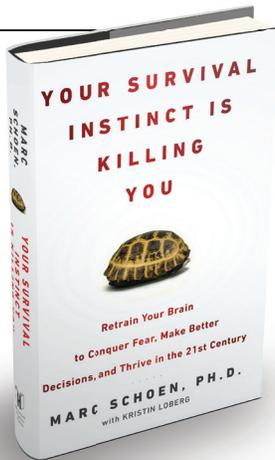


Your Survival Instinct Is Killing You

Retrain Your Brain to Conquer Fear, Make Better Decisions, and Thrive in the 21st Century

by Marc Schoen



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SUCCESS Points

From this book you'll learn:

- How increased stress and demands heighten your survival instinct's sensitivity
- How to retrain your brain's response to perceived threats
- Why stretching your comfort zone is essential
- Why adequate sleep is critical to your health
- How to stay calm, cool and collected

Emergency!

What your body *perceives* as a threat can hurt you.

QUICK OVERVIEW

Do you constantly check your email? When you have an unexpected hour of free time, do you race to fill it? Do you find it difficult to turn off your mind at bedtime? Do you drive fast even when you are not in a rush? If you answered yes to any one of these questions, your survival instinct could be working against you, says Marc Schoen, author of *Your Survival Instinct Is Killing You*.

People in developed countries have adapted to an always-on culture. Schoen explains that the survival instinct, designed to be triggered in life-threatening situations, has become hypersensitive, reacting to a myriad of perceived stresses—from deadlines to traffic jams to slow cashiers who make us late, to the fact that an expected email or text hasn't arrived. The biochemical effect of this hair trigger causes cravings, irritability, fear and other damaging mental and physical symptoms. Thankfully, Schoen offers methods and insights on how to train the body and brain to accept everyday stressors as a normal, nonthreatening part of life.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE

What pushes your buttons? You know the things that make your temper flare—perhaps unreasonably so—or the hurt you hold on to in an effort to protect yourself from future pain. One of the suggestions Marc Schoen offers in his “15 Tips for Staying Calm, Cool, and Collected” is to kick the anger habit. Anger, he explains, can become an addiction. Although the emotion certainly is valid in the right circumstances, when you feel angry for no real reason, it can perpetuate stress and agitation.

Rather than burning in anger, attempt to soothe that anger. Practicing forgiveness is a logical step toward cooling feelings of anger. Another suggestion Schoen offers is smiling—even a “half-smile” can be constructive. Additionally, doing something kind for another person can take your mind off hostile feelings. Finding constructive ways to deal with or release anger will help you, and those around you, feel healthier, happier and less stressed.

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Have you ever stopped to marvel at how clever your body really is? In just the last second, 10 trillion cellular transactions took place within you—but you didn't have to direct even 1 percent of them. And at the same time, each of those cells was given the proper nourishment to replenish its activity. You didn't need to consciously do one thing. Yes, the mind and body are unbelievable capable of sustaining our lives and the status quo. But what happens when the status quo is no longer supporting our health and our behavior in a productive way?

I've worked with thousands of people whose health, happiness, and decision-making have been compromised by discomfort and fear, and enslaved them into behavioral patterns that are unproductive and unfulfilling. I've helped chronic migraine and headache sufferers who are struck with pain when exposed to fluorescent lights, air conditioning, or a deadline by teaching them how to stop being physically affected by these triggers. I've also helped numerous people break the cycle of suffering panic attacks like clockwork when they encounter certain situations, such as a freeway overpass, an enclosed elevator, or a stuffy room full of people. One of the most universal experiences I routinely see is what I call the Let Down Effect, which transpires when a person "always" gets sick over the holidays, while on vacation, or after a big deadline has been met. I've even assisted the time-crunched and harassed CEO who functions well most of the time but becomes seriously unraveled when making decisions under pressure. All of these simple cause-and-effect relationships are not arbitrary. They are dynamic manifestations of the body's neurobiological wiring that science can now explain, and they have far-reaching ramifications for how we stay healthy and even how we age.

