

UNDERSTAND YOUR BRAIN



"Teaching people about their brain has a profound effect on their ability to understand themselves and understand others, making them far more effective at what they want to achieve."- David Rock, Cofounder and Director of the NeuroLeadership Institute

As emergency managers we are accustomed to pushing through nonstop, despite the impacts to mental, physical and overall health. **"IT'S JUST WHAT YOU DO."** **"YOU JUST RUN ON ADRENALINE."** These are the silent mantras and expectations we set for ourselves, our peers, and our subordinates—not by deliberate intent, but mostly by example. We feel there is no choice. But we must **RE-IMAGINE AND RE-THINK** these old ideas and beliefs. We have no choice. The pace is too much and the cost is too high. Continuous stress can physically rewire your brain—and not in a positive way. For example, shrinking of activity in the Prefrontal Cortex and Hippocampus (higher brain), and growth in the Amygdala (primitive brain), leads to increased reactivity, and compromises decision-making ability and performance.

Neuroplasticity allows us to undo some of that damage. **YOU CAN ACTUALLY TEACH YOUR BRAIN HOW TO BE STRONGER, TO UNDO SOME OF THIS DAMAGE, AND BE MORE RESILIENT TO STRESSORS.** The good news: It's not one more thing on your plate. Simple steps can yield big results.

STRATEGY 2: UNLEASH THE POWER OF CALM AND CREATIVITY

Recent studies find that engaging in creative activities reduces cortisol levels (the stress hormone) and improves mental health and resiliency. Like physical exercise, creative stimulation engages and focuses the mind differently and distracts from feelings of stress and anxiety. Our brains are hardwired for novelty, and introducing even small changes or experiences, stimulates dopamine release (the "feel good" hormone). The novelty center of the brain is closely linked to the hippocampus, which plays major roles in learning and memory; and the amygdala which is involved in regulating emotional reaction and control. Novelty can increase the plasticity of the hippocampus, and therefore the potential for improving memory and learning... but how do you leave room for novelty and creativity when the pace feels relentless and never ending?

1

COLLABORATIVE ART: Put up some large pieces of butcher paper, poster board, or canvas roll/sheet if you can get it (Logistics?!) in your Operations Center, at your home office, or other setting. Provide some markers, paints, crayons, or other materials to use throughout the day(s). Draw, write, express feelings. It's not only a way to engage your brain differently, but a way to remember and capture the moment. Idea: Many people/groups save them and frame them, or upcycle into other art forms for display.



2

LEGOS®: Introducing simple Lego® activities into meetings or discussion can change dynamics and open neural pathways. Create 60-second individual and 90-second team challenges. For example, what can you build in under a minute (house, tree, rocket, #Legoduck)? Or, how many different #Legoducks can your team build in 90 seconds?



3

CREATIVITY KIT: Create a kit that you or your team can use for a creativity break. Fill it with activities you can grab for a quick break, such as: notepads for doodling; adult coloring pages or books (lots of free printables online); modeling clay, brain teaser toys (e.g., Rubik's cube, Coogam toys, Legos, etc.), and puzzles.

