

107. How to Turn off Your Work Brain and Stop Thinking About Work at Home

Vanessa 00:00

Welcome to the Empowered brain, the only podcast using science, psychology and coaching to help you rewire your brain and create a life you love with your host, Dr. Vanessa Calderon, a Harvard grad physician, master coach, and mother of two.

Hello, welcome back to the podcast, we are on episode 107. And today, I'm going to teach you how to turn off your work brain, and how to stop thinking about work at home. This problem is incredibly universal. So let me share some examples. And I want to know if any of these sorts of resonate with you. Let's say you are on a date with your significant other. And instead of paying attention to what they're saying, you're thinking about work, or you're on a date with your significant other. And while they're talking to you, you're thinking, can they just hurry up and finish what they're saying?

So I can get back to thinking about work? Or what about you getting ready to get your kids ready for bed? And they're taking forever to brush their teeth and to shower and you just get so frustrated and angry during bedtime. And it doesn't show up as anger yelling at them. But it shows up as maybe some rushed energy like urgency like Hurry up, hurry up, let's get to bed to brush your teeth. Because you want to get them to bed and get back to work, or start thinking about work. So we all have these moments. And there are these moments when we're sort of in this state of hyper-vigilance. Now you can call that, you know, at the very base foundation of it, it's a moment of stress. But for you, you might call it anxiety, you might call it overwhelmed, you might call it frustration. But hypervigilance at its base is a moment of our stress response going off.

So I'm gonna share with you how it would consistently show up for me. So way back before I was really connected to my brain to my body, I would have these moments where I would finish work on Friday, and I had the weekend off, and I wasn't going to work clinically. And I had already told myself this was you know, after working after being a physician leader for so many years and working through the weekends in the hospital, but not giving myself days off and continuing to work through the week. I am I had given myself grace and said, Okay, I'm gonna be really intentional about my weekends, and I'll work on weekends, I can be home with my family.

So when it would be my weekend off, and I wasn't working clinically and Friday would come up. And I knew I wasn't going to have a moment to work the next day because I'd already told myself that I wasn't going to work on weekends, I could be present with my family. So Friday at 5 pm, I'm closing everything up, like shutting down my laptop. And all of a sudden I would get this feeling in my chest, it would be like this pressure sensation in my chest. And I never knew what it was because I was so disconnected. But what it would lead me to do as we are driving to pick up our kids, and I just like wouldn't be present in the conversation in the car. And we do this thing at our home where we do take out Friday, so we go

out to dinner on Friday night. So we pick up the kids and we're driving to dinner and I wouldn't be present. And I would be looking out the window thinking about all the stuff that I didn't get done or that I need to do. And sometimes I would just take long, deep breaths. Because I had this feeling in my chest and I wanted to get it out. And again, I wasn't present as to what it was what was causing it. And then we'd get to dinner.

And during the conversation, I just wouldn't be present. And sometimes I'd have moments of presence where I would like, you know, engage and talk or whatever. But I'd go back to that feeling. And I would feel all of that through Saturday, and then come Sunday at about, you know, noon or 2 pm I'd finally start feeling better, the pressure would go away and I'd start feeling better. And next thing I know it's time to go to bed and get ready for the week. And so I spent my entire you know, weekend almost having this sensation in my body when not being able to be present.

And one Friday night, I had this moment of awareness. So it's the same thing again, I'm closing everything up. I have this feeling in my chest. And we're getting in the car, my husband and I to go pick up the kids from school to do our regular takeout Fridays. And we are having pizza. So we're at the pizza place and we're sitting outside because it's a beautiful day. And I have this feeling in my chest still and I was like Goodness gracious like what is that? So I excused myself because I had to go wash my hands anyway, and I get up to go wash my hands. And when I'm in the bathroom, I just pause and I What am I feeling? So I put my hand over my chest. And I asked myself like, what is this? Like? What am I feeling? What is this pressure in my chest? What am I thinking? And I realized that what I was feeling was overwhelmed, I was feeling a feeling of overwhelm. And that for me was how my hypervigilance would show up for you and might be anxiety, or you might just call it stress, or you might call it frustration.

