



Burnout Prevention Toolkit

Practical strategies to manage pressure and sustain your performance without burnout



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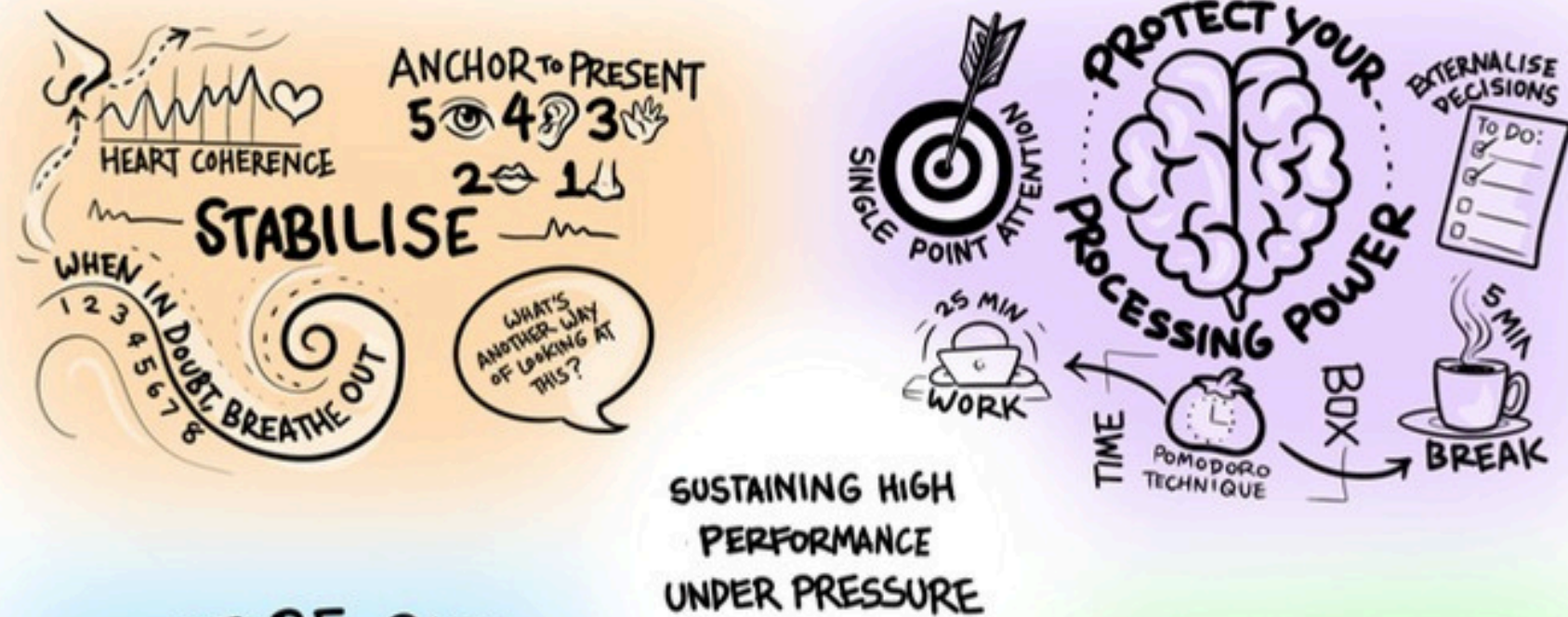
Burnout is predictable—which means it's preventable

This guide is designed to give you simple, actionable tools and strategies to help manage pressure and protect your energy whilst performing well.

By making small, targeted adjustments across four areas, you can stay in a sustainable performance zone.

This toolkit is organised around four ‘control panels’:

• YOUR OPERATING SYSTEM.



- Regulate** – maintaining a healthy baseline
- Stabilise** – manage stress in the moment
- Protect** – reduce cognitive overload
- Restore** – recharge your energy outside work



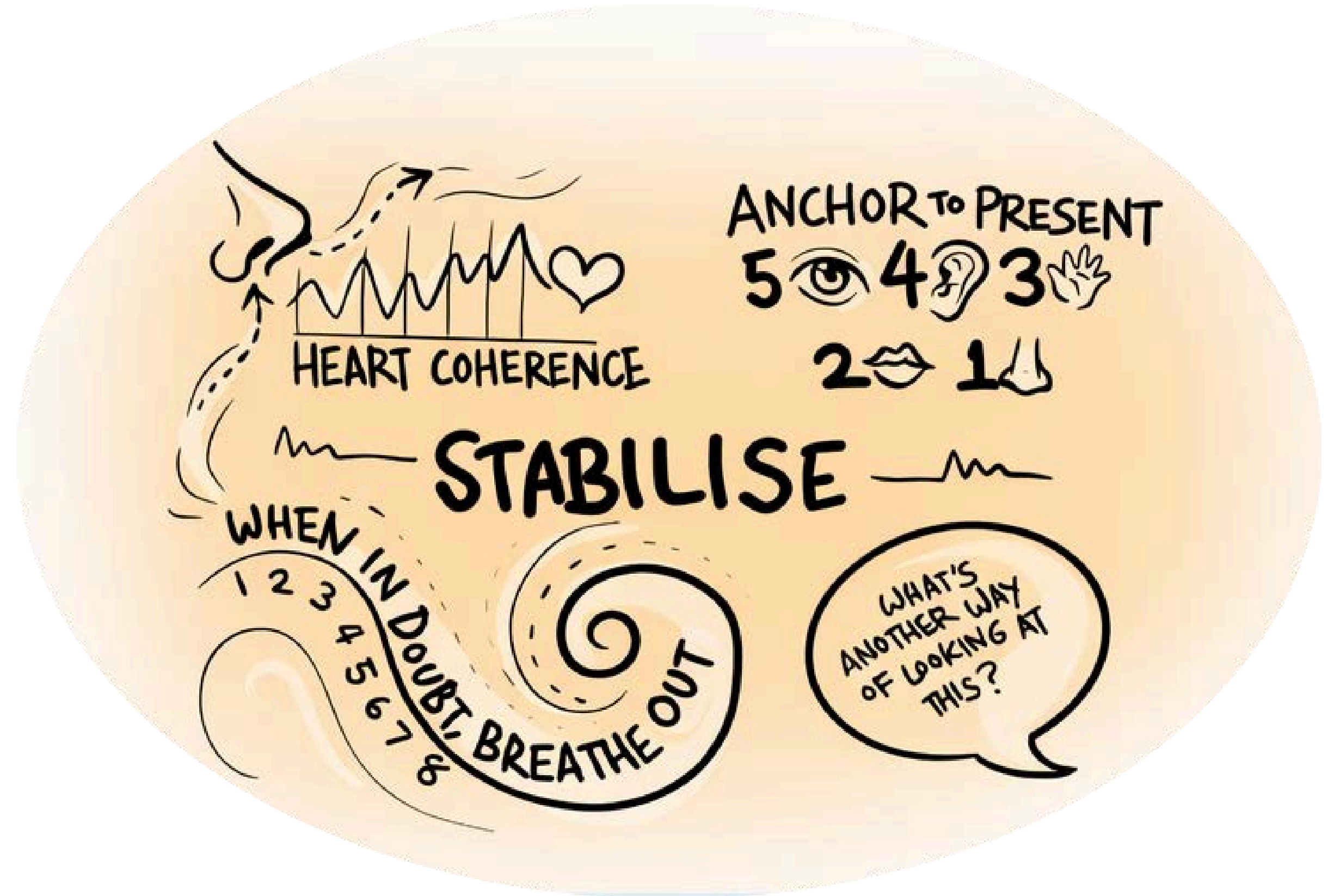
How to use this guide

You don't need to do everything. Start with one area and apply one or two tools consistently.

