



ARTICLE //

# Exploring the Universe of Emotions and Managing Emotions

Complete





Even today I am constantly amazed by how often the great performance myth is peddled in ineffective albeit well-meaning attempts to improve an individual or team's performance. All too often coaches and consultants are dishing out insightful nuggets such as, "it's OK to be nervous before you start" or "if you are not a bit nervous you will not perform well". Such statements are based on the belief that we need to be 'psyched up' in order to excel. Other coaches may tell us the exact opposite and suggest that in order to perform at our best we need to be "relaxed under pressure".

So which is it? Before giving a major presentation to city analysts or pitching to win a large corporate account do we need to be pumped up or do we need to be relaxed? The answer is neither because neither determine performance on the day.

When we put our 'pedal to the metal' or hit the accelerator prior to a major event we activate our autonomic nervous system (ANS). Any effort to psych ourselves up has just engaged the primitive 'fight or flight' response. Although the result may look similar the chemistry that drives each response is slightly different. When flight looks like the best option our system releases adrenaline or as the American's call it, epinephrine, which gives us a boost of energy so we can run away!

In contrast when we trigger the desire to fight our body releases adrenalin's sister, noradrenalin which readies the body for battle.

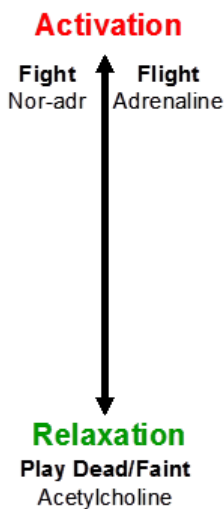
The other main physiological response to a threat is to freeze, play dead or faint. None of which are terribly helpful in a high pressure business setting. Nevertheless this 'relaxation response' is also often advocated by coaching professionals. Interestingly while most people have heard of adrenaline, the 'accelerator fluid' very few people have heard of the brake fluid. When we freeze or faint our body releases a chemical called acetylcholine.

So in very general terms heating our system up requires adrenaline or nor-adrenaline and cooling the system down requires acetylcholine.



## The Performance Myth Explained

Performance is not about relaxation or arousal. It's not about 'chillin' out', getting 'Gee'd up', fight, flight or freezing! What really determines the quality of our output is our neuroendocrine system (NE) not our autonomic nervous system (ANS). The NE system determines the quality of our emotional experience whereas the ANS determines the degree of our arousal. Failure to meet these legal obligations has resulted in payment of damages and the issuing of HSE improvement notices.<sup>6</sup>

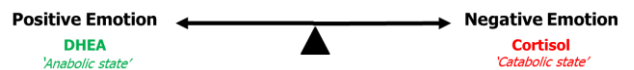


## Figure 1.1 The assumed Drivers of Performance

When we are on the right hand side of the horizontal NE axis (Figure 1.2) we are said to be in a catabolic state or 'breakdown' state. This state is underpinned by the catabolic hormones, particularly cortisol which is the body's main stress hormone. There is a strong scientific relationship between cortisol and negative emotion.

For example, people with brain tumours that produce too much cortisol often get depressed. And people suffering from depression show high levels of cortisol in their brain fluid. Consequently, increased levels of cortisol are likely to induce more 'negative' emotions. High performance is extremely difficult when we feel negative. These negative emotions then increase the cortisol still further creating a vicious cycle.

## Figure 1.2 The Real Drivers of Performance



When we are on the left hand side of NE axis we are said to be in anabolic state or "build up" state. This is underpinned by a range 'anabolic hormones', particularly Dihydroepiandrosterone (DHEA). DHEA is the 'performance' or 'vitality hormone', the body's natural antidote to cortisol and is associated with more 'positive' emotions. It is the molecule that makes testosterone in men and oestrogen in women. High performance is obviously much easier when we feel positive. These positive emotions then increase the levels of DHEA still further creating a virtuous cycle.



