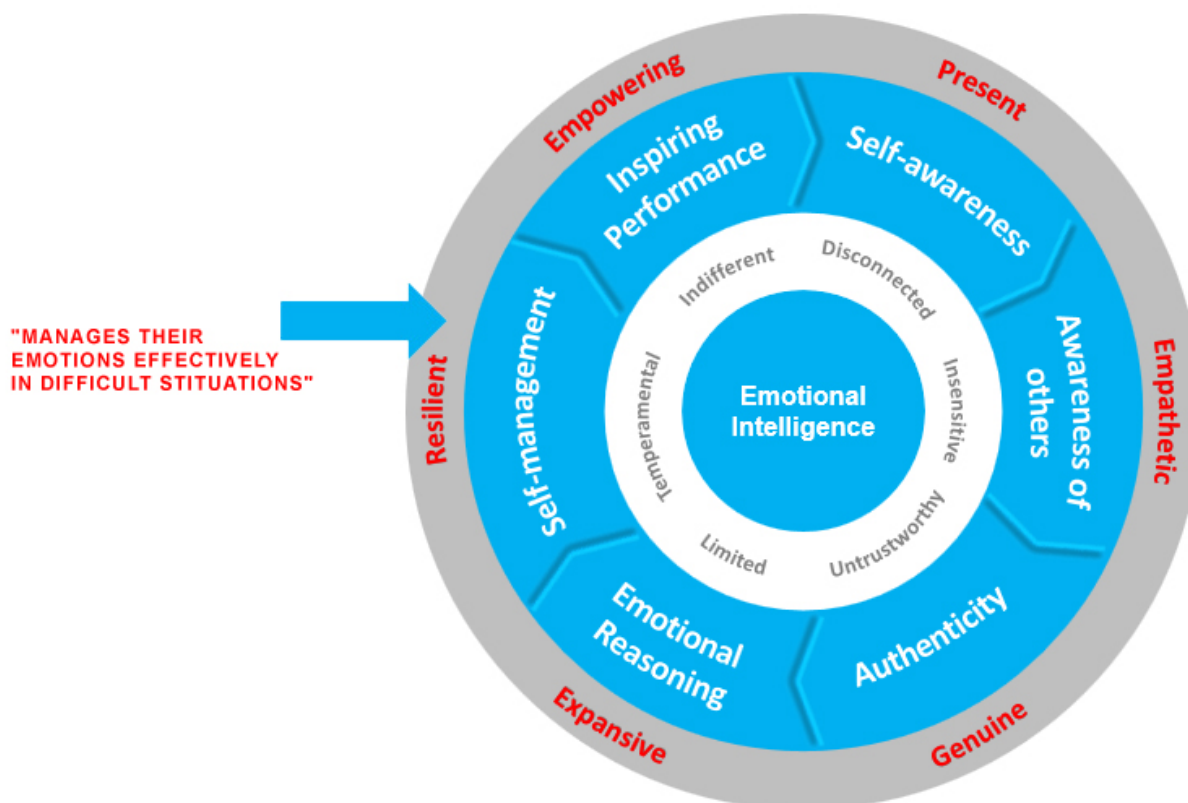


## **Manage Stress and become more Resilient through understanding the Neuroscience of Emotions**



Emotions play a key role in human experience. They have their origins in early development. In almost all literature, authors, and scientists state that emotions change and mature during one's lifetime. (Shiner, Goldsmith).

As a trained practitioner on the GENOS Emotional Intelligence Model one of the competencies required to be emotionally intelligent is Self-Management. Self-Management is about managing one's own self-regulation (controlling or redirecting disruptive impulses and moods), time and behaviour, and continuously improving oneself. It is therefore indicative that your capability of regulating your emotions, instead of being at the mercy of them, is key to being effective and more resilient.



Daniel Goleman mentions in his book Emotional Intelligence, the primary characteristics of someone with high Emotional Intelligence is the awareness of their emotions and the ability to regulate same, furthermore this is both directed inward to oneself and outwards to others which is known as Social Competence.

Psychological stress occurs when we believe we have no control in the present and assume the worst about the future. When we become more emotionally intelligent and learn techniques to self-regulate, we take control over our life and become more resilient.

In my training as a brain-based coach, we learned that there are a few key areas that make up how emotions work in the brain. I will discuss two of them. Firstly, our **prefrontal cortex** which is involved with emotional regulation and decision-making. Its main function is for high level thinking processes and also to suppress emotions.