MISBEHAVING INSTINCTS

These may seem like vastly different problems, but they often have a single common denominator that has gone virtually unnoticed and unappreciated: a misbehaving survival instinct. In many cases, disease processes and compromised behavioral patterns are not just solely rooted in the body, but they are also stitched deep within the most primitive, old areas of our animal or limbic brain—the place where many of our ancient physical and behavioral reactions are encoded and which set the course of our behavior, health, and wellness. It is also the place where, working with my patients, I attempt to enter and stimulate the production of new neuronal pathways that ultimately redirect the body's biological path away from illness and misfiring to one that fosters health and productive behavioral patterns.

Your survival instinct is working inside you right now. It's that programmed part of you that controls what you do intuitively to save yourself when necessary, such as get up and run out of a burning building. Rarely do you need to recruit this part of you today because seldom do you find yourself in situations that are truly life-threatening. Yet I witness this instinct in action daily among patients whose chronic conditions have come to define their lives. It's the culprit acting up in the person who cannot stop overeating, the insomniac who can't find sleep, the executive who cannot gain control of his panic attacks when he prepares for a big meeting, and the individual who cannot open herself up to love because of past heartache. In all of these cases, their hair-trigger survival instinct is being unnecessarily pressed into action at the slightest hint of discomfort, which manifests itself in these injurious and destructive behaviors. Once the survival instinct seizes control of the body, it gains the power to perpetuate illness and disease, and undermine decisions and focus, without people even knowing it.

THE SINKING THRESHOLD

Paradoxically, as the comfort in our lives has expanded thanks to technology, the omnipresence of our survival instinct in action is at an all-time high in our lives and culture. Rather than lessening, our intolerance of discomfort is on an upswing, instilling within us an increasingly lower "discomfort threshold"—setting us up to be more and more at the mercy of our primitive instincts and reactions that can perpetuate disease and dysfunction.

The good news is that there is much that we can do to reset this threshold. Although our ancestral instincts direct us to flee even the anticipation of discomfort, it is now possible to transform these instincts to accept a greater tolerance for discomfort while embracing a far greater level of safety. There is little chance that we can ever fully avoid being uncomfortable, for it will always be part of our experience as humans. Ironically, you will learn in this book that your overall level of comfort is often predicated on your tolerance of discomfort, and that you can build up your "instinctual muscles" for successfully managing discomfort while turning down your overly reactive survival instinct.

MANAGING YOUR COMFORT ZONE

Much has been written in the last decade about the science of happiness: Scientists have found that we each have our own happiness "set-point," the genetic and learned tendency to maintain a certain level of happiness, similar to a

A State of Agitation

Chronic discomfort is not something that comes on suddenly or out of the blue. It's the consequence to a subtle but powerful subversive undercurrent that I call *agitation*, which is what tends to build up silently before we even sense discomfort.

With the initial signs of discomfort, it's easy to turn a blind eye to agitation as it quietly brews. But as agitation levels begin to spike, a sense of discomfort emerges. Once this happens, you notice the change in substantial and undeniable signs—significant brain fog, fatigue, aches, difficulty concentrating, high irritability, and a short temper. And it's this very threshold that indicates your agitation level has crossed the line into the discomfort zone.

If these discomfort signals continue to be ignored or artificially quelled, agitation hits dangerously high levels. At this unfortunate point, the brain and body take action to preserve the safety of the organism before serious damage occurs.