Small shifts, applied consistently, make the biggest difference.



Key Tools



Physiological Sigh

When to use

When you feel a surge of anxiety or physical stress and need a fast reset

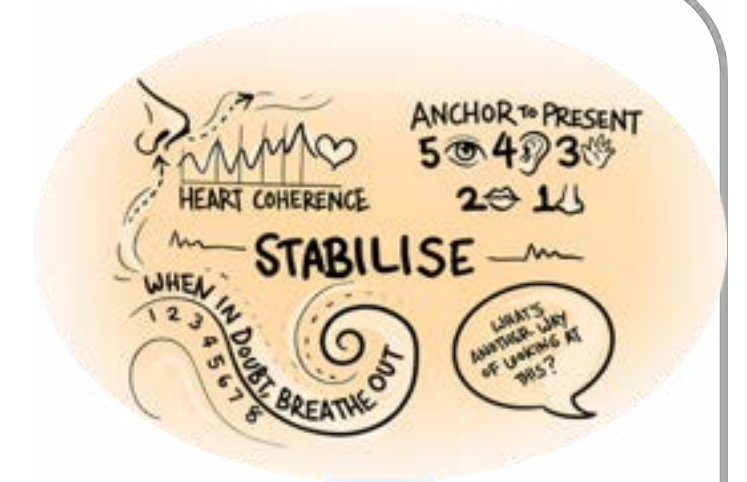
How it helps

Rapidly reduces stress in the body by resetting your breathing and lowering carbon dioxide levels, helping calm the nervous system and bring your thinking brain back online.

What to do

- Take a slow breath in through your nose
- Top it up with a second short inhale
- Slowly exhale through your mouth

Repeat 2–3 times.



When In Doubt, Breathe Out

Box Breathing

When to use

When you feel overwhelmed, stressed or reactive

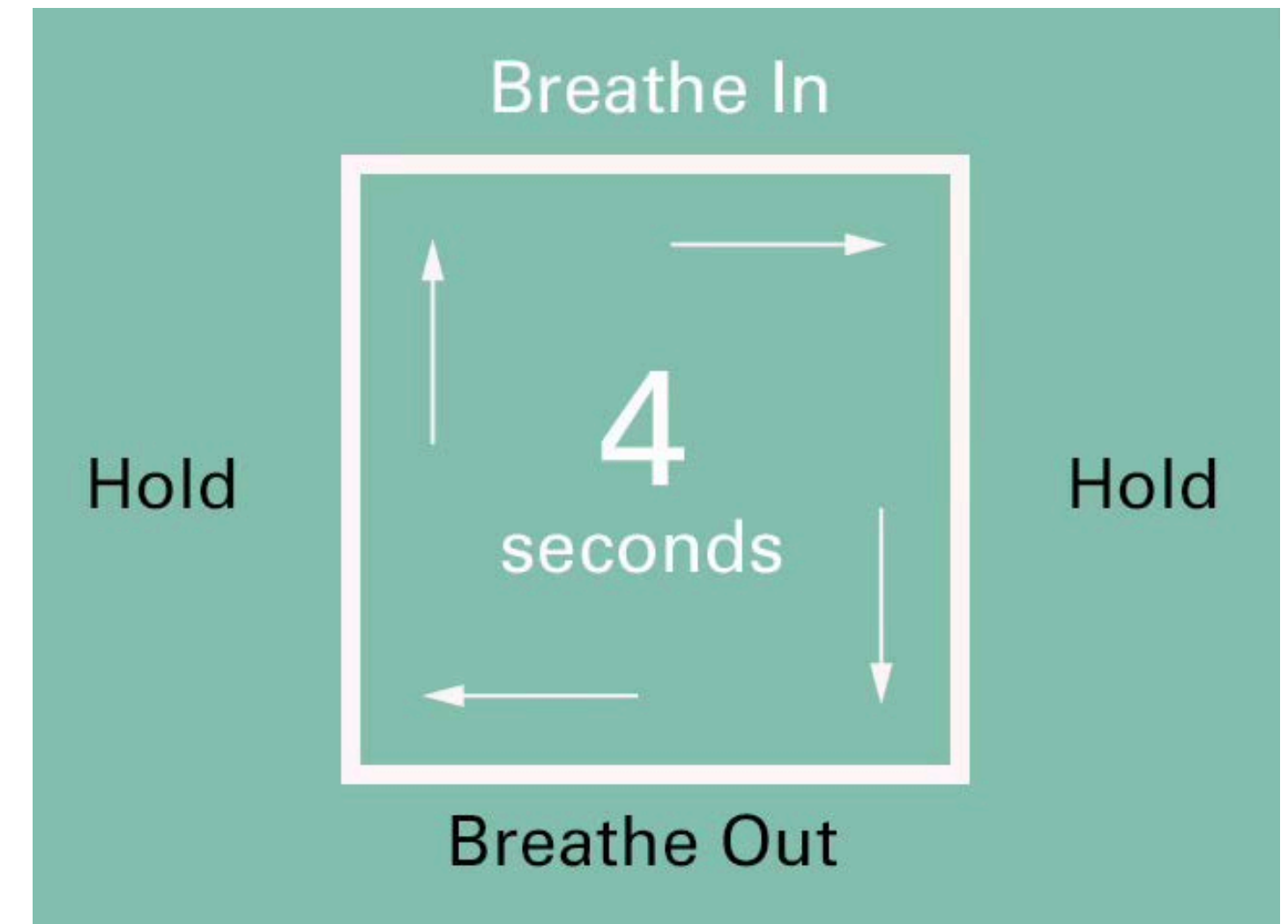
How it helps

Stablises your system under pressure, helping shift you from 'fight or flight' into 'control mode' so you can think and respond clearly.

What to do

- Inhale – 4 seconds
- Hold – 4 seconds
- Exhale – 4 seconds
- Hold – 4 seconds

Repeat 3–5 rounds.



5-4-3-2-1 Grounding

When to use

When you feel anxious, overwhelmed, distracted, or “in your head”.

