

Get your sh!t together

30 tips for an effective 'head plan'

DENNIS HOIBERG*

A client I was coaching recently was outlining his challenges. Certainly, there was a lot on his plate. He appeared almost overwhelmed by the numerous priorities, concerns and worries. After about 40 minutes I asked him; 'Ok – what's the plan?'

The response I got back was akin to that of the kangaroo I hit just outside Jamestown one evening. Regardless of what I did all I got back was a startled, unblinking stare.

This reaction is something I have seen many times in my emotional resilience strategies work: people not having – even not believing it was possible to develop – a plan for how they will cope with challenging times when (not if) they occur.

Everyone needs a 'head plan' that will enable them to deal with the challenges they will encounter.

When it comes to planning I find an absolute paradox in many of my clients, especially those in regional and remote areas. Some of these people are the best planners I have encountered in my professional life. Not only are they good planners, they are excellent contingency planners. They have more plans B, C, D etc than Port Power has avenues to score!

People spend days planning how they will approach the coming season. I see computer projections and project plans setting out what is going to happen when, with things timed to virtually the very minute. But these skills are not applied in other aspects of their lives.

Rural producers and others who have high-level planning skills can quickly learn to apply them to their thinking about themselves and their lives in the same way as they use them in their farming and business activities.

Resilience

Everyone needs a 'head plan' that will

Got your machinery all ready? **Check!**

Got all the material you need for this busy season? **Check!**

Got the workers all organised? **Check!**

Got your mind sorted so you can use your brain – HUH?

enable them to deal with the challenges they will encounter.

Regardless of what happens to you in life, if you have a plan and strategy to implement that plan, most times you will come out of a stress or challenge situation with valuable life experience and often stronger, happier and more resilient. More importantly, you will know that, the next time you are challenged in this way, you will cope and thrive.

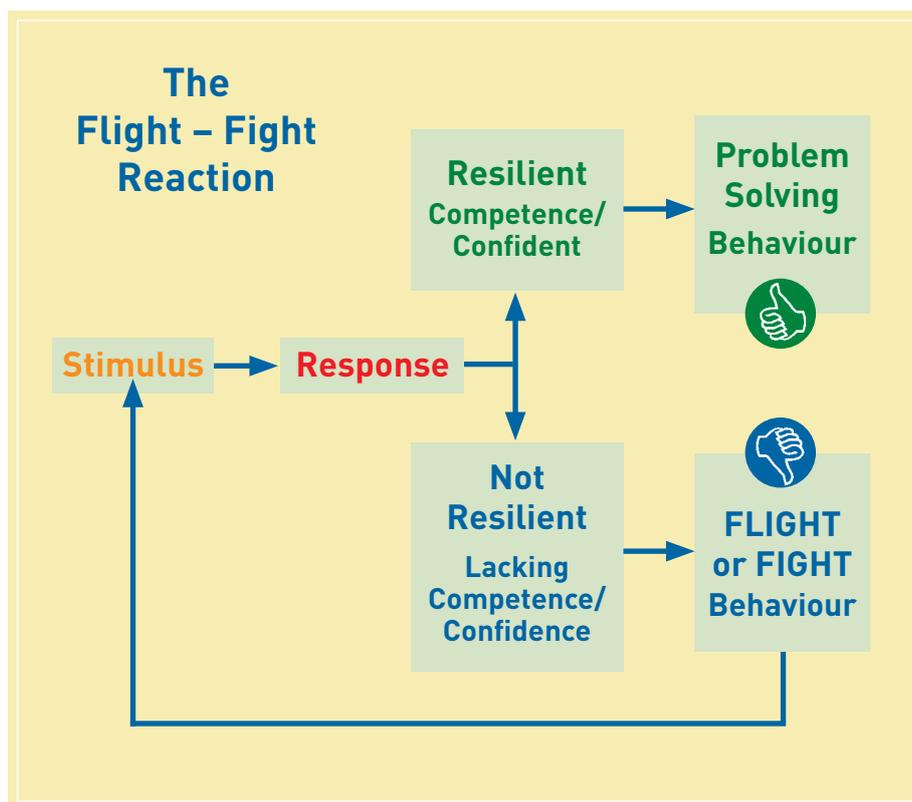
You will never know where the edge of the envelope is until you have a real crack at pushing it!

I frequently use the diagram shown below when helping clients develop a head plan.

It's quite simple. For every stimulus in this world, there is a response. If you are resilient and have the strategies to respond to a particular stimulus, you will display problem-solving behaviour. When you are challenged by the stimulus your response will be a resilience response along the lines of: 'OK, this has happened, so now I am going to do this'. Another version of this response is: 'OK, so this has happened, and while I don't know precisely what I am going to do YET, I know some strategies that will get me through the uncertainty and allow me to bounce forward'.