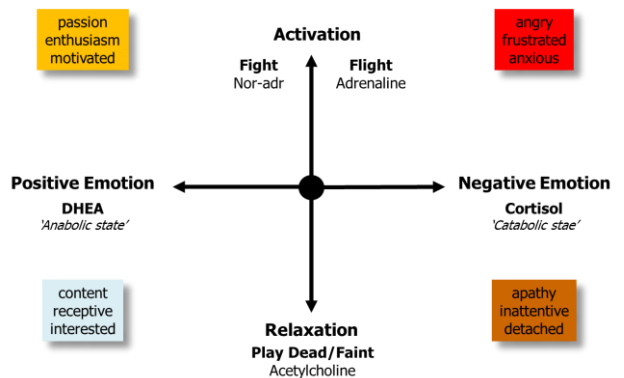
## Cortisol: DHEA Ratio

This ratio is a widely used marker for biological aging and a high cortisol: low DHEA ratio has also been implicated in many of the most common diseases we face today:

- Obesity (cortisol increases fat on the waist)
- Diabetes (cortisol increases blood sugar)
- High Blood Pressure (cortisol disrupts fluid balance)
- Heart Disease (cortisol increases cholesterol)
- Cancer (cortisol impairs immune function)
- Depression (cortisol promotes negative feelings)
- Senile dementia (cortisol impairs brain function)

A high level of cortisol impairs many aspects of performance and consequently a business may underperform simply because the “corporate cortisol” level is too high. Conversely, high DHEA levels underpin great performance. In fact DHEA is a banned substance in the Olympic Games because of its performance enhancing capabilities.

## Figure 1.3 The Performance Grid



If we put the vertical ‘Activation’ axis together with the horizontal ‘State’ axis we get the Performance Grid. The interaction of these two critical physiological systems was first described by Professor James P Henry, now working at McMaster University in Toronto.

What really matters, when it comes to consistent performance is whether we are on the positive left hand side or the negative right hand side of the performance grid not whether we are in the activated top half or relaxed bottom half of the grid.

Too often the blanket antidote for stress and performance issues is assumed to be relaxation – or just cooling the system down and dropping into the bottom half of the grid. People are obsessed with relaxation but again this obsession is underpinned by a universal misunderstanding of how our physiology really works. Just as there are two types of arousal – positive arousal (states such as passion or enthusiasm - top left) and negative arousal (states such as anger or frustration - top right), there are also two types of relaxation. It is possible to drop into the bottom half of the axis positively or negatively.



## Cortisol: DHEA Ratio

Positive relaxation is characterized by feelings such as contentment, curiosity and peacefulness whereas negative relaxation is characterised by feelings such as apathy, boredom or detachment. The problem is that when we drop into these negatively “relaxed” states we are still running high levels of cortisol and other catabolic hormones which will seriously interfere with our health, our ability to think clearly and ultimately our performance. In fact the dangers are often exacerbated because people in these negative states tend to think that they are alright because they are “relaxed”. They are not alright – physiologically speaking they are in real danger. At least when someone is in the top right quadrant of the performance grid, feeling angry, resentful or frustrated they usually realise they are not in a great place and may be more inclined to do something about it.

Just because we have learned to detach from negative feelings does not mean that the negativity has disappeared. It is still wreaking havoc with our physiology.

It is therefore essential that we are able to distinguish whether we are operating in the top right or top left of the performance grid and where our senior team is operating from. This is critical to consistently delivering best performance.



## References

- <sup>1</sup> Henry JP (1982) The relation of social to biological processes in disease. *Social Science & Medicine* 16 (4)
- <sup>2</sup> Henry JP, Stephens PM, Ely DL. (1986) Psychosocial hypertension and the defence and defeat reactions. *Journal of Hypertension* 4(6)



Clearly it's not the event or situation that impacts the outcome it's what happens emotionally as a result of those events and situations that really make the difference between life and death, success and failure, happiness and misery. This is the distinction that is so often missing in modern medicine.

Earlier I said that the real risk of heart disease were not so much the widely publicised traditional risks of blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes etc but the relatively unknown social, educational, interpersonal or physiological risks such as poverty, social inequality, low education attainment, stress, social isolation, depression, anxiety and anger. These things in and of themselves won't necessarily kill us but what these things do to our biology can.