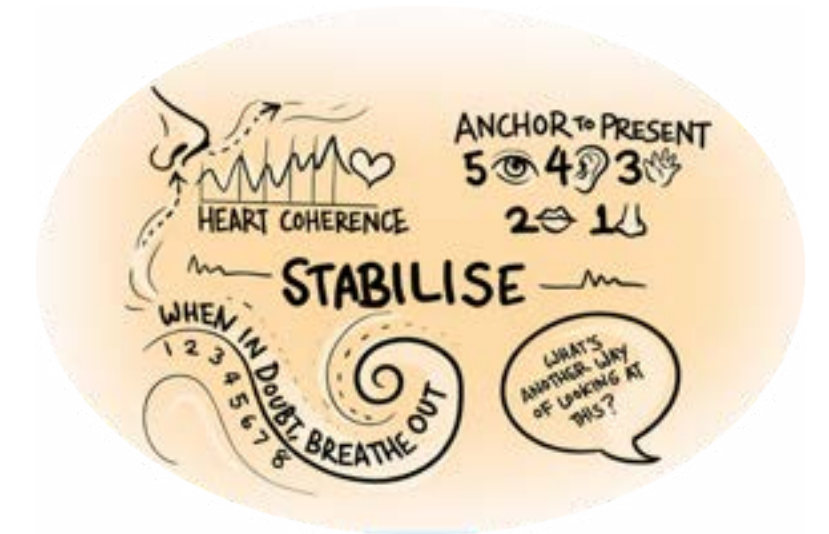
How it helps

Reconnects you with your body and activates your five senses. This brings your attention out of worry and back into the present, calming your stress response.

What to do

Stop what you're doing and name the 5-4-3-2-1 (see right)

Take your time. Notice each sensation fully



5 things you can see



4 things you can hear



3 things you can feel



2 things you can taste



1 thing you can smell

Curiosity Gap

When to use

When you feel annoyed, angry or frustrated by something

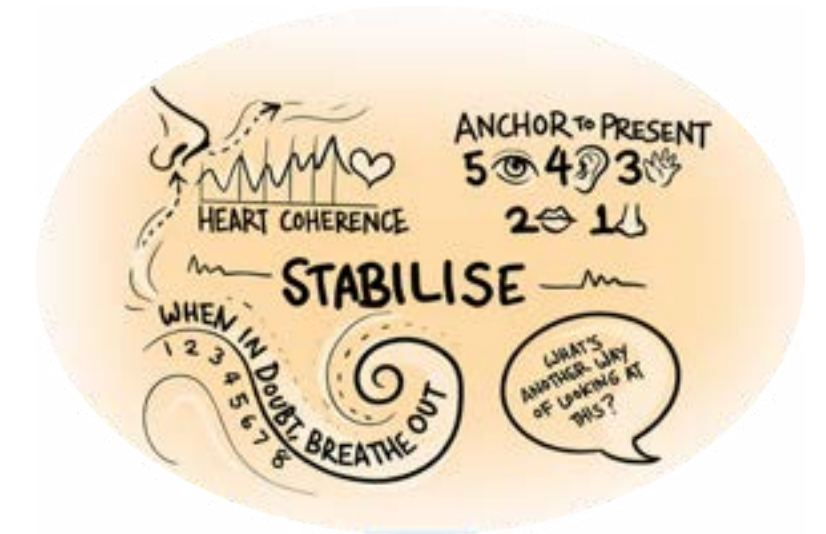
How it helps

Creates space between emotion and reaction.
Reduces ‘amygdala hijack’, keeping your ‘thinking’ brain online to respond with clarity.