If you lack the strategies to appropriately respond to the challenge you will display flight or fight behaviours, or freeze because you don't know what to do.

'Flight' behaviours include avoiding the issue, not talking about it, denying the nature of it, even lying to yourself and others about the seriousness of it. Fight behaviour can be characterised as shooting the messenger rather than addressing the message.



Strategy

Before suggesting some resilience strategies, we need to understand how the brain works.

Recently-released books such as ‘The Brain that Changes Itself’, by Norman Doidge, and ‘How to Take Control of Your Brain’ by George Lee Sye, have provided new insights.

We now know that most of us use less than one sixth of the potential power of our brains and run our brains on autopilot. We also know that our brains try to hard-wire everything; to make things predictable. So to improve our productivity we need to start working with **emotions, thinking and habits**.

We also know our brains have a very acute threat-detection system. **The brain loves certainty and adores absolute certainty**. When it doesn't have this certainty the brain feels under threat and the reaction is a flight or fight response; a self-defence mechanism triggered by the brain stimulating a release of chemicals that creates all sorts of imbalances between cortisol, melatonin, serotonin and insulin.

Your ‘brain plan’ requires three rules:

- a rule for ‘concentration’
- a rule for ‘creating certainty’
- a rule for ‘staying cool under pressure’

If you can develop and apply these three rules you will thrive under the pressure that comes with working and living in a rural environment.

There are practical activities you can do to access more of the awesome power of your brain.

CONCENTRATION. To get quicker and better results and effectively tackle tasks that require serious thinking you must develop a **disciplined habit** of removing distractions.

CLARITY is achieved through focus. To achieve clarity:

- Develop a work plan.
- Create and use ‘to do’ lists.
- Tick off achievements (the brain loves achievements as well as focus).
- Remove clutter from your workplace and at home.
- Remove all distractions.
- Ensure other people understand and agree with your focus.

- Get adequate and good-quality sleep.
- Apply 90-minute ‘energy chunks’. Have your mind tell your brain that for the next 90 minutes you are going to focus on this task. Tackle the task for 90 minutes then have a 10-minute break and do the same again.
- Develop and stick with healthy habits.
- If possible schedule short breaks from the pressure; a maximum of four days during busy periods but a minimum of four days in ‘down’ periods.

CERTAINTY. The brain sees **lack of certainty as a threat**, which is why habits are so important.

To create certainty:

- Have a plan.
- Use powerful and positive language – e.g. ‘I am going to ...’, not ‘Maybe, I will ...’.
- In times of stress, ensure everyone around you knows what is going to happen when and who will do what. This is particularly important for members of the family; especially children. Outline schedules and who is picking them up from sport, school, etc. If you are going to be away or unavailable for extended periods ensure people around you know how long you will be involved in the work, when it will be finalised and what sort of celebration will occur when the work load ceases. (This addresses the ‘what’s in it for me’ issue.)
- Monitor your self-talk. How you feel about yourself will influence your words, which will drive your behaviour.
- See change as a positive opportunity (as opposed to a threat).
- Tick off achievements on your ‘to do’ lists.
- Engage with people and where relevant give them control through delegation.
- Be open to new ideas.
- Be open to co-operation and collaboration.
- Where possible engage in team work, but ensure the ‘powergrams’ of effective teamwork are clarified and public.

OUTCOMES. To stay cool under pressure you need to get above the drama, detail and emotion and focus on the **outcome** you want and the next step to take you forward.

To stay calm under pressure:

- Keep reminding yourself why you are doing what you are doing; why the price of the pain is worth the effect.
- Remind yourself of the steps you are taking to achieve the goal.
- Remind yourself of the progress you are making by using to do lists and project plans.
- Remember the value of deep breathing and the positive effect this has on your mental health.
- Go for a walk to calm down, refocus and re-energise.
- Look after your most valuable asset - your health!
- Keep connected with your family, your friends and your community. This brings perspective to your life.
- Keep the brain ‘fresh’ by challenging yourself mentally. Read, do cross words, Sudoku or similar.
- Get quality sleep, keep hydrated (monitor the colour of your urine to ensure you are drinking enough water), have some alcohol-free days (maybe two or three a week) and cut down or quit smoking.
- Seek outside help if you feel you may be ‘going under’.

You will never know where the edge of the envelope is until you have a real crack at pushing it!

If you apply these 30 tips your mind will manage your brain, allowing you to be focused, effective and happy through even the most challenging times.

**Dennis Hoiberg operates the niche consulting company Lessons Learnt Consulting. He works with individuals, families, teams, organisations and communities to help them thrive in periods of change. He hosts monthly webinars on topics around resilience and coping with change. These webinars are free to SANTFA members. More information is available at www.lessonslearntconsulting.com or phone 1300 365 119.*

