

# HOW TO COPE IN A CRISIS

OR

# HERE'S WHAT TO DO WHEN THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

PAUL MCGEE — THE SUMO GUY

For over twenty years I've been writing and speaking about the subjects of change, resilience, leadership and dealing with uncertainty. So, as we all learn to navigate uncharted waters in unprecedented times, I wanted to share four ways we can cope.

## **1. UNDERSTAND HOW YOUR BRAIN WORKS**

In his bestselling book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman talks about two systems in our brain. Our Fast system is our primitive, emotional brain. I often represent this brain with a red baseball cap. It's the oldest part of our brain and its primary purpose is to keep us alive. Its number one priority is our survival. It's this part of our brain that triggers our fight, flight or freeze response.

However, because it's super-fast in how it processes information it often reacts to situations without having the full facts. If it had a motto it would be **'Act first, think later.'**

There are times when this part of our brain is incredibly helpful. If a driver suddenly swerves into your lane, you brake immediately. (A string of expletives may normally follow!) You don't think, or weigh up your choices, you just react. But your fast response could save your life.

In the current Coronavirus crisis, our Red Cap brain is on high alert. In fact it's on overdrive. Our very survival, and that of our loved ones, is under potential threat and this is dominating how we engage with the world right now.

We are living in uncertain times, equivalent to walking through a maze blindfolded. No one is sure what the future holds exactly, and to compensate we crave information. Sadly some of that information is neither helpful or true. It's fake, and it can make us lose our ability to think and respond calmly under pressure.

That's where our Slow brain, which I represent with a blue baseball cap, comes in.

It's the logical and rational part of our brain. It helps us to analyse data, to reflect and to plan. Unfortunately, it's our slow part of the brain that we need to consciously and intentionally access. While Red Cap brain reacts impulsively and on auto pilot, accessing Blue Cap brain takes longer.

As a result, we need to acknowledge and recognise that at times we may all react to the Coronavirus crisis irrationally.

### **We can lose perspective and panic.**

When we're in survival mode our first thoughts, perhaps understandably, are about our needs and the needs of our close family. We don't really need all those toilet rolls and paracetamol. By stocking up excessively we may create a degree of security for ourselves, but also potential pain for others.

So it's important we recognise the impact of Red Cap brain: that it is operating instinctively, in a reactionary (and often illogical) way to the challenges we face. That's why learning to slow down and taking a moment to pause and access Blue Cap brain is vital at this time.

# 2.

# MANAGE YOUR MENTAL DIET

The ocean is full of water, but it's possible to be lost at sea and die of thirst. In fact, drinking salt water is not only detrimental to your health, it also makes you thirstier.

The same can happen with our consumption of information. We crave certainty but this can lead to us feeding our minds with more and more news that isn't always true. Stories that can, on occasion, exaggerate the real picture and provide a distorted view of reality.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not a member of the happy clappy brigade. What we are facing is incredibly serious and unprecedented. In no way do I want to downplay the huge impact this virus has had and will have on peoples' lives. I know that from my own experience.

Speaking at events is how I predominantly generate my income. All my events for the next few months are cancelled. Some will be rearranged, but a number won't. My two elderly parents are vulnerable and live alone, so I'm not writing from a place of cosy comfort. I'm writing from a place of reality. A few days ago I discovered that, given my current symptoms, it's likely that I have the Coronavirus.

But if we are going to remain resilient and strong for ourselves and others, we need to manage our mental diet. We need to consume water that is pure, not salty.

We can't control what is going on in the world right now, but we can influence what's going on in our inner world.

A really great question to reflect on, and one that will engage your Blue Cap brain, is this:

*'Who's in charge, the thinker or the thought?'*

Here's the deal. You're in charge. Remember that.

But feasting on a diet of negativity and despair will only exacerbate your anxiety.

Now I'm not suggesting we play the denial card and pretend everything is fine when clearly it's not. What I *am* asking is simply this: **how balanced is your mental diet?** We need to be prepared and we need to be informed, but we also need to avoid feeding our fears.

I know that's easier said than done. But here's one idea that will help. Having struggled with my own anxiety issues, even before this global crisis began, it's something I practice every day. And it's something I will continue to do, even when this current situation is under control.

Every day I ask myself the following three questions:

**Question One – What Am I Thankful ‘Four’?** That’s four specific things you’re thankful for that happened the previous day. They don’t have to be life-changing or amazing, just four simple things that could be easy to take for granted, but which you are grateful for. It could be a cuddle with your cat, an easier commute to work, a catch up with a friend, or managing to find a shop that had some toilet rolls!

**Question Two – How Am I Showing Kindness to Others?** This could be as simple as asking a harassed checkout operator how they are, smiling, and saying thank you. It could be checking in on a neighbour to see if they need anything. It could be donating to a charity that will be under particular pressure at the moment. Again, it’s not about life changing actions, just simple acts of kindness.

**Question Three – How Am I Showing Kindness to Myself?** Self-care isn’t selfish, it’s crucial to our success and sanity. So apart from looking out for others, don’t put yourself and your needs at the bottom of your priority list. Perhaps it’s going for a walk, having a nice long bath, or choosing to do something that either relaxes or revitalises you.

Either way, make sure you look after yourself if you want to be a support to others.

# 3.

## CONNECTION COUNTS

Our current situation might limit the physical connection we have with others, but let’s get creative – there are still plenty of ways to connect. Perhaps some people might rediscover the lost art of talking on the phone, writing a letter or sending a card. Join a Facebook group, start a WhatsApp group, and when it’s appropriate, spread humour. We live in serious times, but sometimes it’s really helpful not to take ourselves too seriously. I know I’m not finding having to self-isolate easy, but I’m connecting with lots of people and those funny memes and videos they share are definitely lifting my spirits.

# 4.

# HIPPO TIME IS OK

What do Hippos do in mud? They wallow. And we all need to give ourselves permission to do the same. We need to allow ourselves the time to digest what could be the huge disappointment of cancellations and schedule changes, whether that's a holiday, family birthday party, a graduation, or even a postponed wedding. It's OK to be gutted, frustrated and seriously hacked off. In fact, it's normal. The only crumb of comfort is knowing it's not just you facing these setbacks.

However, the next point is crucial.

Hippo Time is Ok, but it's temporary. If you look at China and see how the country is slowly (but cautiously) returning to normal, it's an indication that what we're facing now is not permanent.

So be careful of becoming too stuck in the mud.

One question I often ask myself is **'How important will this be in six months' time?'** The aftershock of this crisis will, I'm sure, be felt for months and potentially years to come. But I'm also hopeful that the picture in six months' time will be a better and more hopeful one than it is now.



## **PAUL MCGEE — THE SUMO GUY**

Paul McGee is a motivational speaker, Sunday Times bestselling author and visiting Professor at the University of Chester. He's authored eleven books to date, including the best seller *How Not to Worry*.

For more information go to [www.theSUMOguy.com](http://www.theSUMOguy.com).