

# The Mental Fitness Challenge

Overwhelming stress levels sap teams of emotional strength, but leaders can develop a training regime for positive thinking

By Barbara Kay, LPC, RCC, TIPC



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**“BARBARA, I MADE A SIMPLE REQUEST,** and a team member launched into a tirade. I had you in my head, so I didn't escalate, but it's not resolved. Help me figure out what to do.”

“Barbara, last week, a colleague burst into my office and threw a temper tantrum. I knew not to react, but he just kept going and going. How do I handle outbursts?”

## What Is Going On?

This is not the first time I've written about leading overly stressed professionals and teams, but sadly the trend is not improving. The American Psychological Association (APA) conducts an annual Stress in America survey. The 2023 survey results are sobering:

Americans with stress-related ailments continue to rise:

- 66 percent now suffer from chronic health conditions
- 37 percent have a mental health diagnosis

Relief is not coming:

- 47 percent wished they had someone to help with their stress
- 61 percent said they are expected to “just get over it”
- 62 percent don't share because they don't want to be a burden

People are clearly suffering. The big question is why are we still struggling?

## Why Are We Still Struggling?

The short answer is mental habits. In the 1950s, psychologist and psychotherapist Albert Ellis observed that beliefs are the source of emotions and behaviors, good or bad. Building on Ellis, recent trauma research has found that events plus perception determine recovery. That is not to downplay the seriousness of traumatic events. Instead, it is good news. Individuals who experience trauma are not doomed to a traumatized future. In addition, modern imaging technology allows neuroscientists to watch the brain in action. We now know the brain is highly dynamic.

Since the 2007 study on Tibetan monks (Tenenbaum 2007), there's been an explosion of research on the positive or negative impact of cognitive habits. The neurologists summarize this effect with the phrase, "Neurons that fire together, wire together." In other words, mental habits literally restructure the brain.

In summary, the psychological, resilience, and neuroscience research shows:

- Our thinking habits physically change brain structures
- Chronic negative thinking creates a hardwired loop of negative emotions and behaviors

## **“Notably, the neurologists found that a brain habituated to angry reactions has a lower tolerance for everyday irritations.”**

Notably, the neurologists found that a brain habituated to angry reactions has a lower tolerance for everyday irritations. The same is true for people who are morose or anxious. Essentially, people train their brains to perpetuate a cycle of negative emotions.

To stop the cycle, we need to go to the source of the problem: critical self-talk. Ellis observed, and modern research confirms, that humans over-focus on the negatives. We default to criticizing ourselves, others, and circumstances with constant mental editorializing.

When I work on mental habits with coaching clients, I encourage them to pay close attention to the ongoing commentary in their heads. Universally, people are amazed at the nastiness of their thoughts. The internal critic blames self, others, and situations in a rotating drip of critique. The worst is often self-criticism, but other people and circumstances are targeted as well. Terrible, awful, failure, idiot, jerk, and dummy are common judgments. This chronic drip of negativity is toxic and greatly

diminishes our effectiveness.

Fortunately, this is entirely voluntary. We can continue with unhealthy cognitive habits or train the brain to build positive emotions, experiences, and outcomes. Like the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, positive mental habits deliver powerful advantages. The first step is to uncover the culprit.

### **How Are We Doing?**

Like I suggest to coaching clients, notice the negativity. Start with yourself. Ask yourself the following questions:

- When I encounter a challenge, what do I say to myself?
- How much time do I spend negatively critiquing myself, others, and circumstances?

Be honest and write it down. Over a few days, you will notice patterns. Frequently, the stream of criticism is more chronic than expected.

Then, turn your attention to your team.

- What's the percentage of positive comments?
- How much talk is about irritations or difficulties?
- What's the atmosphere across the office?

### **Consider the Impact**

Similar to loss aversion, which is the tendency for people to exaggerate potential losses, people also exaggerate negative commentary. It takes three positive comments to counteract the damage of a single criticism (Robinson 2020). In addition, our brains are hardwired to focus on potential threats. As a result, the human default is to notice and over-focus on the negatives, internally and externally. In over 20 years of coaching, I find that people overwhelmingly default to negative mind-chatter about self, others, and circumstances. Unless your team is sincerely positive 75 percent of the time, they're suffering from negative toxicity.

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### What Do I Do?

We can rewire the brain to diminish the natural tendencies. The scope of this column is too limited to outline a complete brain training regime, but I can share several proven individual and team techniques:

#### *Individual Techniques*

**Stop the poison.** Many people have little awareness of their chronic negativity. The first step is to uncover your mental habits. After noticing any negative mind chatter, ask yourself: Is this perspective helping or hurting me? It's easy to cling to harmful mindsets. Being right, feeling indignant, blaming, and complaining are normal defense mechanisms. They feel good but are counterproductive. Don't be fooled by your inner critic's desire to sit in negativity.

**Shift thinking.** Craft a perspective that points to a positive. The negative mindset will keep repeating, as old habits die hard. The way to defeat the habit is to consistently replace the old viewpoint with a positive perspective. This will take persistence. I often deploy the cartoon trope of the "devil on one shoulder and the angel on the other." The "devil on your shoulder" does not want to give up territory. But consistently firing positive neural pathways will rewire your brain.

#### *Team Techniques*

**Leadership first.** Emotional contagion is a real thing. Humans are hardwired to detect friends or foes instantaneously and unconsciously. Negative emotions bleed into the atmosphere setting up a chain reaction across the team. The first step in shifting the team is to attend to leader attitudes. Platitudes will not placate a team that feels negative contagion from leadership. Even worse, the disconnect between the sunny words and the sour attitudes increases suspicion and decreases trust.

Practicing positive mindset techniques is the first priority for leaders. It'll deliver immediate personal and team benefits.

**Acknowledge challenges.** Adam Grant (2024) recently wrote an insightful article about the downside of over-optimism. Although well-intentioned, unrealistic optimism is a form of gaslighting. It implies the team is hallucinating. Not surprisingly, this approach backfires badly. Instead, acknowledge any challenges. People need to feel understood before they can move on.

**Solve problems with head and heart.** Moving forward positively requires a balanced approach. Shifting too quickly will negate the empathy. Acknowledge and move toward collaborative problem-solving in tandem. Good leaders don't leave acknowledgement behind when searching for solutions. They do both at the same time, all the way through the journey.

**“We can continue with unhealthy cognitive habits or train the brain to build positive emotions, experiences, and outcomes.”**

### Next Steps and Resources

I've outlined well-documented and effective techniques, but long-term change takes practice. I recommend a couple of next steps:

**Get more informed.** The single best book on building a positive mindset is *Positive Intelligence* by Shirzad Chamine. This book summarizes the field of positive psychology and provides practical techniques to train your brain. It's an easy read. This is my first and best recommendation.

**Schedule a call.** I offer every FPA member free coaching. Please take me up on that. Contact me

directly to schedule a call to discuss your interests. I can suggest powerful tools to use with or without coaching.

### Don't Wait

There is much more neuropsychological evidence than I can outline in a brief column, but there is a good analogy for the power of brain training. Imagine the immediate relief of removing a 200-pound backpack off your shoulders. You'd feel better, do better, and accomplish more instantaneously. Don't wait. ■

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