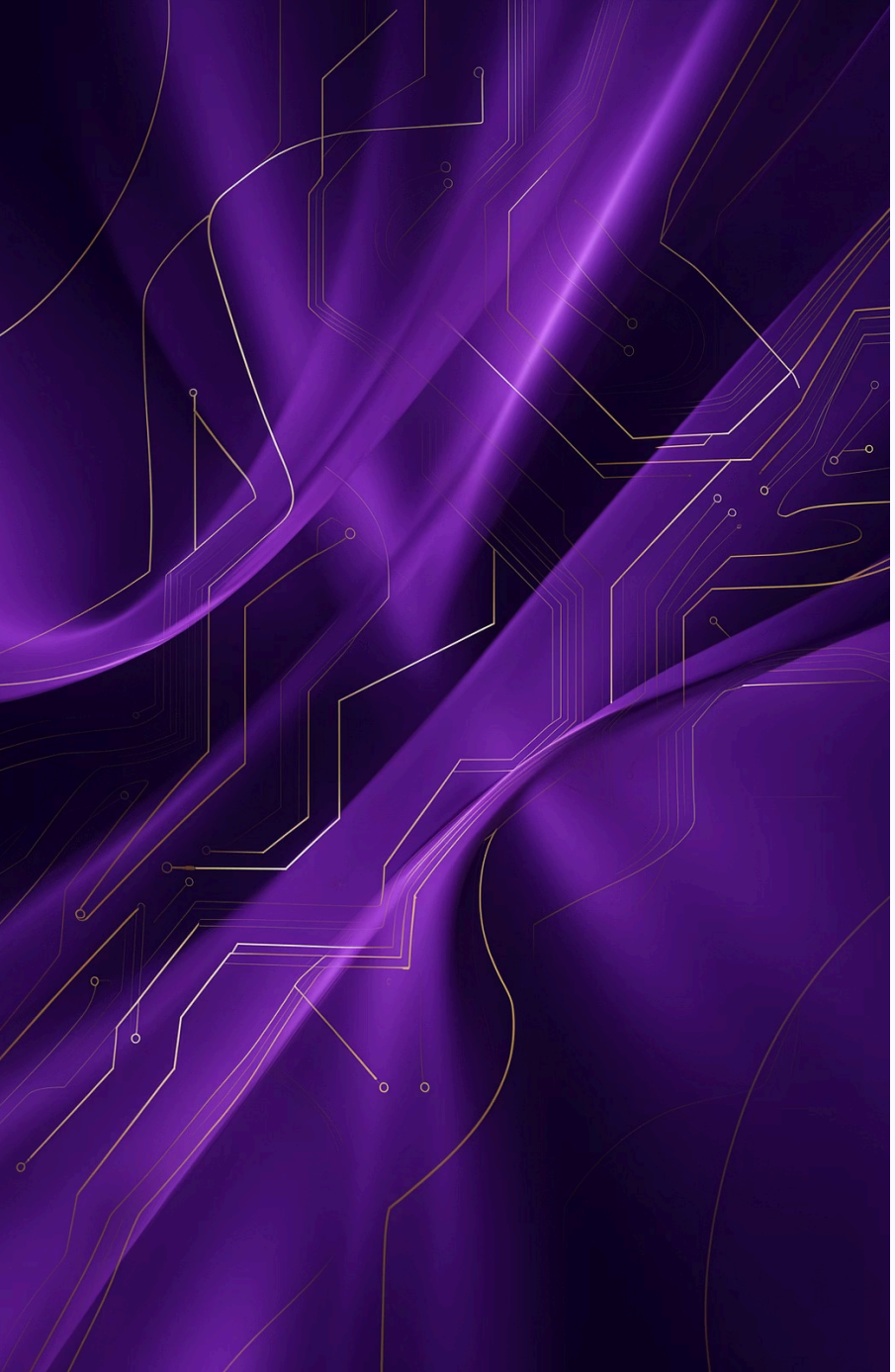

MASTERCLASS 2 · SUSTAINABLE EXCELLENCE TRACK

What Stress Actually Does to the Brain and Body

Emotional Regulation & Performance Psychology

> Core Question: Why does pressure sharpen some students and derail others?

Total Duration: 75 minutes

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ACADEMY

Performance Is More Than Knowledge

Students often assume preparation alone determines results. In high-pressure moments, the equation is more complex. True performance depends on two things working together:

Knowledge

What you know, built over time through content, skills, and preparation. This is the foundation — but it is not the full picture.