Low educational attainment doesn't cause heart disease but it usually leads to poverty because the individual doesn't have the knowledge, skills or self-confidence to earn a decent living and that creates poverty. But even then it's still not the poverty that is creating the heart disease it's the fact that poverty usually creates emotional distress, worry and pressure – especially if that person has a family to support. If the poverty creates emotional incoherence in the physiology then it is probably experienced as worry, panic, anxiety and depression. The person may feel worthless, helpless and socially isolated which further suppresses the immune system, increases cortisol levels even more thus laying the body wide open for a host of diseases of which heart disease and cancer are just two.

One of commonest feelings that people live with is that they are 'not enough'. They feel that they are deficient in some way or there is something lacking in the world around them. These feelings of deficiency may be personalised into 'I am not a good enough husband/wife, father/mother or friend'. Women often specialize in feeling bad about their physicality: 'I am too fat' or 'my (insert appropriate body part) is too big or too small'. Men's specialist inadequacy is often centred on their ability to provide, or their strengths and physical ability. Why don't I have a six pack, or better biceps? Many people don't feel good about themselves and lead lives of quiet desperation. Whether their backside looks big in those jeans or not is largely irrelevant it's what that observation does to the person's physiology that screws up their health and happiness. In the same way it's not actually the chocolate cake that makes someone unhealthy, or the fact that they didn't go to the gym again this week - what's doing the most damage is the self flagellation, guilt, self disgust and remorse they feel after eating the chocolate cake or not going to the gym again. That's what's really doing the damage. It's important to understand that how we feel about what we're doing often has a much bigger effect on health and happiness than what we are actually doing.





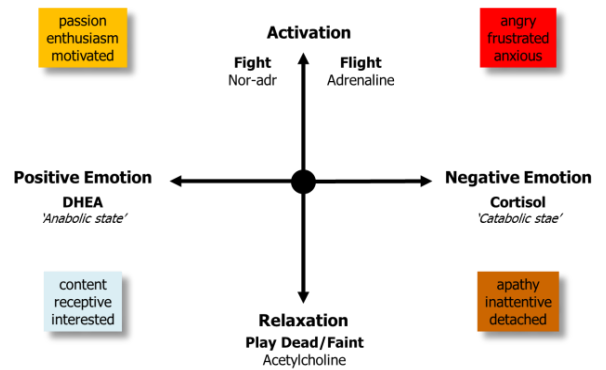
## Vicious Cycles caused by Mismanaged Emotions

Take exercise for example. One of the primary benefits of exercise is determined by the way someone feels about the exercise. If you force yourself to go to the gym but don't really enjoy it, then your body will react catabolically and you will be operating from the negative side of the performance grid. In other words your workout will be breaking your body down not building it up. In contrast, if you love going to the gym the exercise will provoke an anabolic response and will be much more beneficial to you because you're operating from the positive side of the performance grid and you're building your body up. In our coaching work we've seen many individuals who are exercising regularly but still have poor physiology and when we have changed their exercise regime to incorporate routines that are much more enjoyable their physiology has improved significantly.

Remember, what we eat and how often we exercise are relevant to optimal health but they are nowhere near as relevant as we've been led to believe. Emotion is the elephant in the room. When we understand emotion and create emotional coherence so we can differentiate between the various emotional tunes our body is playing and behave appropriately then our health and happiness will improve dramatically.

The simple unequivocal fact about health and happiness is that emotion is the active ingredient and developing emotional coherence will not only make you more productive but it just might save your life.

## Figure 3.0 The Performance Grid



we are on the left hand side of NE axis we are said to be in anabolic state or "build up" state. This is underpinned by a range 'anabolic hormones', particularly Dihydroepiandrosterone (DHEA). DHEA is the 'performance' or 'vitality hormone', the body's natural antidote to cortisol and is associated with more 'positive' emotions. It is the molecule that makes testosterone in men and oestrogen in women. High performance is obviously much easier when we feel positive. These positive emotions then increase the levels of DHEA still further creating a virtuous cycle.



## Emotions and Feelings: The Critical Difference

Most people, including medical professionals use the word “emotion” and “feeling” as interchangeable terms believing they are essentially the same thing. They are not.

