

Title: Neuroscience of Emotional Stamina and Resilience

<picture of brain>

As I re-read the last paragraph of our Part 2 article 'Navigating the Emotional Roller Coaster' published in the Menopause Matters Spring 2024 issue, I paused. It read, "*Join us next issue as we continue to leverage applied neuroscience to embark on an exploration of how to proactively build emotional stamina and resilience.*"

The journey to building emotional stamina and resilience is often punctuated with that word – *pause*. You will see us weave that word in today's final part, as we offer a summer challenge to boost your efforts to proactively build emotional stamina and resilience. But, before then, let us re-visit what emotional stamina and resilience is and, more importantly, what it is not?

What is emotional stamina and resilience; what is it not?

It is not about *not* feeling any emotion. 'I never get angry,' 'Weak people cry,' 'I am too grown up to be scared,' 'Strong people act, not feel,' are all examples of unhelpful limiting beliefs and behaviours that go against the grain of proactively developing emotional stamina and resilience.

Neuroscience has proven that everything that humans experience first goes through the emotional cortex of the brain (limbic) not the thinking cortex (pre-frontal cortex). Thoughts give meaning to why we feel something. Part of emotional resilience is spotting the emotion before the thoughts come flooding in - because sometimes thoughts come loaded with judgement, self critique and other unhelpful filters. It is about accepting that we will experience all kinds of emotions and use them as intelligent data points.

As women we might have a systemic advantage? We are often in the corporate world or otherwise described as being 'too emotional'. Whilst there is no scientific basis to this, it could be true due to our upbringing and social cues. We can make this our secret weapon. The way to do this is to expand our emotional vocabulary, raise awareness of how our body responds when we experience different emotions and, identify the intelligence it brings to us.

<picture of Plutchik's model>

If you are new to this, keep a journal of emotions; what you felt, how did your body feel in the moment, what triggered you, what did you do. You can refer to various models – for instance Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions, which organises and divides into subcategories the eight basic emotions (joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, anticipation, anger, and disgust).

Emotional stamina and resilience are *not* the ability to ignore feelings of anger, anxiety, or fear. The times when we were angry but did not express it because we did not know how to do so appropriately or, we got stuck into people pleasing. Sounds familiar? How about the belief that a leader showing concerns and fears to team members is not right because no-one wants a leader who shows these emotions? So wrong. We aren't talking about breaking down in front of the team, good leadership is the ability to saying 'this is scary' and taking courageous decisions.

Emotional stamina and resilience is acknowledging our emotions and then choosing to step aside, using a pause. We call this pause a neurological circuit breaker and it gives us

a chance to re-direct what we think and do after having understood what intelligence the original emotion brought with it.

Creating your own and being adept in using neurological circuit breakers is an important skill we teach our clients. Mostly because most of us were never taught how to really deal with emotions! It is not about not being upset about something that triggered it, it is about not letting the upset emotion take over and snowball into anger, frustration, and fury about many other things. It is the skill to perceive, acknowledge, regulate, and learn how to thrive with all our emotions. It can be learnt by everyone.

In addition to some ideas above, here are three actionable ways to proactively build emotional stamina and resilience. Tried and tested they come to you with a summer challenge - each will make this summer sunnier and your life pleasanter than you might imagine.

1. Protect Your Recovery Zone

<picture of Reena>

Two years ago, as menopause began to make deeper inroads on all aspects of my life I experienced intense bouts of anger, frustration, and irritation. This was not the best timing, as I was about to expand my business, and needed to feel mentally and emotionally more stable. I started taking a few days off work every month and staying in an Airbnb in the beautiful English countryside. I did this for six months. The results were dramatic. Those pauses gave me time to breathe and build perspective as I replenished my emotional reserves by spending time with nature.

And so, fast-forward twelve months, I have invested in a static caravan in South Devon, overlooking the sea. It gives me access to a beautiful coastal life where I hope to work from home on a regular basis. Has it made a difference? Well, it is early days and a work-in-progress, but I can sense a part of me relax, knowing I have a space like this available to me to enable me to easily prioritise my recovery zone.

What is a recovery zone, and why is it important?

The recovery zone is when you take a deliberate pause and replenish your mental and emotional reserves – you know you are in this zone when you feel calm, rested, peaceful, relaxed, loved and safe. It does not mean we are not doing anything and sitting around getting bored. It could include hiking, painting, singing, meditation, sleeping, spending time with pets or a loved one. You get the picture. These are activities that use and create anabolic energy characterised with dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin. As we develop regular pauses to access our recovery zone we become mentally and emotionally more agile and resilient.