State Management

How you regulate your mind and body in the moment of performance. This is the variable most students overlook — and the one that decides the outcome under real pressure.

Understanding your stress response gives you the ability to **perform consistently**, avoid mental shutdown, and recover quickly when pressure peaks.

How This Session Works

Four stages, each building on the last — designed to move you from concept to personal application by the end of 75 minutes:

1

Provocation

A challenging question or scenario to activate thinking and surface assumptions about stress and performance.

2

Concept & Model

A clear framework grounded in research that gives structure to the idea and explains the science behind the stress response.

3

Application

Practical exercises and tasks that connect the model to your real experience — building self-awareness as a performance skill.

4

Artefact Build

You document your insights to build a personal performance system over time — your own regulation manual.

Session Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be equipped to **recognise and work with your stress response** rather than be controlled by it. Four objectives:

Understand the Stress Response

What happens biologically and psychologically under pressure — and why it affects performance.

Recognise Early Warning Signs

Identify your personal physical and mental stress signals before they escalate and derail performance.

Connect Physiology to Performance

Understand how body states directly influence cognitive output — and why blanking happens.

Begin Building a Regulation System

Start developing tools and strategies you can apply in real performance moments.

SECTION 2 — 10–22 MIN

The Thinking Gap & Provocation

Surfacing what students believe about stress — and challenging it

The Thinking Gap

One of the biggest barriers to performance improvement is a persistent misconception about stress itself.

Common Belief

"Stress is bad. It hurts my performance and I need to eliminate it."

This belief leads students to avoid pressure, catastrophise stress signals, and feel powerless in high-stakes moments.

The Reality

- Stress is a **biological signal** — neither good nor bad
- The outcome depends entirely on how you **interpret and regulate it**
- **Unmanaged stress** is the problem — not stress itself

This shift in framing changes everything. You move from feeling controlled by stress to being able to work with it deliberately.

PROVOCATION — 3-MINUTE OPEN DISCUSSION

A Tale of Two Students

Same exam. Same knowledge. Same preparation. Two very different outcomes.

Student A

Thrives under pressure — delivers their best performance when stakes are highest. Feels **alert, focused, and in control**. Pressure activates rather than derails.

Student B

Freezes under pressure — blanks on material they know well. Feels **overwhelmed, scattered, and unable to recover**. Pressure shuts the system down.

> **Discussion Prompt:** What explains the difference? Is it intelligence? Preparation? Something else?

⚠ **Hold your answers** — we'll return to them once we've explored the science. Don't reveal the explanation yet.

KEY INSIGHT

Unpacking the Difference

The gap between Student A and Student B is **not** about who studied harder or who is more capable. The difference lies in three trainable areas:

Physiological Response

How the body reacts to a stress trigger — heart rate, breathing, muscle tension. Performers learn to recognise and **modulate these before they escalate**.

Mental Framing

The interpretation placed on stress signals. Is a racing heart a sign of **danger or readiness?** Framing determines the direction of performance.

Regulation Ability

The capacity to intervene using breath, attention, or self-talk to shift from a reactive state to a controlled one. **All three are trainable.**

FACILITATED DISCUSSION — 4 MINUTES

Reframing Stress — Class Discussion

> When has stress ever *helped* your performance? Think of a moment — a sport, a performance, a deadline — where pressure made you **sharper, not worse.**

→ What Was Different?

Compare that sharpening moment to moments when stress derailed you. What changed — your mindset, the context, the stakes?

→ What Did You Do Differently?

Did you interpret the pressure differently? Did your body respond differently? Did you have more preparation or a clearer focus?

→ What Can You Replicate?

If stress helped you once, it can help you again. The goal is to understand the conditions — and create them deliberately.

Establish with the class: The goal of this session is not to eliminate stress. It is to understand it well enough to **use it**.

