

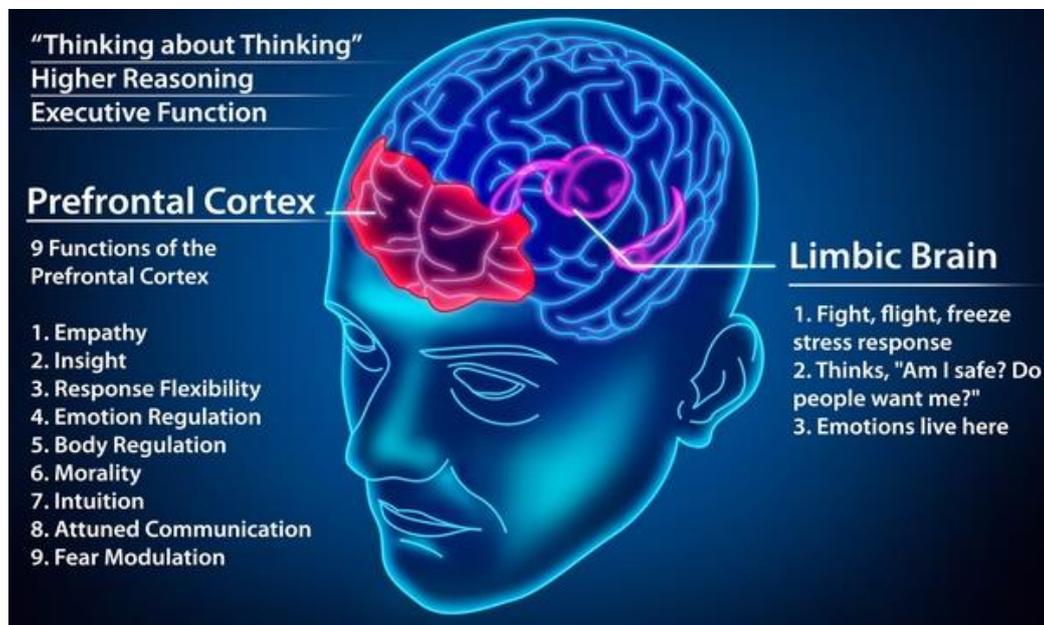
## Life after lockdown

*(Please note this CareMail refers to previous CareMails. If you don't have 'the set' you can download any or all of them at [www.ruthdines.com/caremail](http://www.ruthdines.com/caremail))*

So how can we manage our stress and anxiety, and our fears about the future, whilst we re-engaging with a new world?

I thought it would be helpful to start with a simple explanation of what happens to our mind and body when we are feeling anxious, upset or even scared and fearful. Once you have a better understanding of what is going on inside you, and why you are feeling the way you are, you can then better manage your emotions and learn to calm yourself.

### The Brain Simplified (or Brain 101)



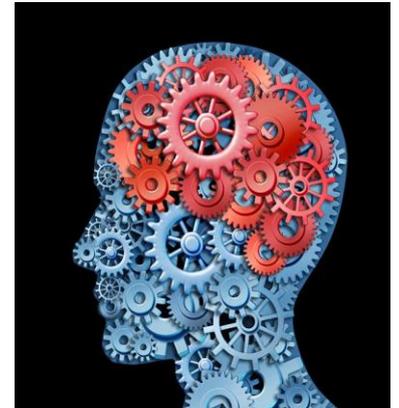
There are lots of technical and formal definitions describing different parts of the brain. Rather than turn this CareMail into "brain surgery 101" let's think simply of the top brain, the middle brain and the bottom brain, and explore a little more about what they do.

**The Top Brain** – This part of the brain enables you to make rational, logical decisions and stay in a more adult, mature place. When the top brain is strong, we are able to think clearly, make good decisions, and be aware of ourselves and others. (It's actually the Pre-frontal Cortex in the above diagram).