During menopause we know emotions can often feel frayed. Protecting and amplifying your recovery zone and prioritising it for the next few years is your gateway to minimising the emotional disruption you might be experiencing and building emotional stamina and resilience.

[Summer Challenge: Regularly access Your Recovery Zone activities this summer.](#)

2. Declutter your inner narratives

'Lynne' (not her real name) is a talented, sociable, helpful, smart 40-year-old, who found herself struggling with her mental health as work challenges and daily stresses got to her. She had a desire to break away and do something which is aligned to her passion to help others achieve their dreams and spotlight effective ways to regulate mental health. As we explored her ideas she gained confidence, but somehow struggled to talk to others about her dream project. We talked about her inner critic but something else was blocking her.

As our session progressed, it suddenly revealed itself with almost a pre-teen voice. 'What about my needs?' She cried out in frustration - almost tearfully. We explored further. Her inner child had been banished before she became a teenager, when she became the responsible one as the eldest of four siblings. There was no one to look after her needs. Her new-found insight was a beautiful transformation to see and work with.

There is another internal voice we might wish to cultivate. Some call it intuition. The wise inner voice that speaks to us which we may tend to ignore, side step or suppress by prioritising logic. The voice of reason, of wisdom. The one that we might look back and say - 'I had an intuition about this and I was right...' At this stage of our lives, I lean onto what the Persian poet Rumi wrote - "There is a voice that doesn't use words. Listen."

Nurturing and cultivating the voice of our inner child and intuition is a sure-fire way to give ourselves a strong anchor as we pivot for the best phase of our life - that which is in front of us. As you amplify your inner child voice and intuition, make sure you differentiate it from the inner critic which is a topic we covered in our past articles. They are different and need different skills to address. To begin with, I invite you this summer to take a pause and explore / re-visit your inner child and intuition.

[Summer Challenge: Write two essays \(circa five hundred words each\) with the title 'what does my inner child have to say about my past, present, future or a particular challenge I am facing?' In the second essay replace the words *inner child* with *intuition*.](#)

3. Saying No

<picture of 2x2>

Recently I posed the question to a group of talented women working in a FTSE 500 company : 'Where can you begin to 'say no' to in order to create more time and energy for yourself?' Some of them looked like a deer caught in headlights as their minds scrambled over task lists, work projects, and the emotional needs of family that need priority attention and cannot be said no to. I used a matrix to help them gain clarity and saw the results I always get to see - a deep sense of relief, hope and empowerment. Try it for yourself.

Draw a simple two-by-two matrix giving you four squares. In the first square, write 'People', in the second, write 'Work/personal projects', third 'Behaviours/ Habits' and the last one, 'Thoughts'. Answer the questions below with no judgement and make a note of your answers in your matrix.

- Who are the 'People' you would like to say no to - in small or large measures? While some people will nourish us, many tend to suck our energies with either time or emotional mind-space. Without explaining or judging write down next to it - what emotions do you feel when you spend time with this person/ people more than you wish to. It may be the same or different for different people.

- Similarly, is there any work or personal projects that can be delegated or moved into 2025 or winter 2024? What are your current emotions around them? Stressed, Angry, Anxious, Lethargic, inertia?
- How about behaviours? Some are like 'sand' - the small, tiny bits that takes up lots of time - emails, social media, too much Netflix etc. Things that feel fun and give us a dopamine kick but can lead to stress due to tiredness, delayed deadlines or wasted time.
- In the last square jot down any thoughts that you wish did not exist - the inner gremlin that says a version of '*you are not good enough for that <promotion, recognition, love, attention>*' or, the 'I shoulds,' 'I musts,' and 'I have tos' in our lives. How do you *feel* when these thoughts fill your mind?

Saying No can be real challenge for many women I coach and decluttering the landscape and articulating the emotions is a powerful first step to training yourself to differentiate between saying yes and saying no. The next step is to take action.

Summer challenge - Prepare and have a courageous conversation with someone you have to 'say no' in the People / Work projects box. Pick one which feels easy.

Closing remarks

Is that all? Depends on the question. If it was as originally posed - *how to proactively build emotional stamina and resilience*, these three powerful techniques will give you the mental and emotional space to make significant choices, progress and notice a positive difference. With practice comes the gifts of emotional intelligence. This is a marathon, not a sprint and we do want to give you a rousing start with our neuroscience lens.

Good luck with our Summer Challenge. Wishing you well.