But for me, I would call it overwhelm, I was feeling this feeling of overwhelm, because I had this thought in the back of my head, that I didn't get enough done throughout the week that I had all these things I still needed to do. And that now I wasn't going to have a chance to do them over the weekend. And that would carry with me all Saturday, and most of Sunday. And what it would lead to is me essentially not being present with my family, I would sit with them, but I would be thinking about all these other things. And it's not like it was like that all the time, I would have these moments of awareness, you know, or to have these moments where I'd want to be present with them. But I still go back to that underlying feeling that I didn't get enough done. And that right, there is what I want to help you shift from, because for so many of us, we carry these ideas, that we're not getting enough, done and that we always have to think about work.

And really what's underneath that our thoughts are like, if I'm not thinking about it, I won't be prepared. Or if I think about it, it'll help me be more prepared, or I'll get more done. So a lot of the students that I've worked with, and a lot of my clients, when they're in the state of hypervigilance when they're thinking about work, when they're at home, and there's no work to be done. They have thoughts like, I don't want to drop the ball, I need to always be responsive, I have to stay on top of everything. And that those are the thoughts that keep them from being present. So you know, when they're at a baseball game with their kids, instead of being present at the baseball game, they're having all of these thoughts in the back of their mind.

Because ultimately, they think that if they're not always thinking about work, then something's going to fall through, or that they're not doing a good enough job, or they're not giving enough. And I want you to take a second right now and ask yourself, when you're in those states of hypervigilance, what are those thoughts that you're having? Because for most of us, we think that thinking about work is going to help us get the work done. We think that stress is helping us be more productive, and is helping us be better at what we're supposed to be doing. But what I want to sort of introduce you to here is what's actually happening, when you're having that feeling of stress, when you're having that overwhelm. When you're having thoughts like, oh, I need to be thinking about work, because I don't want to fail. Or I don't want you know, to drop the ball, what you're actually feeling. Think about it, what are you actually feeling? What you're actually feeling or feelings of anxiety, feelings of fear, feelings of disappointment. That's what you're actually feeling. And when you're feeling anxious, afraid, or disappointed, what are the actions that you think you take?

I'll tell you right now, it's not actions that are going to drive you to be more productive, it's usually rumination, it's usually not being present, it's usually like being frustrated or angry. And when you think about that, what I want you to see is when you're coming from those unintentional feelings of anxiety, of fear of disappointment, it's going to lead to an unintentional result. It's doing the opposite of helping you be more productive, it's making you less productive, less present, and less able to give to the people in your life. So notice how those thoughts that I just mentioned all those thoughts of fear, anxiety, and disappointment, notice how all those thoughts are fear-based. And I label them as fear-based because what I want you to see is when we're experiencing any sense of a fear-based emotion, frustration, anxiety, disappointment, fear, any of those feelings overwhelm, which was a big one for me when that's happening, what's actually happening chemically in your brain, is that you're triggering your human stress response, also known as the fight or flight response.

Now, I talk in detail about the human stress response in Episode 99 of the podcast. So if you want to know more details, go back to that. But let me just sort of summarize it here. The human stress response is incredible. It's hardwired for acute stress. It's the reason why we've been able to be so resilient and stay alive for so many years. And the human stress response goes is off. When we're in danger, we have a gun to our heads, we're being chased by a bear, and our human stress response is gonna go off.

However, the human stress response doesn't just go off with actual threat. It also goes off with perceived threats. So anytime we're perceiving fear or perceiving danger, you see where I'm going here. When you have these feelings of anxiety, fear disappointment of frustration, the signal it sends to your brain is I am perceiving fear, I'm perceiving a threat. And that by itself triggers your human stress response. So the human stress response in our brain, the fear center, the amygdala turns on and sends a signal to our hypothalamus, which releases a bunch of hormones, ultimately, cortisol and cortisol that steroid travels to our entire body and tells our body to react to stress. It says to turn on the fight or flight response, something's happening to react to stress. It's the reason why I felt that pressure in my chest, it's the reason why you can't focus. It's the reason why your palms might get cooler, and sweaty when you're about to speak in public.