**The Middle Brain** – This is the part of the brain that is responsible for our emotions. When you are upset or detect a physical or psychological 'threat' to your safety, your top brain effectively closes down and goes 'offline', your nervous system goes into hyper alert, and your middle brain takes over. It's an involuntary response to danger and you can't control it. An intruder, a bullying boss, or an argument with a friend or family member are just a few examples of what can 'trigger' your middle emotional brain. Which is why when we get upset or scared, we often can't think straight or make logical decisions, this is because our emotions have hijacked our rational, logical top brain, which has temporarily gone offline. The middle brain's response is good because it's your body's automatic survival mechanism, alerting you to danger.

**The Bottom Brain** – With your mind and body now on high danger alert, the bottom brain (located at the bottom of your brain stem) is triggered. This part of the brain controls our bodies vital functions such as our heart rate and body temperature and acts instinctively when you sense danger. It automatically gets your body prepared for the danger by releasing hormones such as adrenaline & cortisol which do one of three things - the 3 F's.

1. **Fight Response** – You experience an adrenaline rush so you can fight off the threat. Body reactions include hyperventilation, palpitations, tense muscles, racing heart and flushed skin.
2. **Flight/Flee Response** – Another adrenaline rush so you have a sudden burst of energy to run away from the danger. The bodies reactions are the same as above.
3. **Freeze Response** – When the fear overwhelms you and you are not able to cope you become paralyzed with fear. This is because sometimes blocking out what's too scary to take in is the best and only thing you can do.



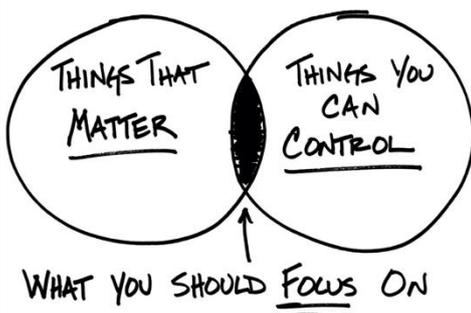
We can use the animal world to explain how the above 3 F's work, and where we, humans got these instinctive primitive responses from. Imagine a deer seeing a lion approach in the bush. The deer's brain senses danger and it then triggers the nervous system to flood its body with adrenaline so it can either run like mad or fight with the lion. Alternatively, it can freeze, which is another instinctive primitive survival response; by staying still it may not get seen by the approaching lion.

Now you have an understanding of why when we are upset, angry or scared our bodies react in the way they do. In the current climate many people will be feeling scared and /or anxious which affects our behaviour, such as our eating and sleeping habits. We can be more tense, less tolerant, less able to make quality decisions and just generally less able to cope. This is because your body is 'feeling' a threat, (at the moment highly likely a threat to our health, security and general wellbeing) and whilst you may be thinking I am OK and not too worried, your body may actually be more anxious than your head is letting on.

With our nervous system on hyper alert mode, or as we say in therapy speak 'dysregulated' everything feels too much - we then go into either hyper arousal mode, anxiety, panic, racing thoughts) or we go into hypo arousal mode where we cannot feel very much at all (numb, empty, apathetic and lethargic).

Below I am going to outline some suggestions on how you can better manage your emotions, and learn to calm your mind and body when you are scared or upset. These tips will be helpful anytime you feel physical or psychological upset and especially now as we all adjust to a new world and a new way of being.

### **Focus on worries you can do something about - and remember one worry at a time**

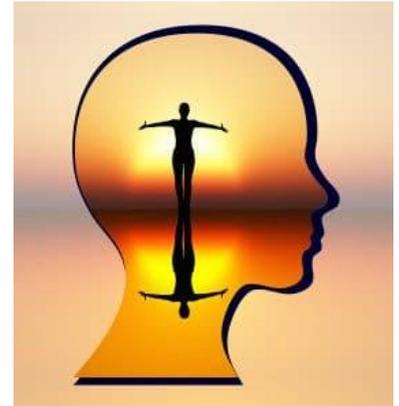


Your current worries might be about work, school, having to go out shopping, even who to see and when. Focus on those things you have some control over and instead of ruminating about the worry be proactive and **do** something, take action so you can be prepared and feel more in charge. Being more proactive and in control of what you can be will ensure you stay in your thinking (top) brain. Doing this will help your nervous system to stay calm so it does not trigger (or sound the alarm) in your emotional brain. With your mind feeling it's in charge and prepared your body can relax a bit more. And wherever practically possible try and address one worry or problem at a time so you are not overwhelmed by having a much larger mountain to climb. Having too much to think about will trigger your emotional brain and you will feel swamped and out of control. This is when your top brain goes off line!

