

# TIME TO M.O.T YOUR MIND?

Words by Dr Kate Middleton  
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Did you know that in times of stress or busyness, your brain automatically suppresses some of what you're thinking and feeling? It's designed to keep your head clearer, so you can focus - but it means you're still reacting, but you might not really know why.

And you might not notice what you're feeling until or unless it becomes a real crisis, erupting like a volcano when you least expect it - leading to angry outbursts, losing your rag or even panic attacks, when emotions catch you by surprise. Those moments can feel overwhelming and even scary, because they hit out of the blue with such power. And a lot of guys are particularly at risk - along with anyone else who tends to keep their emotions more 'under wraps'.

Here are 5 things to check...

## **(1) Where's your base?**

Stress is a funny thing - we tend to think of it emotionally, and link it to feeling stressed out. But anything that places demand on your brain is stress. And sometimes in life's busy seasons our stress baseline just creeps up without us really thinking about it. And because emotions like anxiety and frustration operate on the same physiological system, if that baseline is high, we can become more emotionally reactive, or even be overwhelmed by little things we'd usually manage with no problems.

So where's YOUR base right now? Imagine your stress level is like the water in a pool. Now think of a 1-10 scale - 1 is where the water is round your ankles. 10 would be over your head. What's your number?

## **(2) Are you near the Danger Zone?**

It's more than just a Top Gun song - there really is a Danger Zone in your emotional mind. But are you near it? Emotions like anger and anxiety are designed to grab your attention when something potentially serious is going on. But when you're busy and distracted, or dealing with ongoing stresses, you have to learn to ignore them a lot of the time. And sometimes this means they can suddenly flare up, pushing your mind into the Danger Zone.

Yes, you really have one - it's how your brain changes the way it works in really serious, urgent situations. Your thinking brain is switched right down, so you can make quick decisions. And meanwhile you feel a powerful urge to act - to do something!

All of this means you're more impulsive, and if you're really not thinking clearly, more likely you might do something you later regret. So it's really important to recognise when you're about to hit that Danger Zone. Just grabbing a moment of calm or stepping out of a conversation or space can drop your stress level and take you into an emotionally calmer place.

Remember that 1-10 scale? Most people find they start to hit the emergency zone somewhere around 8. You can spot it by those fleeting thoughts of hitting out, running away, yelling ... probably all the things you shouldn't do! So next time you feel frustration or panic rising, ask yourself 'what number am I?' - and if you're getting near to 'the zone' do something about it.

**(3) Reconnect!**

Another thing that happens when we're busy, stressed and distracted is that we stop noticing physical sensations. And when it comes to emotions, those things are like early warnings, the dashboard light going on to warn you something is up. If you don't notice them, the emotion has to ramp up higher to get attention - making it harder to manage and more likely to catch you out.

Been busy? Why not grab a moment to reconnect with yourself? Sit for a moment - you might want to close your eyes, but if that makes it feel too intense don't worry. As you sit, try to name three things you can see, then three things you can hear, then three things you can physically feel. It might be the feel of the chair against your body or the breath moving in and out of your lungs. Can you feel anything else? your stomach rumbling?! Tension in part of your body? Pain or discomfort anywhere? Don't be overwhelmed or alarmed by those things - just notice them. Now think - is there anything you need to do for yourself, to care for yourself, to treat your brain or body well in this moment? Grab something to eat, take a break, stretch....?

#### **(4) What's on your mind?**

Sometimes the things your brain needs to figure out are the things you LEAST want to think about. Difficult things that have happened, especially if they triggered a really awkward emotion, like jealousy. Trauma and tough stuff - chances are you just want to try to forget about it, suppress it, get on with your day - but your BRAIN needs to make sense of it, to understand and learn so it doesn't happen again. To keep it at the front of your mind it uses negative emotions which focus your attention and remind you of it. And the more you try to push it down and NOT think about it, the more your brain bounces it back up, like a game of emotional whack-a-mole. So what do you do?

If this is you, take some time to process what is in your head and give your mind room to think. You can do this on your own - go for a walk, run or ride (exercise often helps), or try writing down what you are feeling - that pushes it through a different bit of your brain which can get you seeing it from a different perspective. Or, find a friend. Chatting stuff over really helps us bounce thoughts back and forth, and means we get another perspective. But it doesn't have to be intense. Find a relaxed space you can chat - over a drink, whilst playing sports or over a meal. And finally - sometimes when things are really tough or emotions are really powerful, we need some help. That's when therapists come in. Think of it like having to physio when you've pulled a muscle. They can help you work out what the problem is - and then take you through the process of dealing with it.



## **I(5) Get some shut eye**

Did you know sleep really is transformative for your brain? It's not just about time spent snoring. When you are sleeping your brain is busy dealing with everything that's been thrown at it - and getting ready for another day. For example, the fluid that surrounds your brain, and takes away waste products created when your brain cells are buzzing is actually cleaned when you are sleeping.

Sleep helps you lay down longer term memories and ditch the information you don't need. And REM sleep (that's when you're dreaming though you might not always remember them!) - is particularly important to help us learn - so you might want to think twice about those all nighter's when you have a lot on, or are cramming for exams.

### **So how do you get better sleep?**

- Prioritise it - make time for it and get yourself to bed at a decent hour. Work WITH your brain's natural rhythms, not against them
- Try to go to sleep and get up at roughly the same times each day as a rule - so your brain gets into a rhythm
- Ease your mind into sleep with a good calming routine - don't do things just before you go to bed that get your brain buzzing.
- And watch out for sleep stealers. Some of these you can't do much about (small children, for example), but others you can - so if you sleep with a pet who wakes you up maybe its time to get a dog (or cat!) basket. Watch out for noise, light and being too hot or cold. And don't forget caffeine and alcohol - they might affect you more than you think, as even if you do sleep they can disturb the natural cycles of sleep so you spend less time in the really important kinds.

Kate Middleton, 13/06/2022

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