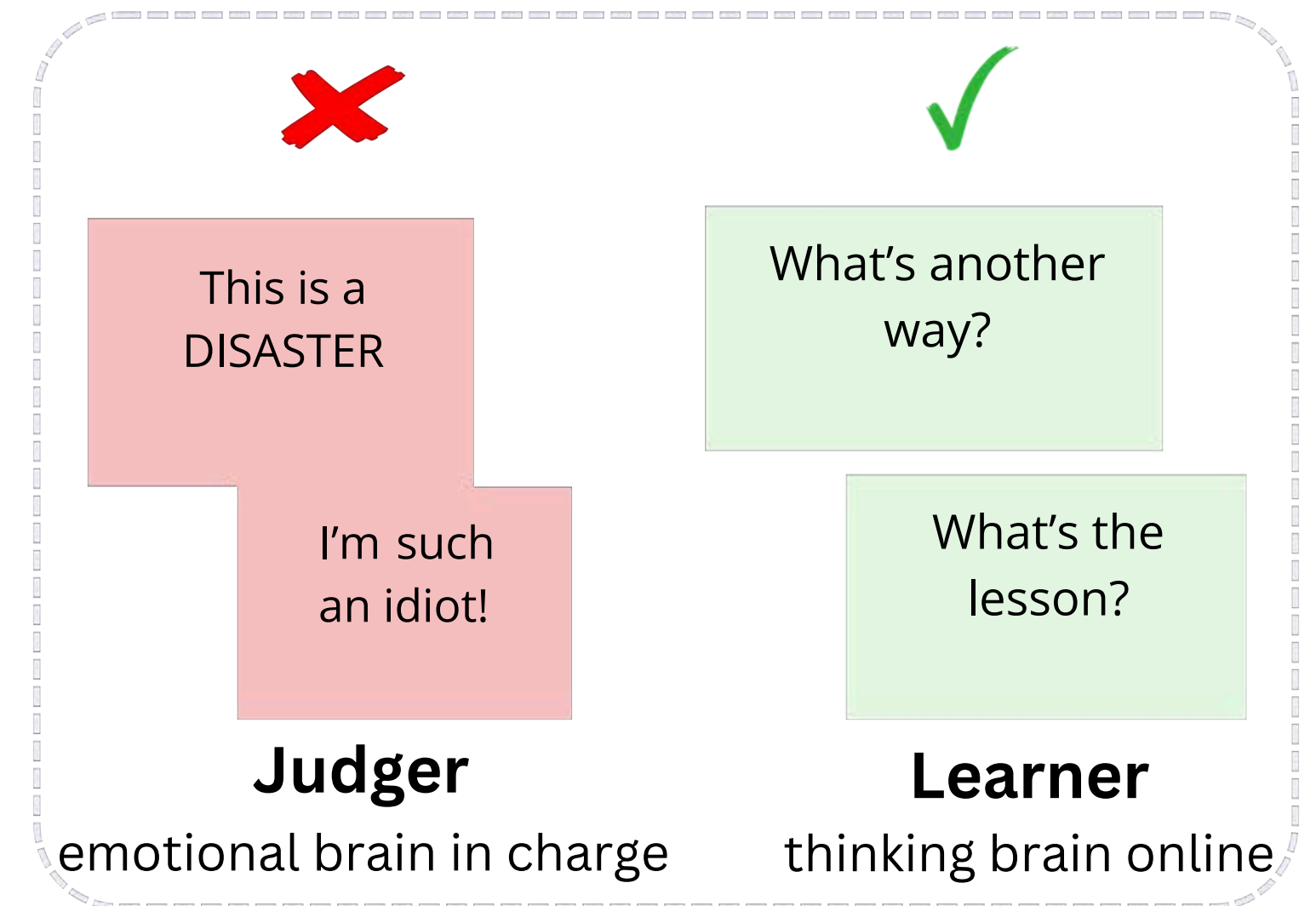
What to do

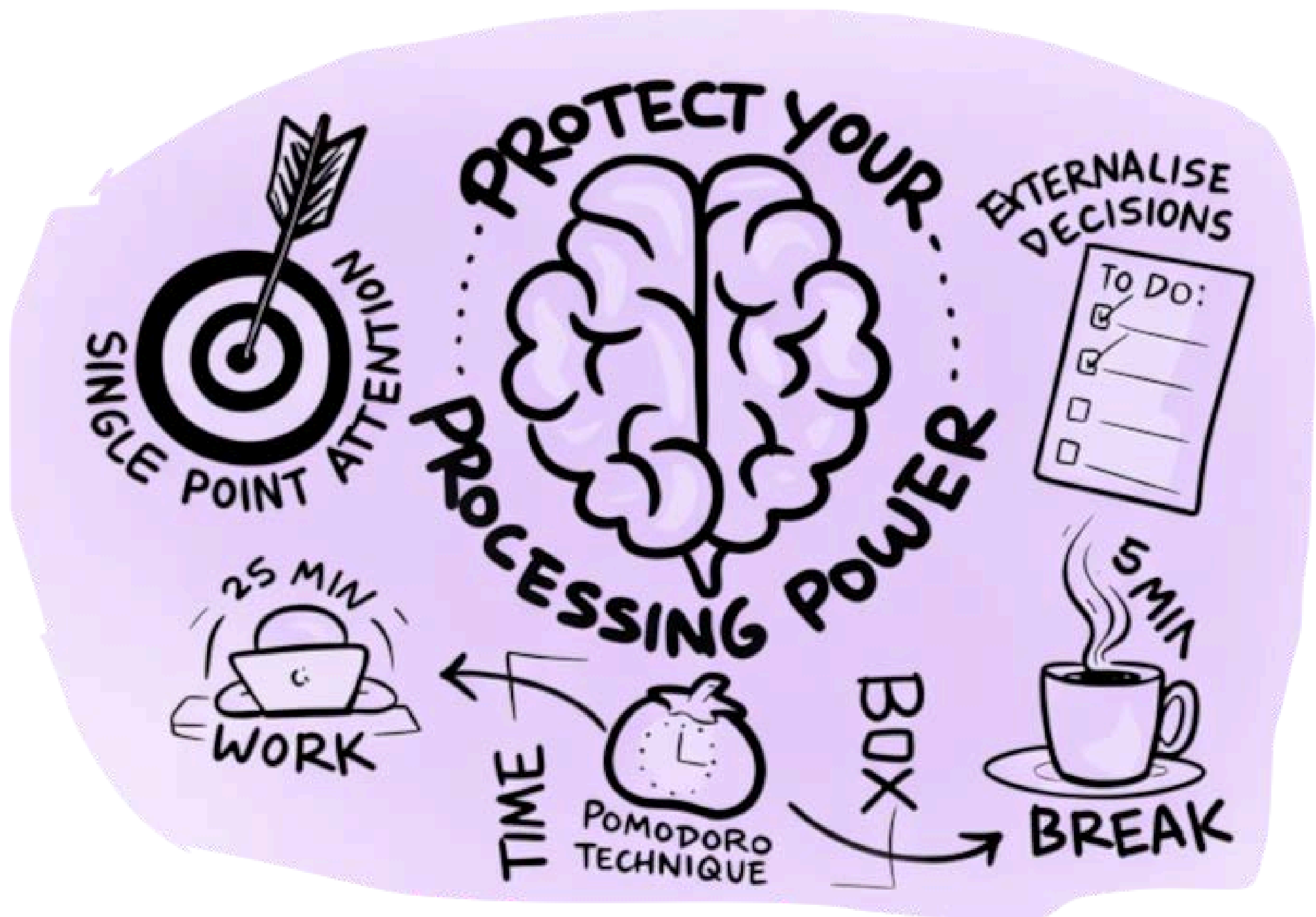
Pause. Then ask one or more of these:

- “What’s another way of seeing this?”
- “What can I learn here?”
- “What’s the opportunity?”



*“Between stimulus and response, there is a space.
In that space is our power to choose.”*





Externalise Decisions

When to use

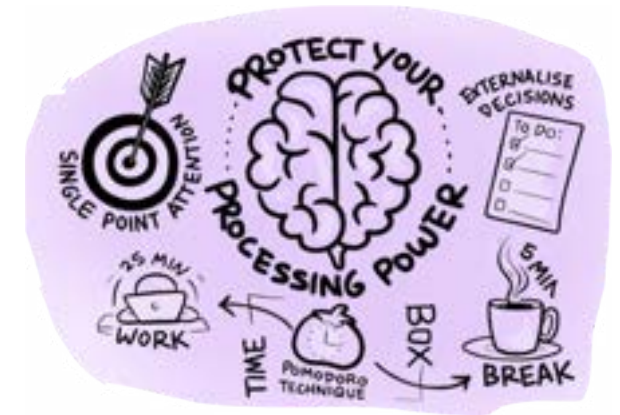
When you have a heavy workload or feel mentally overloaded

How it helps

Reduces cognitive load. Frees up mental capacity for high-value thinking, focus, and problem-solving.

What to do

- Use to-do lists and planners
- Create checklists for repeatable tasks
- Build templates and scripts (emails, agendas)
- Set simple rules (if-then decisions)
- Time-block your day into clear themes



Examples

Daily Structure (time blocks)

- 9–12 → Case work
- 12–12:30 → Email
- 3–4 → Calls
- 4–5 → Admin

Set Rules (if-then decisions)

- If a deadline is received → Then log it in calendar immediately
- If a document is drafted → Then run checklist before sending
- If an email takes < 2 minutes → Then reply immediately

