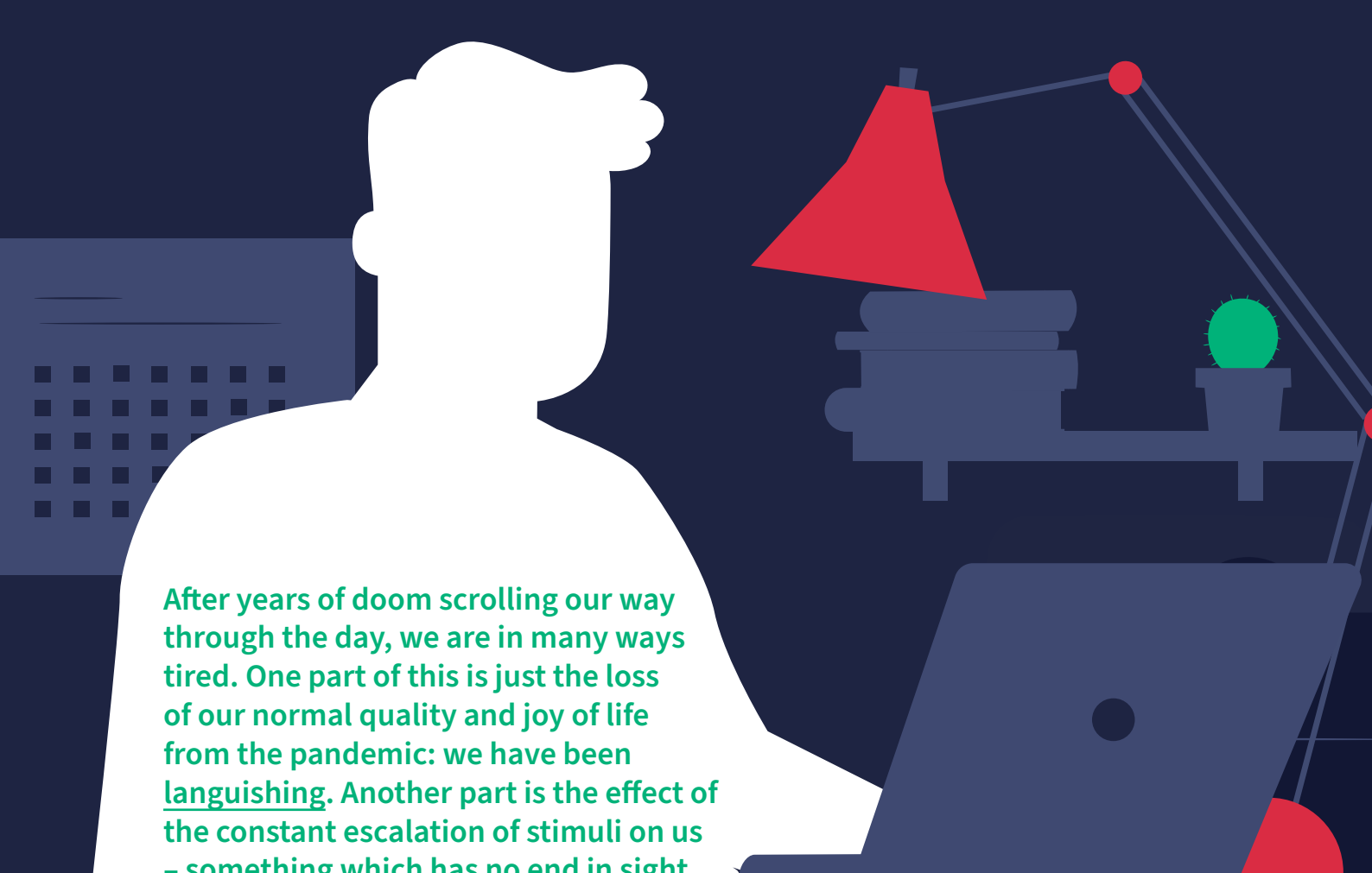


# De-escalating with CALM





After years of doom scrolling our way through the day, we are in many ways tired. One part of this is just the loss of our normal quality and joy of life from the pandemic: we have been languishing. Another part is the effect of the constant escalation of stimuli on us – something which has no end in sight.