It's the reason why you lay down to go to sleep, but you can't turn off your brain, you keep thinking about all these things, and you're in this state of hyper-vigilance because your brain does not think it's safe. Alright, so how can we deal with this? So what is it that we can do when these things are happening to us? So the very first thing I want you to think about it, I want you to think about why it's important for you to be present, why it's important for you to turn off that state of hypervigilance and be present. Take a moment right now and answer that for yourself. Why is it important for you? I'll tell you, for me, it really matters to me, because I want the people that I love to know that I love them. And for me, I show them that by being present, by being respectful to them to the things that they have to say by listening to them, by showing them that I love them. So it's important for me that the people that I love, know that I love and care about them. And respect really matters to me.

So I want to be respectful of others. For me, you know, it also matters because I don't want those negative health effects of chronic stress. And that's what happens when you're allowing your body to consistently be hyper-vigilant, and always think about work, what's happening is you're having that stress response going off all of the time in your body. So you are essentially going to experience all of the negative health effects of chronic stress. Things like weight gain, you know, autoimmune rashes, so if you experience eczema or psoriasis, it's going to flare up, when you're chronically stressed out, poor sleep at night, muscle aches, you know, sore back, all of those things tend to be manifestations of chronic stress. And for some of you, this might be one of the biggest reasons why it matters. Because when you're in the state of hypervigilance, it's actually harder for you to be more effective to be really productive, focused, creative, innovative, because what's happening is those states of hypervigilance take us out of our prefrontal cortex and put us in our primitive part of our brain.

Because it thinks that we need to always be on always be thinking, and it moves us away from being focused from being effective from being creative. So for all of those reasons, come up with your own reasons, but there are a few that matter to a lot of people and some that really matter to me. Alright, so now that you've sort of answered that question for yourself, why does it matter to you? The second thing I want you to do is I want you to notice how it feels for you when you start to be unfocused when you start to go into that state of hypervigilance.

For me, my trigger was what it would do to my body. Like, I knew that I had that pressure in my chest, and that was a sign. And that was, you know, I don't know, 10 years ago or so before I started doing a lot of this work. But what does it feel like now for me? For me, it's I have this like rushed energy, like, I gotta get going, I gotta do the next thing. That's what it feels like to me. Now. I don't have that pressure in my chest anymore. But I have this rushed sense of this energy. So I want you to answer that for yourself. How does it feel for you when you become hyper-vigilant or unfocused or less present? Get really clear as to what that energy feels like in your body. Maybe you have you know, this discomfort in your stomach, maybe have a pressure in your chest. Maybe you're starting to feel cloudy, like a clogged mind. Or maybe you know, you just have that sense of urgency like I'd Okay, once you get clear, and the reason why it's important to get clear is that our human stress response is so hardwired, that it starts taking action even before you've had a chance to process what's happening.

So this is a habit, this is happening so fast, it's already in motion, even before you've had a chance to process it. And sometimes the only cue we have to turn it off is what our body's doing. So for me, I used

to know that when I felt that pressure in my chest, that was my cue that I was experiencing the stress. Or now it's like when I'm feeling that sense of urgency, that's my cue. So what is going to be your cue for you? So, once you notice that, I'm gonna give you a few tools that you can start using now. Okay, number one, the first tool is what's called noticing. I've talked about this a lot on the podcast because it's so effective. And noting the practice of noting goes something like this, I noticed that I'm feeling pressure in my chest, I noticed that I'm feeling urgent, I noticed that I'm not being present. That tiny little exercise is a huge moment of awareness. What that does is it allows you to practice, practice mindfulness, right there in real-time, by having the ability to notice what your thinking brain is doing and bring yourself back to the present moment. That's what noting does. It's so simple, and it is so effective. So practice, noting number one, and notice what your body's doing.

