

# DEMENTIA PREVENTION

## Session 4 - stress

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### Resources

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BOOK: *The End of Alzheimer's Programme* by Dr Dale Bredeesen

### PLEASE NOTE:

These class materials are intended as background for the lifestyle support I'm giving you as your brain health coach. My element of Goldster's dementia prevention course is based on my training with Dr Dale Bredeesen's team and my experience as a health coach. I'm here to support you on the Wicking Centre/University of Tasmania Dementia Prevention MOOC (Mass Open Online Course) and I'll be doing the course along with you. Please do ask me any questions about the course and I'll do everything I can to help.

You can sign up for the Dementia Prevention MOOC here:

[https://dementia.utas.edu.au/partner/partner\\_course/12-17-b4bbe54b15](https://dementia.utas.edu.au/partner/partner_course/12-17-b4bbe54b15)

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### Disclaimer

I'm not a doctor or a nurse. I can't prescribe, I can't give you advice on individual health issues. You need to talk to your GP about those. I'm here to guide you to make your own healthy choices, and to coach you to discover what's right for you.

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### The purpose of this course is to help you prevent dementia

There are two elements

1 = Dementia Prevention Mass Open Online Course from the Wicking Centre at UTas

2 = coaching support from me each week to complement that – I'm here to support you on the course and to add more practical lifestyle advice from my own training.

## STRESS

**Stress has a hugely debilitating effect on the brain and has been linked to an increased risk of Alzheimer's in multiple studies. One example: women under chronic stress have much lower levels of a hormone called Klotho which regulates ageing and enhances cognition.**

### **Your Body's Response to Stress**

- Neurotransmitters send information to the amygdala, a part of the brain that processes emotional signals and a danger alarm is sent to the hypothalamus
- The hypothalamus then acts like a switchboard, communicating with the rest of the body through the nervous system activating the "fight or flight" response
- From there, hundreds of involuntary bodily functions are activated: adrenalin floods your body increasing your heart rate contributing needed blood flow to your muscles and vital organs
- You breathe more rapidly, small airways in the lungs open to flood your brain with oxygen. Your blood vessels are dilated, blood pressure rises, your senses are heightened
- Glucose is released supplying energy to all parts of the body giving you the fuel you need to respond to the perceived threat

These changes pitch your body into a fight or flight response. That enabled our ancestors to outrun sabre-toothed tigers, and it's helpful today for situations like dodging a car accident. But most modern chronic stressors, such as finances or a challenging relationship, keep your body in that heightened state, which hurts your health. A lot of the stress we talk about today isn't an acute response to danger, it's a long-term chronic response to a situation we feel we can't control. The problem is that the effect on our bodies is the same, and this can have a negative impact on brain health.

- Chronic, unresolved, or severe stress can lead to:
  - hypertension -heart disease -obesity
  - sleep disorders
  - structural brain changes
  - cognitive decline

### **Why do we feel stress?**

Because we care! That's a good thing.

We may want to reframe stress in that context – it allows us to achieve things, to help, to care for people. It's our brains saying, 'this needs to get done'. And even if we are stressed because we're bored, or our lives feel empty – the message is 'what needs to get done here?', what needs to change?

We can't just get rid of the causes of stress in our lives. What we can do is change our perception of that stress – our mindset about it – and seek calm in our lives to balance it out.

**We're going to look at stress in three ways: changing our mindset around stress, focussing on what causes stress in our own lives and how to relieve that; and seeking activities that bring us joy and calm.**

### **1. MINDSET ON STRESS**

What impacts how we feel about a stressful situation is our mindset. We need to ask ourselves if we can we change our mindset around stress. If we're dealing with a stressful situation, can we reframe it in some way?

We know that we stress because we care, and the reality is that the body is designed to have an enhanced response to experiences of stress. But stress can also enhance a sense of connection to what we value, and to other people. It can help us to grow as people, and to deal with difficult situations.

How would it feel if you were able to view a stressor as more of a challenge and less of a threat? If you can do that the brain and body become more adaptive.

### **2. OUR RESPONSE TO STRESS**

Psychologists talk about stress containers: we all have one. It means we can all take a certain amount of stress and we're all different.

Stress flows into the container, the more stressed we are – and the more we have to stress about – the faster it fills up. When stress levels build up the container overflows and we feel like we're drowning in stress. We all have a different response to that, what psychologists call our stress signature.

Certain things help us empty the bucket - like exercise, talking to a friend, working with a coach. But there are other things we think might help, like alcohol or overworrying which block the emptying process.

### **3. ACTIVITIES WHICH BRING US JOY AND CALM**

#### **What is genuine self-care?**

It's sustainable nurturing which will help make us feel better long term. Real self-care is about getting to the root of our issues and healing ourselves, about committing to look after ourselves as an act of self-respect. I'd like to invite you to value yourself, to appreciate yourself for caring enough to be stressed about a situation and to focus on the things which will open the tap at the bottom of the bucket.

### **Adopt a Regular Stress Management Practice**

- Experiment with mindfulness, meditation, qigong, tai chi, or yoga. Find several stress management strategies that appeal to you
- Journal the effect the various practices have for you
- Try to build stress management into your schedule by practicing as often as possible, preferably daily
- The benefits of stress management can become self-sustaining when practiced regularly

### **Build Stress Management Habits**

- **Give Yourself Permission for Self-Care** - Allow time in your schedule to care for yourself
- **Don't Overschedule** - You needn't say yes to every social engagement, work opportunity, or family obligation
- **Use Lists** - We all have lots to get done every day. Start your day by writing down realistic goals and cross them out as you achieve them

**Unplug** - Think of the enormous freedom this can provide. Limit your exposure to technology.

**Forget multitasking** - The ability to perform multiple tasks at one time is an overrated and newly prized skill; it's not aligned with our still primitive genomes. Science shows that our attention network works best when we focus on one cognitive skill at a time

• **Exercise** - In addition to all of the benefits that we've already discussed, regular exercise (especially outdoors) is an excellent stress reducer

• **Get adequate sleep** - Science clearly demonstrates that adequate sleep improves our mood and ability to respond to stress

### **Reach Out**

• When situational or chronic stress affects your ability to enjoy previously pleasurable activities, eat well, get quality sleep, or simply feel happy; it's time to talk to your doctor.