

EXECUTIVE PERFORMANCE GUIDE

7 Evidence-Based CBT Strategies
to Think Clearly, Lead Calmly and
Perform Confidently Under Pressure

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The Anxiety Blueprint® – Executive Edition

Executive Performance Guide

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Disclaimer

This guide is intended for educational and informational purposes only.

It is not a substitute for individual psychological assessment, diagnosis or treatment. If you are experiencing significant mental health difficulties or are in crisis, please seek appropriate professional support or contact your local emergency services.

The techniques contained within this guide are based on evidence-informed Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) principles but individual outcomes will vary.

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This guide distils the most effective cognitive behavioural strategies used in clinical practice with senior leaders. Each technique is grounded in peer-reviewed research and adapted specifically for the demands of executive performance.

The Neuroscience of Executive Pressure

Understanding the biological mechanisms behind high-stakes decision making

When executives face sustained pressure, the prefrontal cortex - responsible for rational analysis, planning and impulse control - becomes progressively impaired. Simultaneously, the amygdala increases its influence over decision-making, shifting cognitive processing toward threat detection rather than strategic thinking.

Research from the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience demonstrates that chronic stress reduces working memory capacity by up to 25%, directly impacting the quality of complex decisions. This is not a character flaw; it is a predictable neurobiological response.

The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, when chronically activated, produces sustained cortisol elevation. This creates a feedback loop: impaired sleep reduces cognitive restoration, which increases perceived threat, which further elevates cortisol.

Understanding these mechanisms is essential because it reframes the problem. Executive underperformance under pressure is not about willpower or resilience - it is about neurobiology. And neurobiology responds to targeted intervention.

Key finding: A 2023 meta-analysis in the Journal of Occupational Health Psychology found that CBT-based interventions reduced executive burnout symptoms by 41% and improved decision-making accuracy by 28% over a 12-week period.

Clinical Insight

The strategies in this guide target specific neural pathways. Each technique is designed to restore prefrontal cortex function and regulate amygdala reactivity - giving you back the cognitive clarity that pressure erodes.

Strategy 1

Cognitive Restructuring for Decision Fatigue

Decision fatigue is the progressive deterioration of decision quality after a long session of decision-making. For executives making hundreds of decisions daily, this represents a significant and often unrecognised performance risk.

The Mechanism

Cognitive restructuring identifies and challenges the automatic thoughts that amplify decision fatigue. These typically include catastrophising ('If I get this wrong, everything fails'), all-or-nothing thinking ('This must be perfect'), and mind-reading ('They will think I am incompetent').

The Protocol

1. Identify the decision point creating tension
2. Notice the automatic thought arising
3. Label the cognitive distortion (catastrophising, black-and-white thinking, etc.)
4. Generate an evidence-based alternative thought
5. Rate your confidence in the balanced thought (aim for 60%+)

Executive Application

Before your next high-stakes meeting, take 90 seconds to write down your primary concern. Ask: 'What is the evidence for this thought? What is the evidence against? What would I tell a trusted colleague in this situation?'

This is not positive thinking. It is accurate thinking - and accuracy under pressure is what separates effective leaders from reactive ones.

Clinical Insight

In clinical practice, executives who use cognitive restructuring before board presentations report a 35% reduction in anticipatory anxiety and significantly improved clarity during Q&A sessions.

Strategy 2

The 90-Second Emotional Reset

Neuroscientist Dr Jill Bolte Taylor identified that the physiological lifespan of an emotion in the body is approximately 90 seconds. After that, any remaining emotional response is being maintained by thought patterns - which are within your control.

The Mechanism

This strategy leverages the natural neurochemical cycle. When triggered, adrenaline and cortisol surge through the body. If you can avoid adding cognitive fuel (rumination, catastrophising) for 90 seconds, the initial chemical cascade naturally subsides.

The Protocol

1. Notice the emotional trigger (frustration, anxiety, anger)
2. Start a mental 90-second count
3. Direct attention to physical sensations only (chest tightness, jaw tension, heat)
4. Breathe: 4 counts in, 6 counts out
5. After 90 seconds, re-engage with the situation from a regulated state

Executive Application

Use this between back-to-back meetings, after receiving difficult feedback, or when you notice your tone shifting in a negotiation. The 90-second window is your neurobiological reset button.