Notice what you're thinking, and really separate your core self from that by saying something like, I noticed that I'm feeling pressure in my chest, or I noticed that I'm thinking about inquiry up, or I noticed that I'm feeling frustrated. Okay, once you do that, once you notice, sometimes all you need is that note, and then you're right back in the moment, and you're good. But if that noting isn't enough, then the next thing you can do is you can practice something called self-regulation. So self-regulation allows us to regulate our body and decouple that stress response, turn off the stress response, and bring us back to the present moment. So episode 94, I give you a ton, I think like 10, super simple, highly effective tools that you can use for self-regulation. So go to that episode and listen to it. And I'll share one with you now. So one of the things that have super so formed this is what I still use habitually is four-by-four breathing. So four by four breathing, just really simple. Imagine four sides of a box, with every side of the box, you're going to do one thing for four seconds. With the first side, you inhale. With the next part of the box, you hold your breath, and then you exhale, and then you hold your breath. So four seconds, inhale, four seconds, hold your breath, four seconds, exhale, four seconds, hold your breath. So picture the fourth sense of the box. And that's what you do. Now, your cue, when you start the inhale, your cue, you start the inhale when you notice what's happening to your body. So the second you know, you catch yourself triggered, you catch yourself in that hyper-vigilant state, and you start the inhalation. And while you're holding your breath, what you want to do is notice what your body's doing. So for me, it's like, oh, I noticed that I'm having this pressure in my chest.

So notice what your body's doing. And then during the exhalation, as you're breathing out, that turns on your relaxation response. So that right there turns on your parasympathetic nervous system, which is the relaxation part of your body. And what that does, when you're breathing out is you're relaxing your entire body. So what do you want to do when you're exhaling you want to relax your body returning to neutral, so I usually just like put my hands at the side of my body, I relaxed my jaw, I put clenching my jaw. So whatever it is that your body's doing, that's you, that's your opportunity to relax your body, and return it to neutral. And then for the last four seconds, as you're holding your breath, you just acknowledge yourself, you just cheer yourself on, give yourself a little celebration for catching that moment and for being willing to shift. So that's one exercise one self-regulation, exercise, and episode 94. I give you a ton more.

So go to Episode 94, if you found that helpful, but I also give you other tactile visuals and other things in case breathing isn't something that sort of serves you. Alright, so you practice noting, if that's enough, great, if not use one of those self-regulation tools. I still use four-by-four breathing, but there are so

many more that are fantastic. And then number three is I want you to come up with an anchor thought, a thought that sort of resonates with you and is going to bring you back to the moment. Call it a mantra if you will. But essentially what a mantra or one of these thoughts is it's an intention that you're setting to be present. And the reason why these thoughts or these mantras work is because intentionality works. Now again, intentionality has been practiced for centuries outside of the Western world, and the Western world doing what it does best studying, you know, ancient wisdom to try to prove that ancient wisdom works, which is you know what, maybe they're not trying to prove that works, they're just showing us how it works. It's gonna be my new top.

So ancient wisdom, you know, has been practicing intentionality forever. And what we've seen in the early 90s, when we started doing functional MRI studies with intentionality is, when you practice an intention, it Prime, your brain to do what you're telling it to do. So in this instance, you come up with an anchor thought, a thought that's going to bring you back to the moment that you can just sit with. So I'm going to share a few with you, but I want you to come up with one that resonates with you. But feel free to use one of these, if they serve you. Here's one, be here now. Or this is what matters. I'm exactly where I need to be. Or it's going to be okay. It's gonna be okay, that's a big one.

Because for so many of us, the reason why this fear base response turns on, is because we're afraid that we're going to get judged, we're going to someone's gonna think we're not doing a good enough job. You know, we have all these means that like external validation that we've been holding on ourselves, especially if you're a woman, especially if you're a high achiever, especially if you're a woman of color. So that thought like it's going to be okay creates that psychological safety that your brain needs to let go of the hypervigilance. So come up with a thought that resonates for you. And that's what you get to practice. So again, we practice noting, do self-regulation exercise if we need it, and come up with an anchor.

And this, my friends, is what's going to support you in turning off your work brain and being fully present. And again, remember, you're why we do this not because we have to. We do this because we want to, we want to let the people around us know that we love them. We want to create those meaningful relationships. We do it because they deserve it. And we do it because that's what we would want for them to do for us. We want them to be present for us. We do it because well worth it. It's worth it to us. You know, like we're worth coming. Our brains were worth turning it off. We don't always have to be working. We don't always have to be thinking about those things. Just who you are in this moment is enough. All right, sweet friends have a wonderful week.

Hey, sweet friends, if you love what you're learning, then you've got to join us in the journey. It's my all inclusive program and the best community out there giving you the education you never knew you needed to help you create a life you love. Join us at VanessaCalderonmd.com/join. I'll see you there.