



Dear {{ contact.FIRSTNAME }} }

Welcome to the twenty-seventh instalment of the serialisation of my upcoming book **“The Futures Effect - Change Your Story, Change Y’our Future!”** - the second volume in the **“Futurize Yourself”** series - that is scheduled for publication later this year or early 2023.

This week I’m sharing the eighth episode of Chapter Three: **“We all need something to look forward to in life”**, and the ninth: **“Rewiring the brain for the future”**.

Happy reading!

Be good to you, be good to y’our future, always.

Tom

PS: Audio and video links in this newsletter will redirect you to the respective platforms as Sendinblue doesn't support iframe embedding. My apologies for the inconvenience but I hope you will check them out.



[PREVIOUS EPISODES](#)

CH3.8 We all need something to look forward to in life



Let's dig a bit deeper into taking ownership of your long-term future when the immediate future is difficult to predict.

At the time I am writing this book, we are living in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, life suddenly changed. Who would have thought then that two years later we would still not be back to normal or that we would never return to the normal that was? For many people this has been, and will continue to be for some time to come, a very stressful time personally and economically.

As governments introduce new rules, and regulations change every week to keep on top of the pandemic, it has even become harder to think and plan ahead. The toll of this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous time on body, mind and spirit is something I see in my patients all too often.

I also see that patients and people around me are becoming more and more fixated on the present. A good example is that some are still working at the kitchen table instead of investing in a good chair or other ergonomic equipment for work to support their body and reduce the health risks associated with bad posture. Reduced exercise is another consequence of this pandemic that has so many people working from home.

Those who had an outdoor exercise routine keep doing it. However, those who didn't or went to the gym, yoga class, or just had their daily exercise going to work or at work by walking from meeting to meeting, stopped exercising altogether during the lockdown.

Patients often tell me they know they are not moving enough as they rarely go out of the house, but they hadn't thought ahead to consider the consequences. That type of short-sightedness lands them in my practice with neck, shoulder and/or back pain, increased stress or other physical or psychological issues.

That we have difficulties planning ahead today is, of course, understandable. The future is very uncertain at the moment and very dependent on the evolution of the pandemic. It is also dependent on the loosening of the restrictions set by respective governments.

The pandemic is a current crisis, but it is not the only crisis in which it is difficult to plan ahead or think of the future. In any kind of crisis that affects us, we can become fixated on the present. I know this all too well from personal experience.

Again, I urge you to think about your own situation and what the future you want. How do you want to feel when this pandemic is under control? You want to feel healthy? Then you need to take care of yourself today. Make sure you exercise enough, have a balanced diet, take regular breaks, stay in contact with family and friends – even if that means online. Set up a dedicated workspace and get the right equipment so you can also work in optimal conditions at home. Set boundaries – and, whatever you do, be good to you.

CH3.9 Rewiring the brain for the future



Taking ownership of your long-term future needs to be done on purpose. Earlier in this book I mentioned that your body and brain are wired for anticipation and that this is mostly so for the immediate and short-term future. When it comes to the long-term future, it is a whole different story.

I could give you the solution to overcome your evolutionary limitations straight away, but I'm a firm believer that understanding the problem and what needs to happen to integrate long-term futures thinking into your routine is far more powerful than giving it to you on a plate.

I also believe in your genius and ingenuity to come up with solutions when you know the problem to overcome. That optimism and belief in human empowerment stems from years of working with patients on their stress management. So let me try to explain a bit what goes on in the wondrous world of your brain, and talk a bit about where things get processed. This is important to know when you want to adopt a futures mindset and make the future an asset to your health, wellbeing and then some.

Let's start with the cognitive abilities that you will need in order to think about the future. Cognitive abilities are orchestrated in the forebrain, also called the prefrontal cortex. Play with me here and put your hand on your forehead, the area of your face above your eyebrows. Don't be shy. Put your hand on your forehead, close your eyes, and breathe in and out slowly. In your hand, behind skin, skull, and three protective membranes, lies the part of your brain called the prefrontal cortex, or PFC for short.

Now, how does it make you feel when you just hold your hand there and breathe in and out slowly? Relaxing, right?!

By the way, have you ever wondered why you tap or rub your forehead when you have forgotten a name during a conversation? Or why you

instinctively hold your forehead when your child or baby is in distress? Keep reading for an answer.

As I mentioned before, stress can, in specific circumstances, impair cognitive functioning, functions that take place in the prefrontal cortex.

The second thing to know is that stress can strengthen certain emotions, like fear and anxiety, and make you fall back to more primitive conditioned responses to certain habits or routines. These are steered by another part of your brain, called the amygdalae ([A. Arnsten, 2009](#)). The amygdalae are situated behind the eyes at the height of your temples. The temples are those soft spots on the left and right sides of your face behind and above the cheekbones. They are the part of your head that you instinctively rub when you have tension stress. Maybe you can ponder about why you do this, too.

Anyway, knowing that stress has these inhibitory effects on the one hand, and activating effects on other, it shouldn't come as a surprise that prolonged stress - experienced, for example, during a long-term pandemic - is not without its consequences for your thinking, emotions and mental state.

A word of clarification: it is, of course, not stress itself that is the problem, but the cascade of neuro-hormonal and physiological changes (with a big role for adrenaline and cortisol) stimulated through stress that will become a nuisance and impact your physical, mental, social and spiritual health and wellbeing. It is just a matter of time, conditions and, among other factors, your personality and proactive coping strategies.