Single-Point Attention

When to use

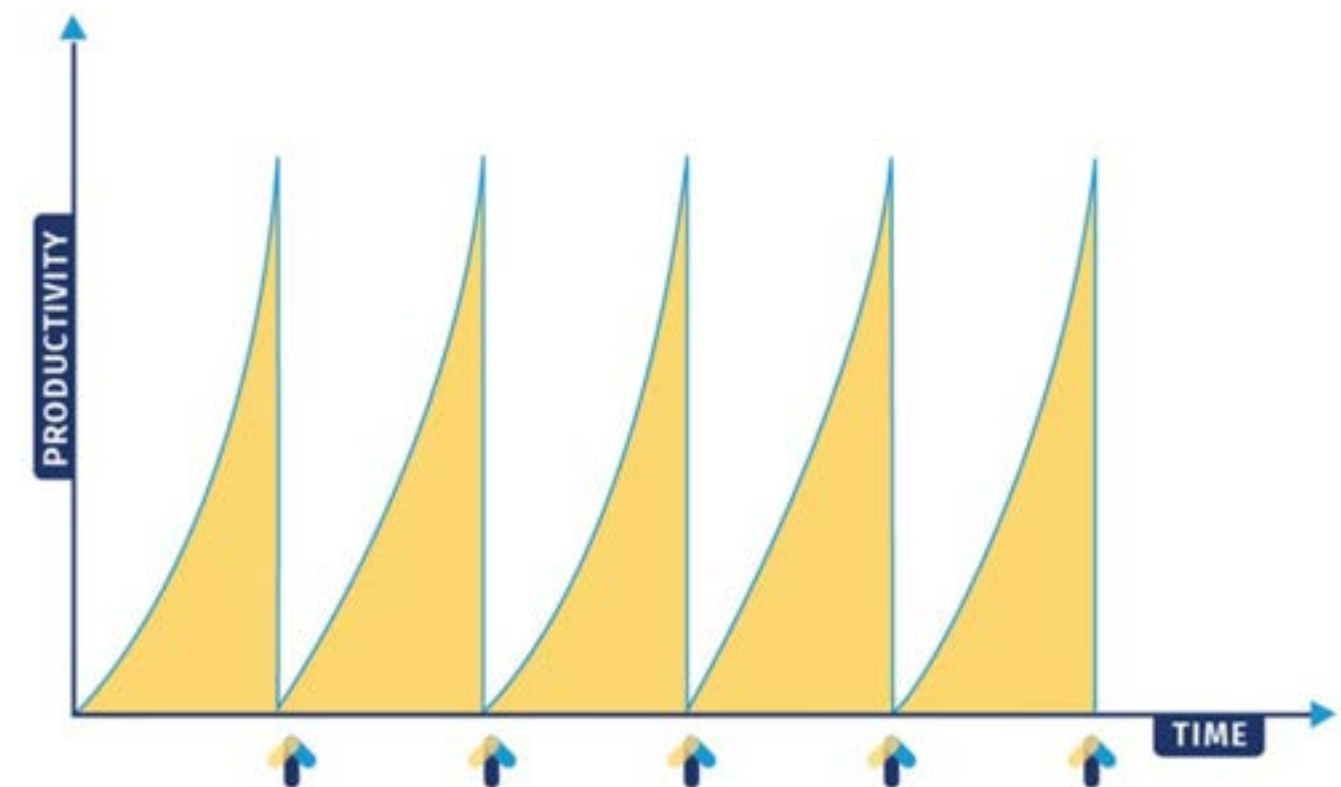
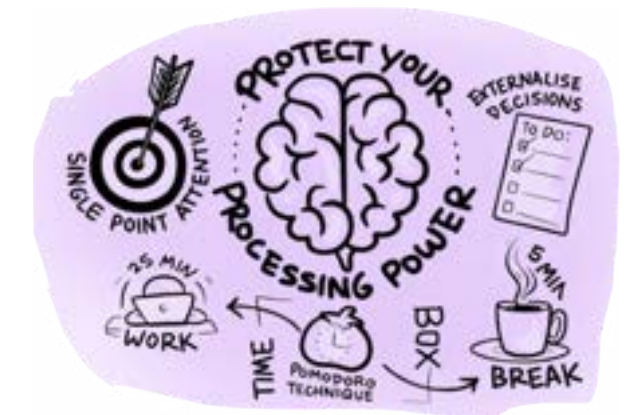
When you're doing work that requires sustained focus, accuracy, or deep thinking.

How it helps

Reduces the cognitive cost of context switching (the "sawtooth effect").

What to do

- Minimise external interruptions (turn off notifications, close unnecessary tabs)
- Signal focus time (sign / calendar block)
- Finish one thinking cycle before changing tasks
- Write down distracting thoughts instead of switching



The Sawtooth effect

Time taken to regain productivity level after brain switches context

Mental Refresher Breaks

When to use

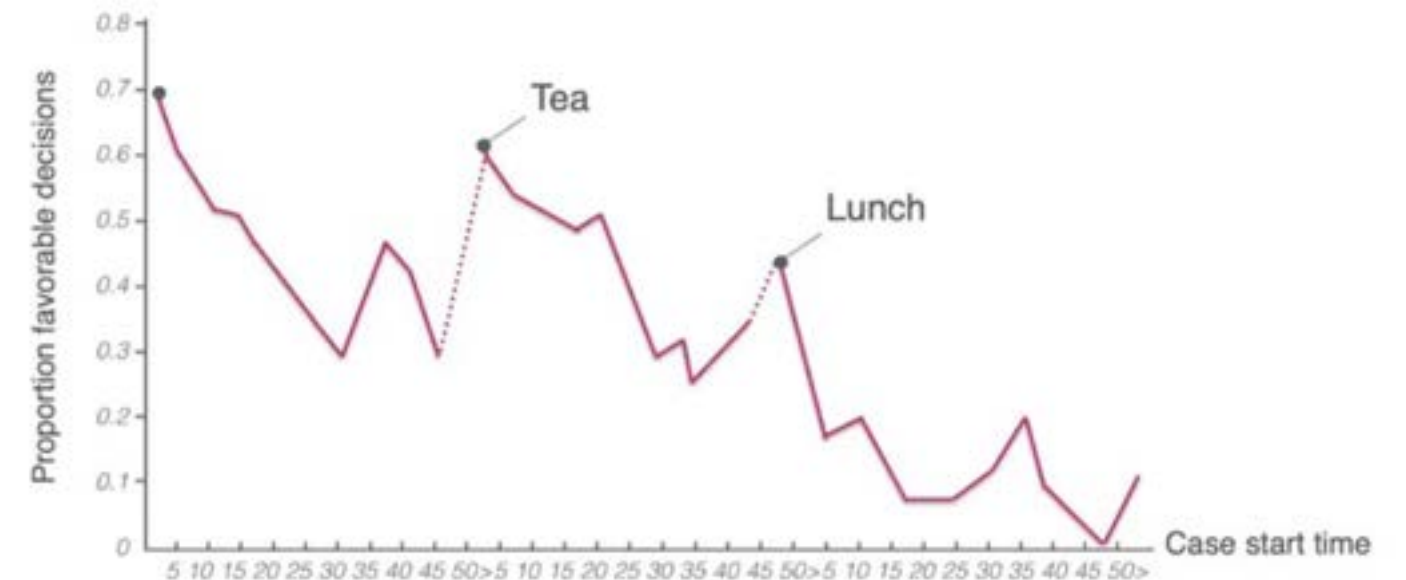
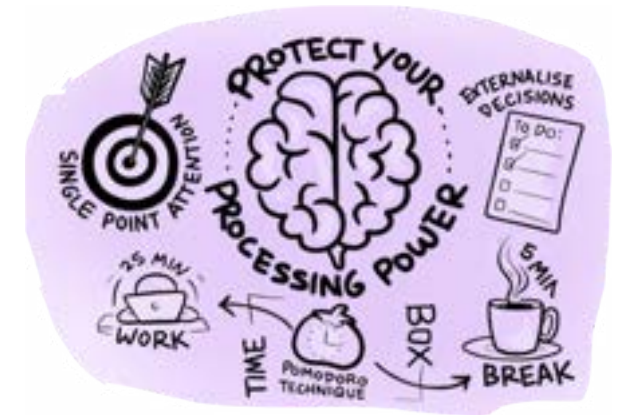
When working on complex tasks, making important decisions, or feeling mentally fatigued.