This technique is particularly effective for leaders who pride themselves on composure. It works with your existing self-regulation rather than against it.

Clinical Insight

Clinical observation: executives who master this technique report that colleagues notice improved composure within two weeks - often before the executive themselves recognises the shift.

Strategy 3

Behavioural Activation Under Pressure

When anxiety escalates, the natural response is avoidance - postponing difficult conversations, delaying decisions, withdrawing from visibility. Behavioural activation reverses this pattern by scheduling valued action regardless of emotional state.

The Mechanism

Avoidance provides short-term relief but long-term deterioration. Each avoided task confirms the implicit belief that you cannot cope, narrowing your operational range. Behavioural activation breaks this cycle by decoupling action from mood.

The Protocol

1. Identify your current avoidance patterns (delayed emails, postponed meetings)
2. Rate each avoided task: importance (1-10) and difficulty (1-10)
3. Schedule the highest importance/lowest difficulty task first
4. Complete it regardless of how you feel
5. Record the outcome vs. your prediction

Executive Application

Create a 'Monday Morning Non-Negotiables' list - three high-value tasks you complete before 10am regardless of mood. This builds evidence that your performance is not contingent on feeling ready.

The executive who waits to feel confident before acting will always be outperformed by the one who acts and lets confidence follow.

Clinical Insight

Leaders who implement structured behavioural activation report that within three weeks, the gap between 'wanting to act' and 'acting' narrows significantly. The technique builds its own momentum.

Strategy 4

Attentional Control Training

Anxiety hijacks attention. It narrows focus onto threat-related stimuli while reducing capacity for broad strategic thinking. Attentional control training systematically rebuilds your ability to direct focus where you choose.

The Mechanism

Attention is not passive - it is a trainable skill. The Attention Training Technique (ATT), developed by Professor Adrian Wells, strengthens executive control over attention by practising deliberate shifts between auditory stimuli.

The Protocol

1. Selective attention: focus on one sound for 2 minutes, ignoring others
2. Attention switching: alternate between different sounds every 10 seconds
3. Divided attention: attempt to monitor all sounds simultaneously for 2 minutes
4. Practise daily for 12 minutes total

Executive Application

Before entering a complex negotiation or board meeting, spend 3 minutes practising attention switching. This primes the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex - the brain region responsible for maintaining focus amid competing demands.

This is not mindfulness. It is cognitive training with a specific neurological target: strengthening the neural circuits that allow you to choose where your attention goes.

Clinical Insight

Research shows that 4 weeks of ATT practice produces measurable improvements in sustained attention and reduces intrusive worry by up to 50% in clinical populations.

Strategy 5

Values-Based Decision Making

Under pressure, decisions default to threat avoidance rather than value pursuit. Values-based decision making provides a stable framework that holds regardless of emotional state or external pressure.

The Mechanism

When the amygdala dominates, decisions optimise for safety. Values-based frameworks re-engage the prefrontal cortex by providing clear criteria that bypass emotional reactivity. The question shifts from 'What feels safest?' to 'What matters most?'

The Protocol

1. Identify your three core professional values (e.g., integrity, innovation, impact)
2. For each decision, ask: 'Which option best serves these values?'
3. Notice when fear is masquerading as prudence
4. Document decisions and their values-alignment for quarterly review
5. Adjust course when patterns reveal drift from stated values

Executive Application

Create a one-page 'Decision Charter' listing your values, their definitions, and one example of each in action. Review it before any decision involving significant uncertainty or stakeholder pressure.

Values do not eliminate difficulty. They provide clarity within it - and clarity is the antidote to paralysis.

Clinical Insight

Executives who use explicit values frameworks report 40% faster decision-making in ambiguous situations and significantly less post-decision rumination.

Strategy 6

Physiological Regulation Techniques

The body and mind operate as a single system. Physiological dysregulation - elevated heart rate, shallow breathing, muscle tension - directly impairs cognitive function. Regulation techniques restore the biological conditions necessary for clear thinking.

The Mechanism

The vagus nerve connects the brainstem to major organs and mediates the parasympathetic 'rest and digest' response. Specific breathing patterns stimulate vagal tone, shifting the autonomic nervous system from sympathetic (fight/flight) to parasympathetic (calm/connected).