While highlighting the unique threat of a situation can be important to galvanize action, when successive events are presented in these terms, it can lead to an ever-heightening of our responses. Stressors create a feedback loop with our thought patterns and, because of this, it is easy for emotional responses to get out of hand. For stress to be an effective means of improving performance, it needs to turn off at some stage. Otherwise, we burn out.

As leaders, we are called to serve, regenerate and energise our teams. Sometimes that means leaning into somatic and emotional intelligence rather than always reaching for solutions-based thinking. Research has shown that crisis leadership is often more about holding a team as opposed to driving a new vision of change. In light of recent times, we are seeing a big focus on the need for regulating emotional experience in teams. The Neuroleadership Institute recently considered de-escalation as one of the most necessary management skills, particularly in the context of healthcare and retail handling anxious clients.

**So, how do we hold our teams and stop the treadmill response of stressors from ramping up?**

## Leading with CALM

We think about de-escalation through the lens of a simple acronym: CALM. CALM stands for Controlled body and tone, Amygdala modulation, Language adaptation and Mindful responses. This is a simple mnemotechnic way for us to remember to stay cool in the heat of the moment and practice the following steps:

### C Controlled body and tone

As we know, much of our communication is through body language and tone, not the words we use ([particularly if the two are at odds](#)). When leading meetings or interacting with teams, we want to strive for a calming approach with an even and measured speaking voice, relaxed body movements and open posture. Not only do these ways of expression convey calm but also a sense of confidence and ease.

Avoid showing up in a way that involves heightened voice and uneven speech, jerky or sudden body movement, closed postures or a sense of looming over others. We know that in human groups, emotions are contagious. Stay calm and your calm will naturally pass to those around you.

To become more aware of your body's cues and increase your somatic intelligence, consider the following techniques:

- Conscious movement exercises (such as Tai Chi, Qigong or 5 rhythms dance)
- Physical theatre
- Body scan meditations
- Yoga nidra

### A Amygdala modulation

People sitting in a threat state lose much of their capacity for rational decision-making in favour of fight or flight survival responses. The amygdala, a part of the limbic system, is a group of cells at the base of the brain which regulates aspects of our memory, decision making and emotions. When the amygdala is activated through confrontation with potential danger, we become more emotional and impulsive.

As a leader, there is much we can do to shift people out of the threat response towards more constructive ways of being. To regulate our nervous system and reduce stress, we can employ practices such as:

- Breathing more deeply and inviting others to focus on their breathing
- Asking the other person to sit down
- Focusing on appreciation for the positives of an individual or a team, including recent gains, successes and achievements
- Building stable rituals that calm and reassure, such as Friday debriefs or mid-week check-ins
- Allowing for down time and pressure releases for team members after high stress situations or projects (such as having an afternoon off or taking a walk in the park)
- Encouraging holistic wellbeing through exercise and family or social time