Going back to the integrated performance model (figure 3.0 above) – physiology is just the raw data or the biological ‘notes’ that our body is playing. Emotion is the integration of all the various physiological signals or ‘notes’ into a tune. In contrast, a feeling is the awareness and recognition in our mind of the tune that is being played by your physical body. Or as neuroscientist, Joseph LeDoux suggests feelings are merely the ‘observation’ of the emotion .

These ‘notes’ are quite literally energy (E) in motion (E-motion). The human system is a multi-layered integrated hierarchy in a state of constant flux with each system, heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, brain playing a tune that contributes to the overall score of the orchestra. Our body is always playing a tune – whether we are aware of that tune or can recognise it or not. When we become aware of the tune that all our bodily systems are playing then we are ‘feeling’ the e-motion. Emotion is, therefore, the link between biology and behaviour. A fact not lost on Henry Maxey – CEO of Ruffer Investment Hedge Fund. Ruffer is an independent and privately-owned investment management firm employing over 160 people, with offices in London, Edinburgh and Hong Kong. When we interviewed Henry on his experiences with Enlightened Leadership he said, “The whole profession is about perceptions...

Because it’s about perceptions, human behaviour plays a huge part, hence the importance of understanding the real drivers of behaviour, namely emotions. Since emotions play such a huge part in this job it’s very helpful to have some understanding of them, your emotional state and how that’s influencing your behaviour when you’re interacting with markets.” Learning how to create greater emotional coherence has therefore been extremely valuable. Henry was one of the very few analysts to predict the credit market collapse of 2007, successfully moving his client’s investments ahead of the turmoil and massively enhancing his firm’s reputation and profile as a result. You can read Henry’s case study at [www.coherence-book.com](http://www.coherence-book.com).

Making the distinction between emotions and feelings may seem like semantics but it’s an absolutely crucial differentiation because it suddenly resolves so much of people’s misunderstandings about how we function. Plus differentiation is the second critical step in the evolution of anything so if we want to develop as human beings we must elevate our ability to differentiate between different emotions, between emotions and feelings and feeling and thoughts. For us to develop as business leaders we need to improve our ability to differentiate things that are not traditionally thought of as related to business – human biology and human nature. Most of which isn’t even given a cursory nod in Business School. And yet the benefits of this knowledge are phenomenal. When leaders, senior executives and employees understand that emotions and feelings are completely different phenomena it enables them to learn how to control both and ultimately build better relationships with customers and colleagues alike.



There is little doubt that some individuals have already learnt a degree of emotional “self-control” or at least they think they have. However such self-regulation often only extends to the control of the more obvious manifestations of body language rather than the emotional energy itself. For example, an individual may be able to conceal the fact that he is feeling angry or is desperately unhappy. He may be able to stop himself from lashing out at a colleague or bursting into tears in a meeting but this is usually no more than gross control of body language. It might look like he’s “got his act together” but inside his body he is still experiencing the negative consequences of those negative emotional signals whether he actually feels the feeling or expresses those feelings or not. In other words it might look like he’s listening to Beethoven and he may even be able to kid himself that his body is playing Beethoven but his physiology is still reacting to what’s really going on – thrash metal at full volume.

Going back to our orchestra metaphor again, underneath the external façade of “controlled emotions” is a vast number of individual musicians each playing different “notes” or sending subtle (and not so subtle) signals around the body. An examination of these uncontrolled signals can be a very revealing window on the underlying emotional state that is currently impacting the individual. Few people recognize let alone control the fine emotional nuances of their physiological orchestra.

And sophisticated control does not mean simply throwing a blanket over the whole orchestra; it means knowing how and when to allow the expression of each musician within the orchestra and how to bring coherence to the tune being played to create something genuinely astonishing. When we learn genuine control over our emotional repertoire then we alter our physiology and this can literally protect us from the illness and disease caused by mismanaged emotions. It can also protect us from poor decision making.



## References

- <sup>1</sup> Coates, J (2013) *The Hour Between Dog and Wolf: Risk Taking, Gut Feelings and the Biology of Boom and Bust* Fourth Estate, London



 Complete