Let me be clear: Agitation itself does not represent a problem, for it's an inevitable byproduct of living in our world. It poses a problem, however, when there are a number of factors or situations tripping it off, when there is little opportunity for it to reset and lower, and when it begins to result in significant misalignments in our world. For example, we may find ourselves wanting to stay up late to work on the computer, return emails, watch shows that we've recorded, or catch up on magazines that are piled up on our desk. But the desire to do this may conflict with an increasing inner fatigue and the body's physiological need to sleep. *In other words, the more agitation we begin to feel, the more out of sync we become with our inner and outside world. And the more out of sync we become, the greater the level of misalignment.*

thermostat setting on your mental well-being. We can say the same is true of our comfort "set-point"—the genetic and learned tendency to remain at a certain level of comfort, before our survival instinct ignites and takes command. Our comfort set-points have been lowered tremendously due to certain pressures inflicted by our modern society, resulting in us having an abysmally low tolerance for discomfort. It's what I've termed the Cozy Paradox: in an age that affords us many comforts and opportunities to thrive, we've become hypersensitive to most forms of distress such that our bodies overreact to stimuli in ways that harm our health and, ultimately, our capacity to flourish. As you've also learned, stimuli can be any number of things, from fluorescent lighting that triggers migraines to calls from your boss that stir agitated feelings leading to sheer panic.

With this new understanding of how our survival instinct plays a tremendous role in our lives, we can arrive at better solutions to healing ourselves and staying as healthy as we can be. We can learn how to care for this inner part of us that refuses to be dismissed or neglected.

The pathway to raising your tolerance, however, starts by managing your agitation levels. Doing so has a dramatic impact on your everyday living and long-term health. I'm not going to recommend the usual suspects for coping, such as medications, or even talk therapy. You'd be surprised by just how easy and effortlessly you can lower your level of agitation, and the effect it has on your discomfort threshold simply by incorporating some simple and highly practical strategies in your daily life. I can't reiterate this enough: agitation levels are different from individual stressors. Unlike stressors, which typically represent an external stimulus such as specific work demands, issues with a coworker or family member, or financial problems, agitation is free-floating and is not typically experienced as a threat or felt as a moment of being uncomfortable. For the most part, agitation exists below our awareness, but it ultimately exerts a palpable effect once a certain volume has been reached.

Below are a few proven ways to help you gain control of your agitation and learn to live in a totally new dimension. See if you can incorporate just one of these into your life today, and add as many as you can over the course of the next several weeks. Many of these require nothing more than conscious awareness and planning. They needn't take any money, time, or unrealistic effort. I encourage you to read through all of these ideas first, and then choose which ones would be easiest for you today. Do those first, then build upon that plan by adding more and more of these techniques, saving the most challenging ones for later.

Simple Strategies to Stay Cool, Calm, and Collected

1. Take a Technology Time Out

Technology is boosting our overall agitation. From emails, texting, surfing the Internet, and much more, our agitation is being pushed and maintained at unsustainable levels. Schedule technology timeouts, where you take brief respites from your digital interactions, giving your mind and body a breather, and a chance for your underlying agitation to cool down

2. Value and Tolerate Imperfection

When you find yourself demanding perfection, remind yourself that it's ultimately unachievable and that it's a setup for disappointment and unhappiness.

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3. Limit the Flood of Sensory Input

We can become dependent on multiple sensory channels—from sounds, sight, tastes, smells, and behaviors. The effect of this is a craving, like an addiction of constantly needing more sensory stimulation. And without this flood of sensory information, it has become common for people to feel chronically bored and sluggish. This elevates agitation.

To avoid this perpetual need to juggle multiple sources of sensorial input, it's important to retrain ourselves to require much less stimulation. There is great value in learning to feel fulfilled and satisfied with little sensory input. Set aside certain times of the week for focusing on one or two sensory channels happening at the same time. For example, eat without distractions. Don't watch TV. Don't read. Don't speak to someone else (and don't check emails or read text messages). Activate just your sense of taste and smell. That's it.

By implementing strategies like these into your life, which are instrumental in steering clear of your discomfort, you can head off an encounter with your survival instinct.

It's important to keep in mind that the goal isn't to vanquish discomfort—this is unrealistic, and leads to a place of diminishing returns. Instead, the goal is to ultimately cope with discomfort in an effective manner, which can have a profound influence on your health and happiness, as well as how well you age. Remember, our reaction to discomfort can play a big role in biochemical alterations in the body, including the impact of your stress hormones, your body's inflammatory response, cellular aging, and even how your genes express themselves.