How it helps

Provides a cognitive reset, reducing fatigue and mental bias. Clears working memory and restores judgement quality.

What to do

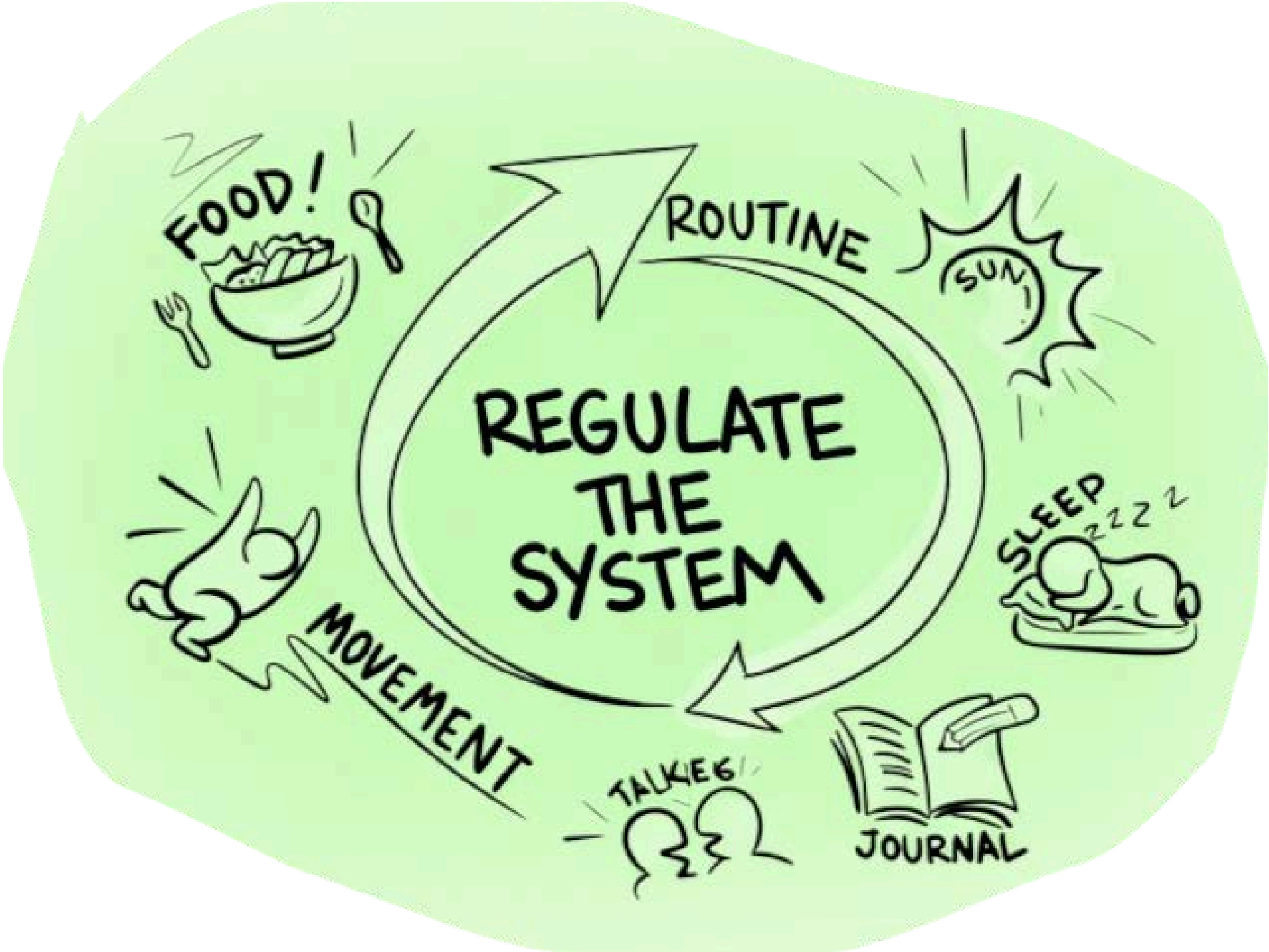
- Step away briefly from the task
- Change your physical state (stand, walk, stretch)
- Hydrate or have a light snack
- Do 1–2 minutes of slow breathing
- Use timed cycles (e.g. Pomodoro technique > 25 mins + 5 min break)



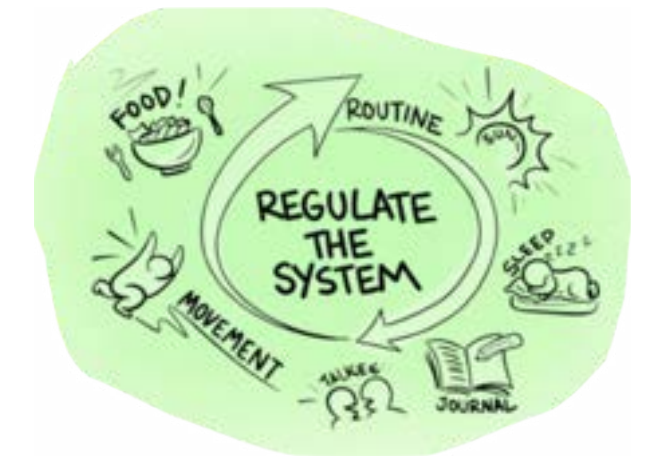
From: Shai Danziger, Jonathan Levav and Liora Avnaim-Pesso, PNAS, February, 2011

The Hungry Judge Effect

When mentally fatigued, people default to easier, safer decisions.



Understanding the Nervous System & Stress



How your body responds to stress - and how to shift gears



The Role of the Nervous System

Your **autonomic nervous system** is your body's command centre, constantly transmitting messages between the brain and the body. It **automatically** coordinates how you respond to people and situations, regulating energy, attention, emotions and behaviour – especially under stress.