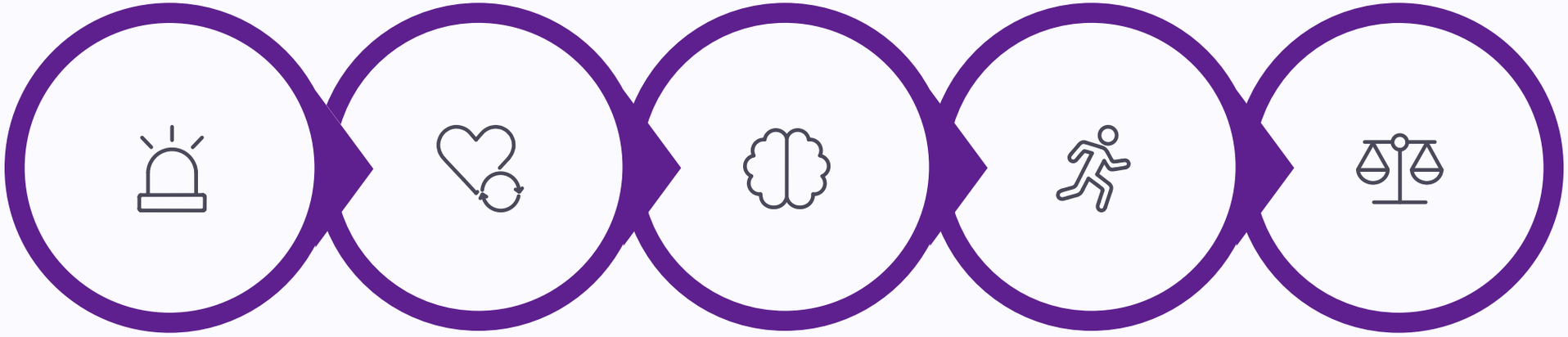
SECTION 3 — 22–38 MIN

The Science of Stress

Understanding the biological and psychological mechanisms behind the stress response

The Stress Response Model

High performers don't eliminate stress — they understand the sequence it follows and intervene at the right point. The model maps that sequence from start to outcome:



Every stress episode follows this path. The most powerful intervention points are **between Physiological Response and Thought**, and **between Thought and Behaviour** — where regulation strategies have the greatest impact on final outcomes.

Understanding the sequence is what makes intervention possible. You cannot regulate what you cannot map.

The Biology of Stress

When a threat or high-stakes moment is perceived, the body activates an **automatic survival response** — designed to protect, but capable of derailing performance when left unmanaged.

Cortisol

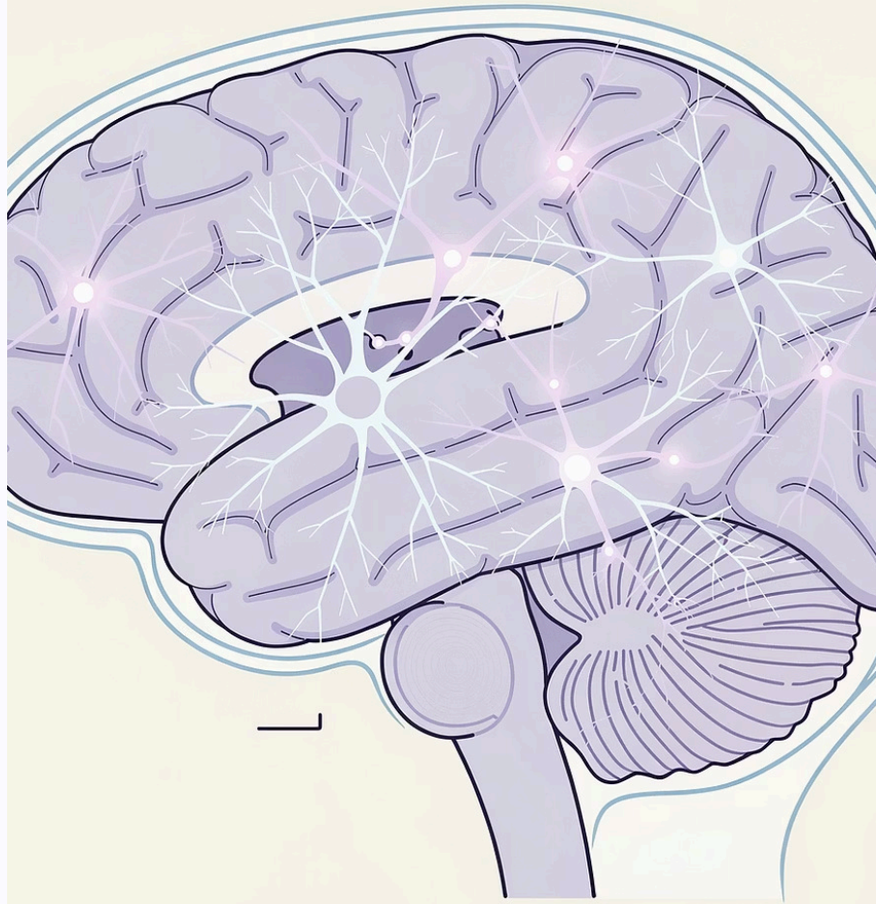
The primary stress hormone, released to mobilise energy. Useful in short bursts, but **sustained cortisol impairs memory consolidation** and reduces cognitive flexibility.