ALLOWING DISCOMFORT TO BENEFIT YOU

When the survival instinct kicks in, we choose to pull back and unconsciously stop ourselves from being able to explore and embrace new ways of being, whether it relates to intimacy with a partner, advancement in our career, taking action to boost our health, or exploring the higher levels of our potential. Put simply, we choose to let our survival instinct run our lives—and in some cases, run over our lives.

It's quite possible that the Native American Indians and other early tribal cultures were half right in believing that it was necessary to endure significant physical pain as part of a rite of passage. In other

words, learning that they could endure pain and still manage to survive. And no doubt physical pain does challenge our inner fears. But I've learned in

my years of practice and in my own personal experience that emotional pain can be far more challenging than physical pain. Physical pain is usually limited to a specific part of the body, while emotional pain feels all-encompassing, and with no way to quarantine it. It's no surprise, then, that the survival instinct is so quick to act to protect us when it perceives potential emotional harm and danger. And as long as our survival instinct is quick to stand up and shield us from anticipated emotional pain, we find ourselves entrapped by our instinctual primitive responses, such as anger, paralysis, overeating, illness, aggression, and withdrawal.

But by tolerating greater emotional distress without turning to the survival instinct for protection, then we can find that this does indeed become a doorway into exploring and developing our true potential, as well as higher evolved states of consciousness where our intuition, connection, and spiritualism thrive. These higher evolved states really don't happen without being able to learn that we can walk through emotional rings of fire without being burned. And maybe that's just it—that to really develop these higher levels of experience, the brain and body, even our soul (if you believe in a soul or spirit), must know that whatever information and experience that is received, no matter how uncomfortable, can be handled and managed in a safe manner. And if it doesn't feel this safety, then there is little chance of being able to receive or embrace these potentials with greater consistency.

And so I come to the crux of the matter, which is this: *Discomfort or vulnerability in our present day actually has more survival value than being comfortable once had in prehistoric times.* Seeking and settling for comfort and familiarity in the present now leads to rigidity and a constriction of brain resources. Although our ancient wiring strives for familiarity and comfort because it allowed us to survive in the past, today it actually impedes our ability to function in the present world and age more successfully. After all, aging is nothing more than a reflection of our behaviors and habits, as well as how we choose to preside over what we confront in life.

Which brings me to where I began. The management of discomfort is the single most important skill for the 21st century. Whether your goal is

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improved work performance, health, relationships, or higher levels of being, they are all ultimately contingent on developing a higher threshold of discomfort while relying less on the survival instinct to keep you safe. In this next century, our overly engaged survival instinct will be our biggest obstacle to finding health and happiness, and, like gravity, it will hold us back from exploring other areas of our lives that make life worth living.

The survival instinct is truly our inner primitive gatekeeper that separates us from our animalistic past and from our more potentially highly evolved selves. So becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable and vulnerable really is the most important tool in the 21st century. Once you form this new relationship and partnership with

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discomfort, the survival instinct will remain relegated to only where it is truly needed. Any remaining obstacles will be far less formidable and much more manageable.

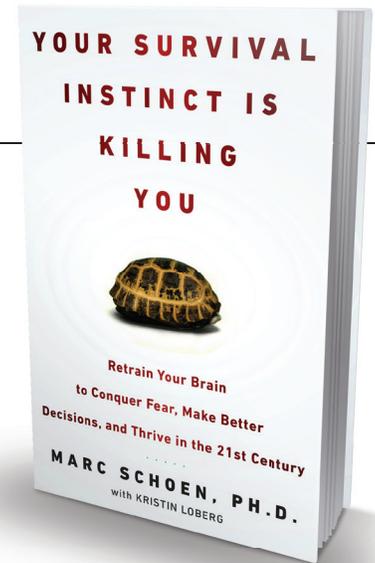
All of this is within our reach, and with discomfort as our partner, we can go far.

