suggested structure of NVC is very helpful and guides us to:

1. State the facts free from evaluation: 'When X happens' (fact),
 2. Express the inner feelings that it triggered in us in a compassionate way: 'I feel Y' (feeling)
 3. Express the deeper needs or values that are not being met in the situation: 'I need Z' (needs)
 4. Request what we do want in a non-demanding and non-threatening way
- **Speak from the masculine or feminine, as appropriate.** We all have masculine and feminine energies within us. In general, women use 'empathy language' which prioritises the need for understanding and listening, whereas men tend to speak in 'solutions language' that calls for a specific or logical response to the problem. When trying to resolve a conflict, consider whether you should use empathy-based or solutions-based language: a judicious choice makes it more likely for your conversational partner to feel heard, and so to respond positively to what you say.

The Three Key Items: Summary

- Red zone stress affects us in three key ways: it leads to strong responses in the mind and body, triggers negative emotions and increases our self-focus
- Ongoing red zone stress produced by our busy lifestyles causes much unseen damage in the body and brain – damage that we often only experience latterly with serious consequences
- Certain tools and techniques, supported by neuroscience, can reverse the effects of the red zone and help to keep you in the green zone

In Conclusion

Through its innate neuroplasticity, our brain has an infinite capacity to adapt and build new inner resources. We can take advantage of this capability by developing a daily practice of noticing our positive life experiences and installing them in your mind. In this way, your brain's hard-wiring of purely negative memories will be counteracted, and you will gain happier and more productive outcomes.

It takes awareness and regular practice to develop true resilience to stress. In fact – it has to be practiced! However, by developing this mindset, you may find that you start to regard challenges and pressures as friends rather than enemies. For as you grow increasingly skilled at using these tools and techniques to reduce the harmful effects of stress on your body, you will start reaping ample benefits in your personal and professional life.

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References

Rick Hanson: The Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love & Wisdom

R. Sapolsky: Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers

<http://media.rickhanson.net/home/files/PNS2.pdf>

<http://media.rickhanson.net/home/files/PNS1.pdf>

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Coaching or training with Sarah Alexander

Sarah Alexander converts business owners and executives with a nightmarish workload into effective leaders who can fulfil their role efficiently.

Typically, a client comes to us who is anxious and worried about the stress that they, or their team, are under. They are concerned that their team is not productive, leading to loss of income and customer satisfaction. And, they are disappointed that they do not take good decisions, problem solve well or communicate or present confidently.

Our role is to turn things around, so business owners and their teams can bring a calm mind into the business space and can:

- Optimise their performance, increase productivity and minimise stress
- Think more clearly, improve concentration and take better decisions
- Increase their confidence, communication and develop better relationships

Client Testimonials Working with Sarah has been an extremely beneficial experience. I felt that she was a really important part of helping me out of an uncertain and dark place whilst helping me progress into a much calmer and clearer position.

I always looked forward to the calls with her, and without a doubt, came out of each one, every time, feeling a deep sense of clarity, calmness, positivity and hope.

She really helped me stay above water and see life more clearly and more simply. Not only has she helped me in my business and how I tackle it day to day, but she's also helped me hugely in my own purpose and the clarity I have on my direction, where I want to go, and who I want to be. (And also, in a way, who I am). Thanks again Sarah! **Thomas Norman CEO Portal Imagery**

Sarah's methods of dealing with stress and her meditation techniques are extremely helpful. They lead to a very real sense of calm and relaxation over-coming real business tension and stress. I would fully recommend this coaching to anyone wanting to gain fresh insights into working relationships and enjoy a more balanced and rounded work life. **John Cooper Chairman Rocketseed**

"Everyone said afterwards how interesting and useful they had found the session with you and that there were many tools and changes they are going to take away and implement. For me this is always a sign of success when there's a commitment to trying some new ideas!

Personally, I really enjoyed the journey you took us on - starting with the evidence and scientific facts that enabled many people to reach the conclusions about what they were doing wrong and how they could change before we had got there. The interactive breakout sessions and coaching questions also combined to make a brilliantly pitched presentation.

Thank you so much again for sharing your knowledge, we all hugely appreciate your support." **Ellie Pendred Chair Ella for Emerging Leaders**

For further details on coaching or training with Sarah Alexander, or to arrange an initial conversation, please email her on sarah@coachingmagnificence.com