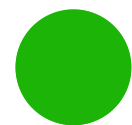


What is Nervous System Regulation?

Nervous system regulation is the body's ability to **move flexibly between modes** and **return to green** after stress. The **vagus nerve** plays a key role in this process by slowing the heart rate and signalling that the immediate demand has passed – supporting rest, connection and recovery.

3 Nervous System Modes

(Think of them like gears in a car)



Green – Regulated & Engaged (mid gear)

- Feeling on top of things
- Able to think clearly and respond flexibly



Amber – Activated (high gear)

Energised, driven & alert
Heightened effort and urgency to act



Red – Shutdown (neutral)

- Low energy, numb or withdrawn
- Reduced motivation and engagement

Like an automatic car, the nervous system is designed to shift smoothly between these modes depending on what's required. Difficulties arise when we get stuck in amber or red without enough opportunity to recover.

Activities that engage this 'vagal brake' and support green mode are:



slow breathing
(long exhale)



yoga or gentle
movement



singing or
humming



laughter



listening to music
(slow rhythms or
binaural beats)



Key Takeaway

In the modern world, our nervous systems are often automatically activated by small, everyday pressures. To recover and recalibrate, we need simple tools that help us intentionally shift back into green mode.



Support Your Circadian Rhythm

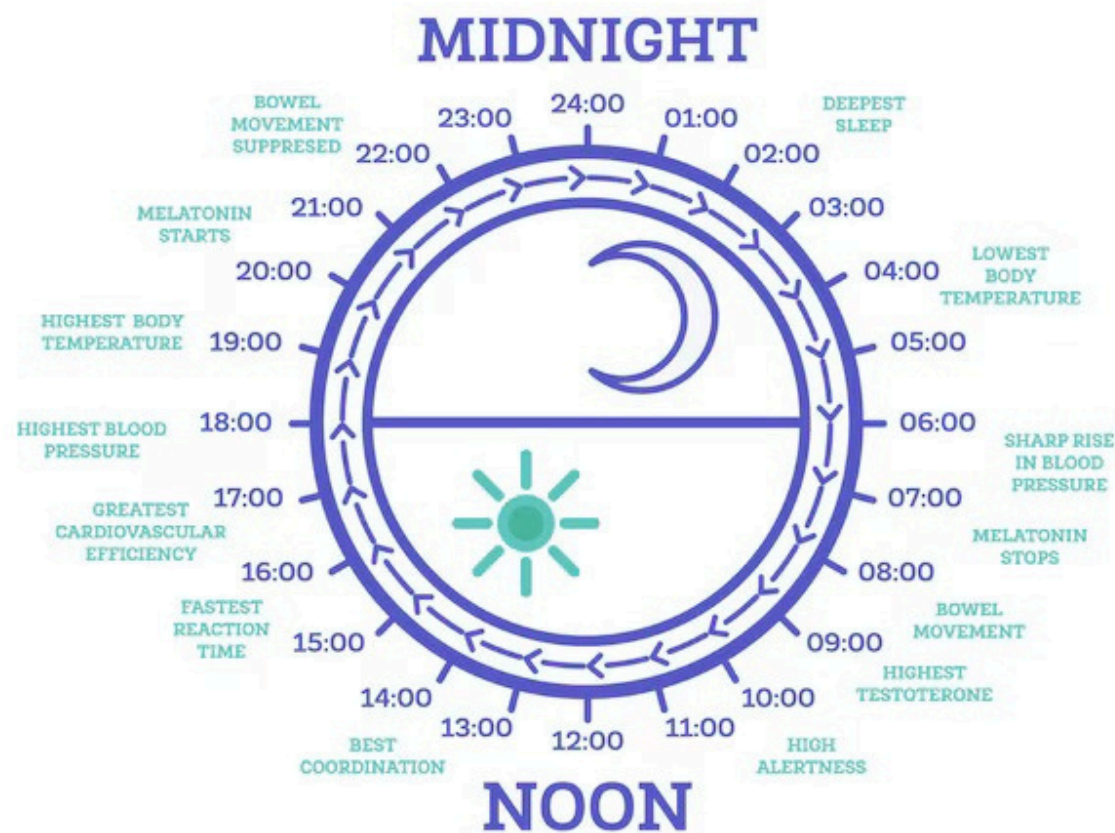
The conductor of your sleep and energy patterns

Your body's internal timing system

Your **circadian rhythm** is your body's internal 24-hour clock. This rhythm tells your body when to sleep and when to wake up. It also affects several other body processes, like your hormones, digestion and body temperature.

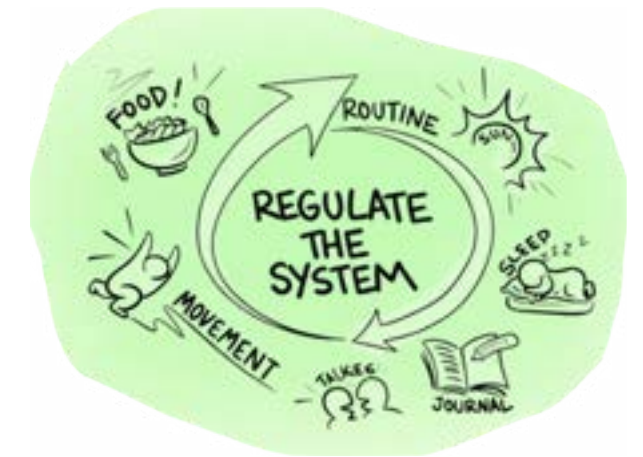
How it works:

Your circadian rhythm is coordinated by a central clock in the brain that uses light – especially **natural daylight** – as its main timing signal.



Across a 24-hour period, the circadian rhythm:

- Increases alertness and energy in the morning
- Supports focus, digestion and physical activity during the day
- Shifts the body toward rest, repair and sleep in the evening



How to keep it regular:

While **light exposure** is the strongest signal shaping your circadian rhythm, it is also influenced by **sleep and wake times, meal timing, stress levels** and **physical activity**.