The next key area is the **amygdala within the limbic system**. Our amygdala assesses our environment for potential threats and invokes anxiety, fear, and the anger that we may require to enable us to respond to a potential threat. The amygdala is also where we store our emotional memory.

When the amygdala senses potential danger or stress it releases triggers of cortisol which increases

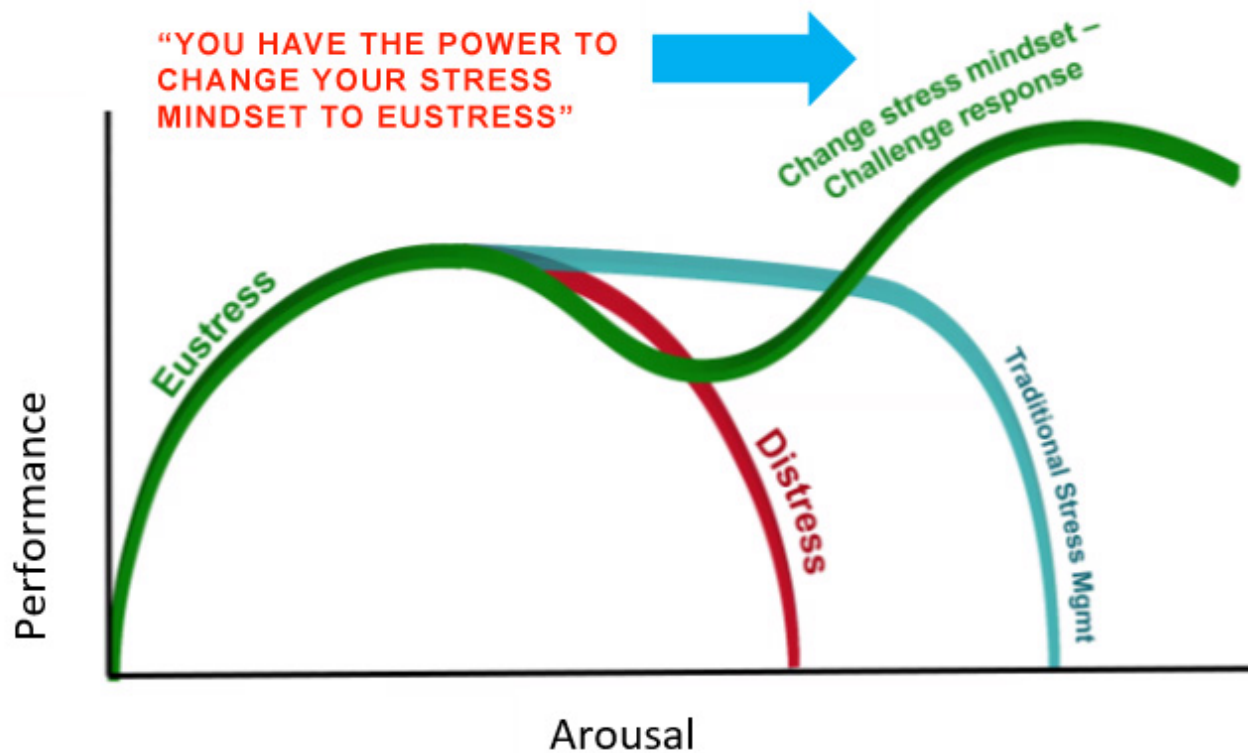
blood pressure, adrenaline is released to increase strength for fight or flight. Oxygen, nutrients and blood flow is shunted to our muscles, the brain gets ready for action and you cannot sleep.

Now in the “prehistoric” days, this fight or flight trigger would have been for a real predatory danger such as physical harm. In today’s VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex & Ambiguous) landscape; work pressures, economic downturns, pandemics such as Covid19 will cause emotional responses to be triggered. Possibly leading to anxiety and fear which further induces shallow breathing starving the brain of oxygen resulting in the shutting down of wider perception, rational thinking, cognition, creativity, and collaboration during this response.

When in this state deep breathing exercises are very helpful as it ensures that your brain receives the required oxygen in order to function properly. By taking deep, deliberate breaths from your belly activates specific neurons that signal the vagus nerve to lower the heart rate which further supports you in better managing your emotions.