The Protocol: Box Breathing

1. Inhale through the nose for 4 counts
2. Hold for 4 counts
3. Exhale through the mouth for 4 counts
4. Hold for 4 counts
5. Repeat for 4 cycles (approximately 90 seconds)

The Protocol: Physiological Sigh

1. Double inhale through the nose (one full breath + one short top-up)
2. Long, slow exhale through the mouth
3. Repeat 2-3 times
4. This is the fastest known method to reduce physiological arousal

Executive Application

Use box breathing before presentations. Use the physiological sigh during meetings when you notice tension rising. Neither requires anyone to know you are doing it.

Clinical Insight

Stanford research demonstrates that the physiological sigh reduces cortisol levels within 60 seconds - faster than any other breathing technique studied to date.

Strategy 7

Building a Sustainable Performance Protocol

Individual strategies are powerful. A structured protocol that integrates them into daily practice is transformational. This final strategy is about building a system that maintains your cognitive performance over months and years, not just moments.

The Mechanism

Habit stacking and implementation intentions ('When X happens, I will do Y') convert effortful strategies into automatic responses. Over time, the cognitive cost of regulation decreases as neural pathways strengthen through repetition.

The Daily Protocol

- Morning (5 min): Review values charter + set three non-negotiable tasks
- Pre-meeting (90 sec): Box breathing or attention switching
- Mid-day (3 min): Cognitive restructuring check - identify and challenge one automatic thought
- Post-trigger (90 sec): Emotional reset protocol
- Evening (5 min): Brief review - what worked, what to adjust

The Weekly Protocol

- Monday: Set behavioural activation targets
- Wednesday: Mid-week values alignment check
- Friday: Review decisions made under pressure - were they values-aligned?

Consistency matters more than intensity. Five minutes daily outperforms an hour weekly. The goal is not perfection - it is a reliable baseline that holds under pressure.

Clinical Insight

In clinical practice, executives who maintain a daily protocol for 8+ weeks show sustained improvements in stress biomarkers, sleep quality, and self-reported decision confidence.

Implementation Framework

A structured 8-week integration plan for sustained performance improvement

Integrating seven strategies simultaneously is neither realistic nor advisable. The following framework introduces each technique progressively, allowing neural consolidation before adding complexity.

Weeks 1-2: Foundation

Physiological regulation (box breathing + physiological sigh) and the 90-second emotional reset. Practise daily. These require minimal cognitive effort and provide immediate relief.

Weeks 3-4: Cognitive Skills

Add cognitive restructuring. Begin identifying automatic thoughts and practising evidence-based challenges. Use the thought record template provided.

Weeks 5-6: Behavioural Integration

Introduce behavioural activation and attentional control training. Establish Monday Morning Non-Negotiables and daily ATT practice.

Weeks 7-8: Strategic Framework

Implement values-based decision making and build your sustainable performance protocol. Create your Decision Charter and daily/weekly review structure.

Key Principle: If you miss a day, simply resume the next. The goal is a sustainable baseline, not a perfect streak. Progress is measured in weeks, not days.

About the Author

Karen Vernon is a BABCP Accredited CBT Therapist and Registered Mental Health Nurse with extensive experience working with senior executives, business leaders and high-performing professionals.



Karen provides private 1:1 therapy both in person (Southport, UK) and online, specialising in executive anxiety, trauma, mood challenges and menopause-related mental health. Her approach combines rigorous clinical evidence with practical, actionable strategies designed for the demands of leadership.

Qualifications

- BABCP Accredited Cognitive Behavioural Therapist
- Registered Mental Health Nurse
- BSc (Hons) | PG Certificates | PG Dip CBTp-bd
- Founder, Thrive Therapy Academy
- Founder, Menopause Masters® Academy

Next Steps

If you recognise yourself in these pages and would like personalised support implementing these strategies, Karen offers confidential 1:1 sessions tailored specifically to executive performance.

Book: [Executive Anxiety Consultation Booking](#)

Website: [executive anxiety support](#)

Instagram: @thrivetherapyacademy

"The most effective leaders I work with share one trait: they treat their cognitive performance with the same rigour they apply to their business strategy. This guide is your starting point."

- Karen Vernon

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