## Managing Your Stress & Anxiety Levels

When you are feeling anxious or stressed please be kind and compassionate with yourself. Remember to be curious so you can explore why you are feeling the way you are. Ask yourself what is my anxiety telling me, what is this migraine or backache saying to me?

Remember all symptoms have a function. When we are stressed or upset our body can often tell us before our head does. These 'symptoms' are trying to tell us something is not right, they are our inner emotional voice and we need to learn to listen to them and respond. Ignoring them will not make them go away!



Let each feeling in and reflect on what that feeling is telling you. Be curious as this will allow you to get in touch with what is going on inside you. The more curiosity and openness you have towards your symptoms the more likely it is that you won't get hijacked by the feeling. This will better enable you to soothe and regulate your inner emotional state.

I want you to become more curious about the language of your body, and your inner emotional world, especially if your feelings are negative or overwhelming.

And what about that critical voice in your head that lacks compassion or empathy for how you are feeling? Trying to get beneath what your 'anxiety' is telling you will be far more helpful to you in understanding your feelings than beating yourself up emotionally. That critical voice is an old one from the past and I promise it's not going to help you, so now is the time to banish it. Shame and blame is not a good teacher. (See CareMail 3 for an exercise you can do).

If you are feeling anxious try and calm your body with some of the exercises in CareMails 1 & 2 and think about what else in your surroundings will make you feel more relaxed. A soothing bath, a soft blanket, a warming scented candle, reading a book or listening to your favourite music.



## Change for The Better

I know we have all coped with change before, but six months ago who could have ever imagined the amount of change we would have to manage and adapt to. Not only have many of us coped well – we've also discovered so many new things about ourselves, our strengths and limitations and what really matters to us in our life. Think about what you coped well with, what you are proud of, and remember these to help build your confidence and add to your list of strengths (See CareMail 7 – Looking at Your Strengths)

## Anger (there's quite a lot of it out there!)

For those of you who are maybe feeling angry – a few words on this powerful emotion.

Anger is often judged as a dangerous and dysfunctional emotional state (I am not talking about destructive aggression here) but actually it can be a useful energy if channelled well – it helps towards social/personal change for a better and brighter life. It tells you something is not right and needs to be addressed.

Anger is useful as it gives the body energy and strengthens the spine so we can stand our ground. It does not have to be harmful or explosive.

So next time you feel angry accept the emotion/feeling as your body's moral compass telling you something is not right. Examine what *feeling* is underneath the anger, maybe it's feeling vulnerable, not heard, or a childhood wound that you have not dealt with. Once you start to think about what is underneath your anger you will not get so caught up in the emotion. Thinking about what you are feeling will help you to go back into your more rational logical 'top' brain (pre-frontal cortex) and move out of 'middle' emotional brain so you can then choose the most appropriate course of action from a more considered and thoughtful place. By the way one of the best ways of getting back into your thinking rational brain when you are upset and emotionally triggered is to count down from 100!

And remember not all hurts are injustices or intentional – but thinking will make them so!

### The Positives (you know I love the positive bits!)

Can you think about what have been the positive aspects of lockdown?

Reflect on what has changed for you during lockdown that you have liked and enjoyed and plan how you can continue to have them in your life. Think about these as the new foundations of your life, enhancing what was already good

### Silver Lining

Lockdown has been an opportunity to review your own needs and limits - what you will and won't accept for yourself and from others – now plan to integrate these into your new, post-lockdown world.

### Quote of the Month