- Get daylight into your eyes within an hour of waking
- Keep a consistent wake time
- Include protein at breakfast to stabilise blood sugar



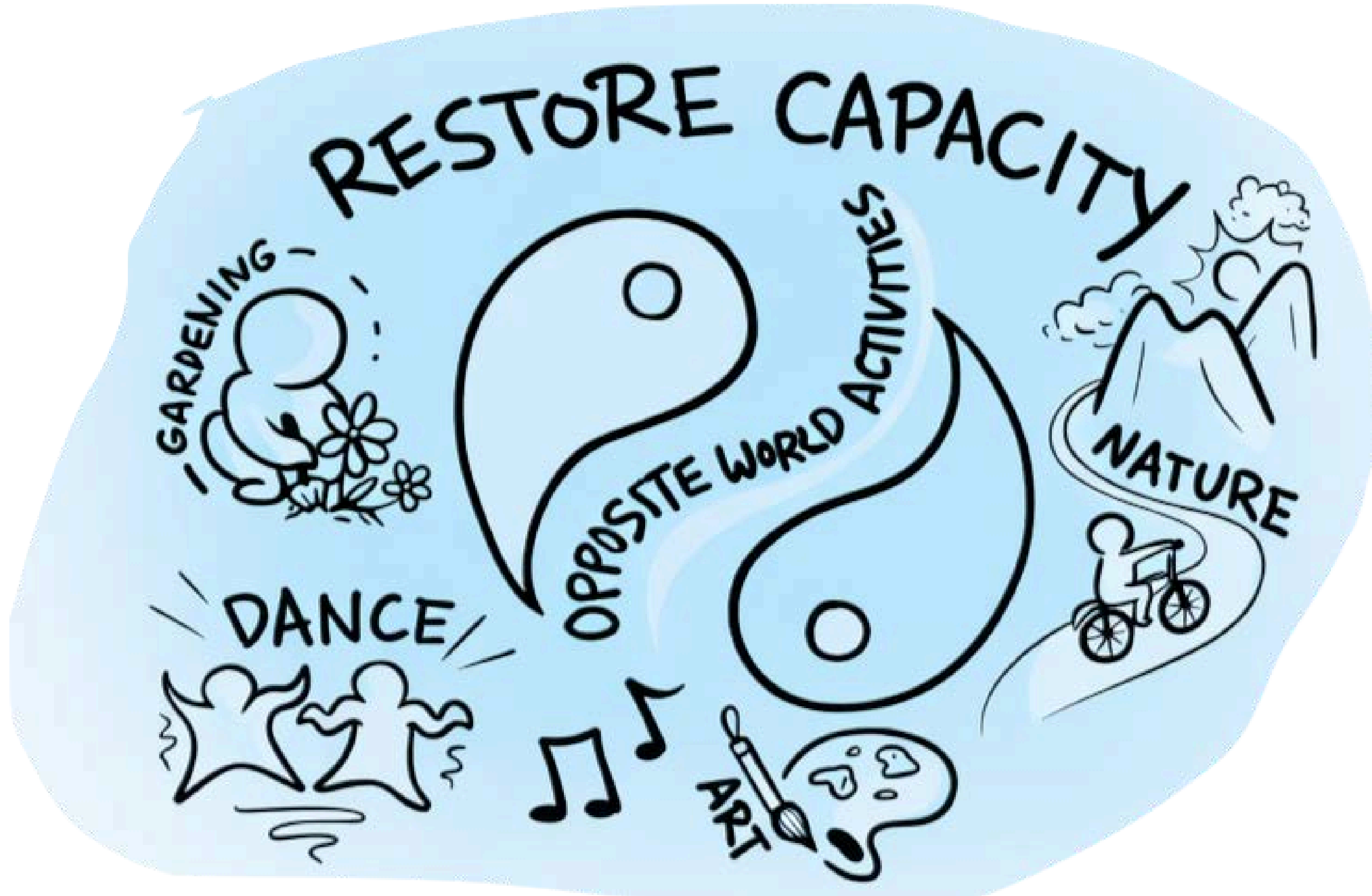
- Eat late, heavy meals
- Use screens (blue light) in the hour before bed
- Have caffeine after 2pm



Key Takeaway

Sleep doesn't start at night – it starts in the morning.

NB. 'Lark' and 'Owl' chronotypes run on different biological clocks so their peak energy and focus can be several hours apart



Do You Have An Opposite World?

Research by Nick Petrie



- Interviews with over 100 top performers across different industries found those that avoided burnout almost always had an ‘opposite world’ outside work - something that genuinely recharges them

What is an ‘Opposite World’?

- An activity that is very different from your professional life
- Not just ‘rest’ or ‘switching off’
- A different mental mode, pace, and identity
- Often a physical activity, creative pursuit, learning something or volunteering
- A space where your mind fully disengages from work

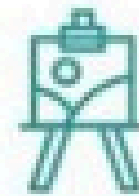
Recovery isn't just about switching off – it's about engaging a different part of yourself.

6 Types Of Opposite Worlds



PHYSICAL

- Dancing ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓
- Sports ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓
- Biking ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓
- Skating ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓
- Martial Arts ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓
- Running ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓
- Cardio/Crossfit ✓✓✓✓✓



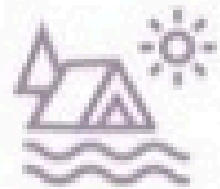
ARTISTIC

- Musical instrument ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓
- Cooking/Baking ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓
- Painting ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓
- Sewing/Crochet ✓✓✓✓✓
- Arts and Crafts ✓✓✓✓✓
- Singing ✓✓✓
- Quilting ✓✓✓



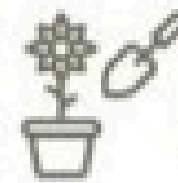
ANIMALS

- Horse riding ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓
- Training dogs ✓✓
- Beekeeping ✓
- Walking dogs ✓



NATURE

- Hiking in nature ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓
- Hunting/ fishing ✓✓✓✓
- Surfing ✓✓✓✓
- Ocean swimming ✓✓✓
- Mountaineering ✓✓
- Scuba ✓✓
- Nordic skiing ✓✓
- Working on farm ✓✓
- Paddle Board/Kayak ✓✓
- Farming ✓✓



HOME PROJECTS

- Gardening ✓✓✓✓
- Fixing things ✓✓
- Mowing lawns ✓✓
- Working on cars ✓
- Renovating ✓
- Cleaning ✓
- Washing dishes ✓



VOLUNTEERING

- Samaritans ✓
- Visiting dementia wards ✓
- Dental in Africa ✓
- Coaching kids ✓

Action Planner

Take a moment to reflect:

1. Where Is My Biggest Gap?

Which “control panel” do I want to get better at?

- Stabilise
 - Regulate the system
 - Restore capacity
 - Protect processing process

2. What Tools Do I Need to Install or Upgrade?

Which 1–2 practices would make the biggest difference?

Tool / Practice 1:

Tool / Practice 2:

3. How Will I Build This In?

What will make this automatic?

- Calendar cue
- Habit anchor
- System / checklist
- Accountability partner

My first step this week: _____



I hope this guide supports you in moments of overwhelm—when it’s hardest to remember what’s available to you.

If it’s been helpful, I’d love to hear from you.

About Me



I’m a chartered occupational psychologist with 20+ years’ experience helping organisations select, develop and retain their people

After experiencing burnout during a decade working in Asia, I founded AURA in 2015 to focus on prevention.

I now work with organisations and individuals to recognise early warning signs of burnout—supporting them through my proprietary assessment tool, coaching, workshops and organisational programmes.

www.rachelausten.co.uk

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www.rachelausten.co.uk (primary)
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