## L Language adaptation

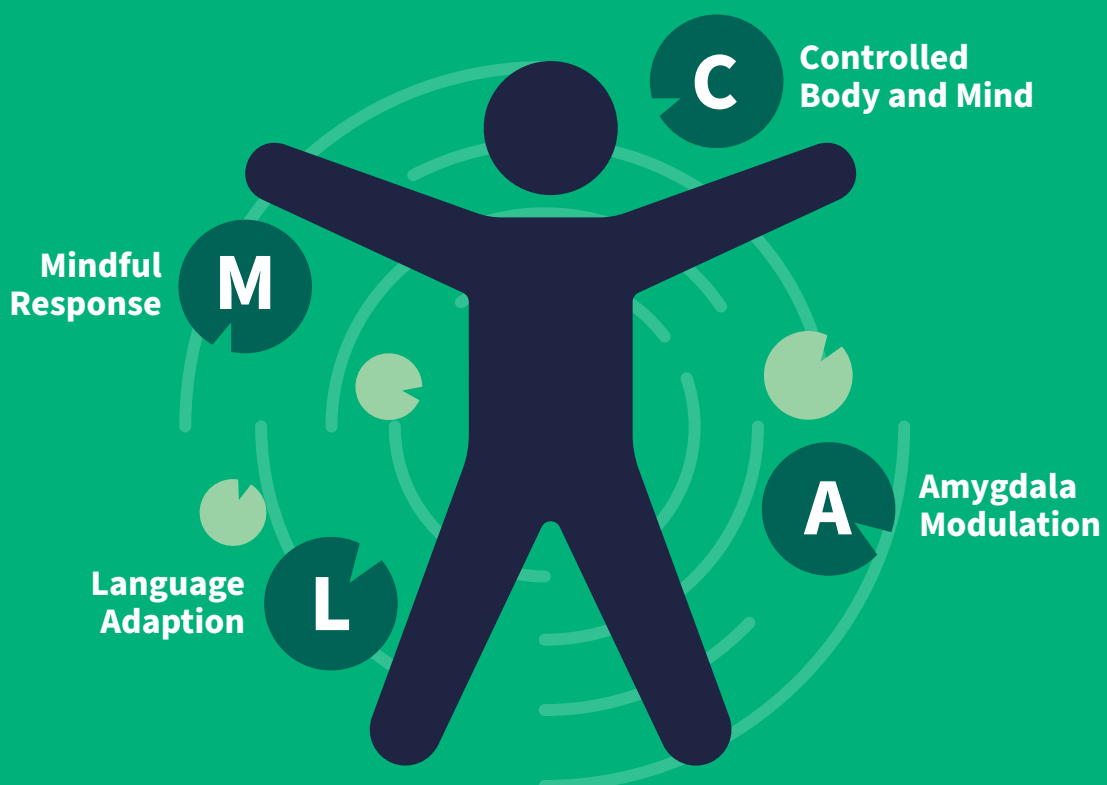
When speaking to teams or those around us, we can practice de-intensifying our language. Use more moderate words to support people in finding perspective in a situation and avoid words that signify threat, either socially or physically (words like, fail, damage, harm, loss, trouble). Consider widening perspectives and helping them embrace change as a natural part of life. Humour can also be a wonderful tool to process difficult periods in our lives.

A highly effective model for adapting our language is Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication Process. Rosenberg provides the conceptual understanding and tools for expressing how you are and receiving how another is without blaming or criticising. This method allows for a lot of flexibility and freedom to adapt to whatever situation is unfolding and its effectiveness comes from acknowledging the dignity, safety, needs and feelings of all stakeholders.

## M Mindful responses

One of the big teachings of de-escalation techniques more broadly is that when people act out, it is often driven by an underlying need or emotion. Rather than reacting to stress or anxiety behaviours and causing them to escalate further, we want to avoid taking it personally and mindfully respond instead. To do so, we can learn to identify and name our emotions as they arise, and pause for a moment, before making a choice about how we act. As Viktor Frankl says, "Between stimulus and response there is space. In that space is our power to choose our response."

A powerful way to be more mindful in the moment during these experiences is by using the CLARA Method. CLARA stands for Center, Learn, Articulate, Receive and Accomplish. This model is highly useful for mapping out our approach to a situation as it helps model compassionate, kind and empathic listening to de-escalate. By following the method, we can use active listening, empathy, and support to de-escalate the person and get to the heart of the issue. Once the crisis has passed, ensure to check-in and keep communication lines open.



## Practice Makes Perfect

Bringing calm (or CALM.) to those around you is ultimately a practice which we build over time. If we mindfully incorporate these behaviours into our every day, they will naturally arise to meet the moment when it comes. Due to the human tendency to mirror the emotions of those around us, the calmer you become, the calmer everybody else around you will be too. To adapt the wisdom of a master of equanimity:

**Be the calm  
you want  
to see in  
the world.**





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