The impact on your cognitive abilities (concentration, anticipation, learning, memorisation, etc.) and emotions (fear, anxiety, etc.), that you are a bit more short-tempered and/or anxious after long-periods of stress, probably has something to do with the fact that, over time, prolonged stress - due to neuro-hormonal and vascular changes - will shrink the prefrontal cortex and another part of brain called the hippocampus ([A. Arnsten, 2009](#)). Yes, you read that correctly: chronic stress shrinks parts of your brain. Ouch!

The hippocampus, a U-shaped structure in the brain with the amygdalae at the front, plays an important role in some emotions, learning, and the consolidation of information from short-term memory to long-term memory. A reduced hippocampus is associated with poorer memory and impairments in mental time-travel.

While the PFC and the hippocampus are shrinking, some parts of your brain increase in volume. Those parts that are linked to your immediate survival, that make you more alert for danger, like the amygdalae. Yes, those almond-shaped clusters of nuclei located behind your eyes at the level of the temples and that are situated at each end of the "U" of the hippocampus. These almond-shaped clusters will increase in volume.

"What does the amygdala do?" you may ask. It plays an important role in emotions, behaviour, and the processing of fear. A larger amygdala means you and your brain will become more receptive to stress, and the future becomes an even more dangerous place. When you become more receptive to stress, that means you become more fearful, including fearful about the future. You also become more anxious and irrational and start

to say or buy things that you later regret.

I think we've all been there, done that and got the proverbial T-shirt. At least I have.

All that said, I think you can start to see or at least imagine that, for the promotion of futures thinking, planning, and decision making, stress is not your friend.

By the way, chronic stress is also not what you want to have during a pandemic or health crisis, as it will suppress your immune system. This book is not about the latter aspect of stress, so I won't go into the details. However, as a future-minded and education-oriented osteopath and body-centred stress coach, I do feel the need to mention it, and I want you to take stress and its many consequences seriously. A well-informed woman or man is worth two. "Mind your body before your body reminds you" is my philosophy.

Now here is another titbit of information that is interesting to know: Although your body is a primordial futurist and perfect for anticipating what is going to happen next, your brain is naturally really terrible at thinking about the long-term future. For example, when you think of your future self, 10 years from now, something quirky happens – an unexpected glitch in your brain. Studies suggest that your brain starts acting as if you're thinking about a stranger, someone you don't know very well, when you imagine your future self. When the future you is someone you don't know very well, why would you care for it? The more your future self feels like a stranger – that is, the more disconnected you are from your future self – the less motivated you will be to plan for your future ([H. Hershfield, 2011](#)).

When I read about this phenomenon, which has been corroborated with functional brain scans (fMRI scans), I wondered if this glitch could be considered as a reason why, for example, smokers keep smoking while they must be aware by now that nearly 9 out of 10 lung cancer deaths are caused by smoking cigarettes: "Cancer?! It will not happen to me, as me in the future is not me!" so to speak.

And what exactly is this glitch? Well, there is increased activity in the mPFC of your brain when you think about yourself and decreased activation when you think of others. The same decrease happens in the mPFC when you think of your future self. It's a gradual process, meaning that, the further into the future you go, the less activity there is in the mPFC and the more you become a stranger to yourself – and the less likely you are to make informed choices for long-term benefits ([J. McGonigal 2017](#)).

"What's mPFC, Tom? Does the PFC stand for prefrontal cortex as you mentioned before when you were talking about stress?" Indeed it does, and the "m" stands for medial, that part of the brain nearest to the midline.

Pure speculation on my part here, but could it be that thinking of your future self causes a stress response?

Luckily for you and others, you have a measure of control over your quirky brain, and you can – on purpose – counteract this outdated evolutionary trait. You might already want to start reflecting on what you can do to make the future you your best friend, an ally you feel closely

bonded to.

Anyway, I hope, with this very brief introduction to some of the key players, you have an idea of why you might have difficulty planning ahead in a crisis or thinking about your future – and who or what to blame for it. It's your brain. But you are not powerless: your brain is full of potential that you can explore to overcome a crisis by rewiring it.

To be continued next week with:

CH3.10 Making the future you your best friend

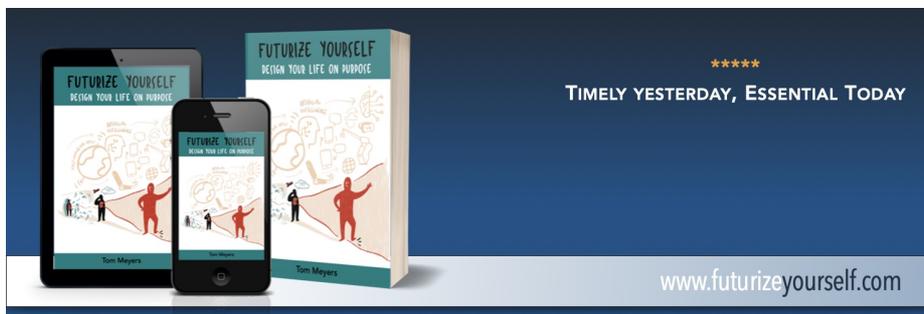
CH3.11 Developing a resilient future



About the author

Tom Meyers, also known as “TomTom the Health Navigator”, is an osteopath D.O., body-centred stress coach, the founder of the “Reset Approach”, a wellbeing futurist, space enthusiast, TEDx organiser and author of “Futurize Yourself - Design your life on purpose.”

His mission is to empower you to flourish and thrive in this fast-changing, uncertain and challenging world full of opportunities.



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