As a GENOS EI Trained Practitioner I use a simple yet powerful breath exercise: “Inhale smoothly to a count of 7, Exhale gently and smoothly for a count of 11... or as close as feels comfortable. Repeat for six breaths. Don’t push yourself. Target breathing is about 5 per minute.... But don’t become goal obsessed... the key is that the exhale is longer than the inhale (ideally 2:1)”

There is plenty written in media and even evidence within our very own workplaces which point toward stress causing burnout, anxiety disorders, insomnia, even heart disease. People believe that stress is not good for you but in fact stress can be good for you if managed and directed into a positive response. Good stress is known as Eustress. Kelly McGonigal, PhD, combines new research on resilience and mindset, proving that “undergoing stress is not bad for you; it is undergoing stress while believing that stress is bad for you that makes it harmful. In fact, stress has many benefits, from giving us greater focus and energy, to strengthening our personal relationship”.



When you are in a moment of distress and not eustress you have the ability to change your mindset around the stress to eustress. Your power to choose your thoughts over the situation is your power to control and create your life. You can use techniques of;

self-observation (notice the emotion) and choose what to feel next in the current challenge you are facing;

Our subconscious mind cannot differentiate between destructive and constructive thoughts so replace the negative thought with a positive thought;

Reflective writing by writing about the experience, then reflecting on what you have written, what have you learned from this experience and what can you can now do;

Practice mindfulness, journaling, prayer, meditation. There are many free mindfulness apps; GENOS, Deepak Chopra to name a few that you can download and perform daily.

By undertaking these simple yet powerful techniques you build your strategic resilience bit by bit.

Resilience is not about rebounding from a setback or crisis but rather about continuously anticipating, adjusting, moving forward and becoming more resilient. It's about having to change before the case for change becomes a desperate crisis to change. Create a plethora of coping techniques today and build your resilience.

Your brain possesses neuroplasticity and has the ability to grow and change. This ability to change allows your brains structure and wiring to be molded by experience. Attention itself creates change in the brain. Donald Hebb's Law (1949) simply put is "Cells that fire together wire together". This means that when we concentrate on a problem, we further embed the problem. One should concentrate on creating solutions. We have the potential to change old behaviors that don't help to meet our present-day challenges. We can rewire our brains. Attention, in the form of quality and quantity, is what will change your brain over time. (Rock,2006; Kehoe,2006)

We think social and physical pain is different however the brain suggests this to be more similar than we imagine. (Matt Lieberman, 2008). Understanding this allows us to be aware of what others may be going through. In my training as a Brain Based Coach and Team coach, I often use the SCARF Model. The Predict-Regulate-Explain (PRE) model which is outlined in the Rock and Cox Paper, (SCARF in 2012) states that “having a memorable language for social threats and rewards allows us to notice these experiences at several junctures that we may not otherwise. Before, during and after an emotion-producing event. This Language is SCARF an acronym for Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness and is built on three central ideas,

The Brain treats social threats and rewards with the same or greater intensity as physical threats and rewards.

Decision making, solution finding & collaboration is reduced by a threat response and increased by a reward state.

The threat response is more intense and more common in social interactions.

Teams can use the SCARF Model to provide an easy way to remember and act upon social triggers that can generate both the toward and away responses in the workplace and in their own personal life. This is particularly important in the workplace first and foremost as a social system to understand triggers to emotions and as Daniel Goleman stated to furthermore demonstrate Social Competence. Awareness of one's emotions and to self-regulate both inwards and outwards.

### **About the author: Michelle Cronje**

Michelle's career spans 20 years' experience with a proven track record of Coaching, Legal HR, Strategic HR, Transactional HR, and Management. Michelle is a credentialed Coach and has over 500 hours of coaching experience. Her current portfolio of coaching clients includes corporate clients from financial services, retail, recruitment and small business owners.

Michelle works with individuals as well as with teams. Michelle has spearheaded activities related to leadership coaching, performance coaching, executive salary benchmarking, policy formulation, creation of director/partner evaluation bundles together with performance contracts up to executive level and performance appraisals at Board Level.

In addition to Michelle running her own practice, she is currently also the Deputy Chairperson of Coaches and Mentors of South Africa KZN Chapter in a volunteering capacity.

Michelle's qualifications and accreditations are; Master in Business Administration (MBA) 2018, Degree Human Resources Management and Labour Relations, Master HR Professional (South African Board for People Practices), Accredited Brain Based Coaching Certification NLI Global, Accredited Team Coach Training Certified NLI Global, NLP Practitioner & NLP Master Practitioner, PDA (Personal Development Analysis) Certified Analyst, GENOS Emotional Intelligence Certified Practitioner, Credentialed Coach COMENSA, Member ICF, Commissioner of Oaths.

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