15 Tips for Staying Calm, Cool, and Collected

- 1. Take a Technology Time Out**—Stop all technology involved with work at least one to two hours prior to bedtime. Limit your use of “plugged-in” time throughout the day and avoid cellphones, texts, computers, especially on weekends, vacations, and evenings with the family.
- 2. Value and Tolerate Imperfection**—Working toward perfection is a recipe for unhappiness, resulting in a lack of acceptance and appreciation, and less tolerance of others. Imperfection offers us the opportunity for making constructive changes in our lives.
- 3. Limit the Flood of Sensory Input**—Retrain yourself to require much less stimulation. An easy way to start is to concentrate solely on reading one article without stopping or multitasking.
- 4. Chill at Bedtime**—Listening to a relaxation CD prior to bedtime can make a dramatic difference in how well you sleep and how you feel the next day.
- 5. S-L-O-W Down**—Slow down when you eat, speak with others, drive, and run errands. Place limits on the times you multitask.
- 6. Stop Procrastinating**—Set aside certain days of the week where you strive to procrastinate less or none at all.
- 7. Stop Trying to Get It All Done**—Accept that getting it all done is as unrealistic as striving for perfection, and that your level of comfort and happiness should no longer be predicated on being perfect or getting it all done.
- 8. Embrace Uncertainty**—Develop an increased sense of comfort, tolerance, safety, and a genuine appreciation of uncertainty. Instead of fearing it, we need to embrace it.
- 9. Kick the Anger Habit**—Give up anger and embrace forgiveness. Consider having anger-free days where you depend less on anger and focus on openness, tolerance, and acceptance.
- 10. Keep a Regular Schedule**—Develop consistency with the basic aspects of life: eating and exercising times, bedtime. The body loves predictability and thrives on a regular schedule.
- 11. Expand Your Comfort Zone**—The less we challenge our comfort zone, the more our comfort zone begins to shrink—often without our awareness. Challenge your comfort zone by doing something different: try a new hobby, a new type of food, read a book that challenges your belief system.
- 12. Take a Breather**—For one to two minutes, several times a day, use a deep breathing technique to reduce stress and reconnect with yourself.
- 13. Delay Your Needs for Gratification**—Identify the areas of your life where you frequently require instant gratification. For example, if you send an email or a text, do you feel a level of agitation if you don't get a quick response? Challenge yourself to relax during these moments without taking some form of action.
- 14. Practice Hanging Out**—Take a timeout for yourself. Sit quietly and just be still. Get comfortable with unstructured, unfilled time.
- 15. Shake a Leg**—Even short bouts of exercise can be enormously helpful in reducing agitation levels. Take a short brisk walk, jog (even in place) for 5 minutes, go up and down the stairs for several minutes, or stretch.

About the Author

Marc Schoen, Ph.D., has specialized in mind-body medicine for over 25 years. He is an assistant clinical professor at UCLA's Geffen School of Medicine, where he teaches and conducts research on mind-body medicine and hypnosis. His work has been featured in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Fortune*.



Action Steps

Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you've learned. Here are a few questions, thoughts and activities to get you started.

1. Do you recognize the effects of the survival instinct at work in your life? What are the symptoms?
2. When do you feel "agitation"? What can you do to minimize its occurrence?
3. How often do you do just one thing at a time?
4. Take a technology timeout this week. For one day, or even one hour, turn off and tune out.
5. Do you demand perfection from yourself? Do you see that demand as unrealistic?
6. Think of a stressful time in your life. Write down the things you learned, the improvements you made as a result of going through that challenging time.
7. Review the 15 strategies in the sidebar for additional ideas for staying calm, cool and collected.

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed the summary of **Your Survival Instinct Is Killing You**, you may also want to check out:

Finding Your Way in a Wide New World by Martha Beck

The 7-Minute Solution by Allyson Lewis

Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers by Robert Sapolsky

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