Adrenaline

Triggers the fight-or-flight response, increasing heart rate and sharpening immediate focus. At high levels, it **narrows attention and reduces access to stored knowledge**.

Working Memory Impact

Under acute stress, the prefrontal cortex — responsible for reasoning and recall — is **partially suppressed**. This is why students "blank" on material they know well.



The Psychology of Stress

Beyond the biological response, stress exerts a powerful effect on **cognition and emotion** — shaping how you think, recall, and feel under pressure.

Narrowed Attention

The stressed brain fixates on perceived threats. Peripheral information — including useful context and prior knowledge — becomes inaccessible.

Reduced Recall

High cortisol interferes with retrieval pathways. You may "know" the answer but be **unable to access it under pressure** — this is a retrieval failure, not a knowledge gap.

Emotional Amplification

Negative emotions — anxiety, self-doubt, frustration — are intensified under stress, making it harder to think clearly and maintain performance confidence.

⚠ **Key distinction:** Blanking in an exam is not evidence that you don't know the material. It is a stress-induced retrieval failure — and it is manageable.

PAIR ACTIVITY — 3 MINUTES

Check for Understanding — Quick Quiz

Without looking at notes, pairs answer three questions. Then share answers with the class.

1

Question 1

What does **cortisol** do to memory under sustained stress?

2

Question 2

Why do students **"blank"** on material they've studied — what is actually happening in the brain?

3

Question 3

Name **one psychological effect** of stress beyond the physical response.

Reinforce the key distinction: Blanking is a *retrieval failure caused by stress physiology* — not evidence that you don't know the material.

Stress & Performance — The Divergence

The same stressor — same exam, same pressure, same environment — produces **fundamentally different outcomes** depending on how a student responds to their internal state.

High Performers Under Pressure

Regulate state in real time. Reframe threats as challenges. **Recover quickly** without compounding errors. Each stressful moment is managed and released.

Low Performers Under Pressure

Spiral — one stressful moment triggers a growing cascade of anxiety. **Overthink** — rumination consumes cognitive bandwidth. **Shut down** — the system becomes overwhelmed and produces blank-outs or avoidance.

The divergence is not fixed. It is a skill gap — and skill gaps close with deliberate practice.

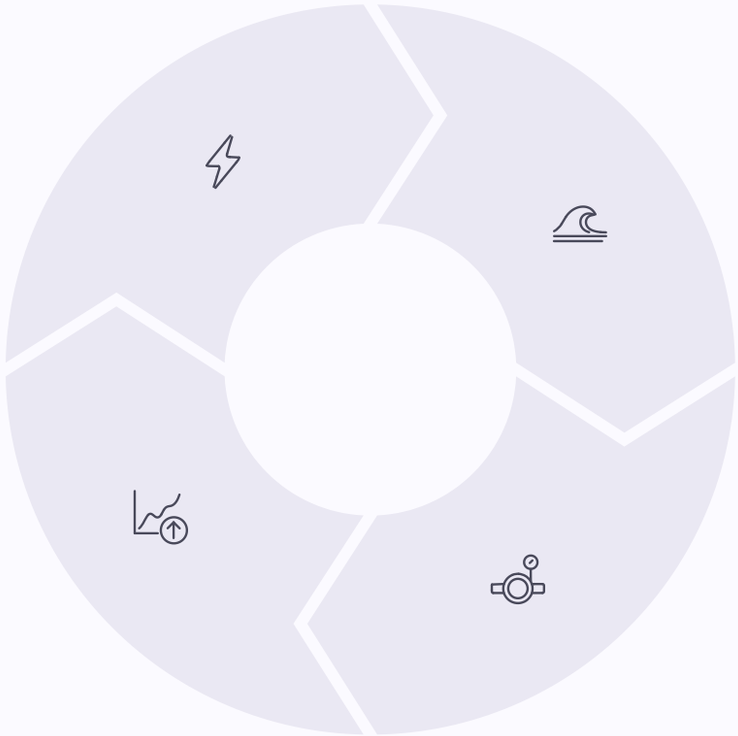
CORE TOOL

The Performance Loop

This four-stage loop is the foundational framework for this masterclass. It maps the journey from stress trigger to recovered performance — and reveals exactly where to intervene.

Trigger

An internal or external stressor activates the stress response — a question, a crowd, a time constraint.



Reaction

Automatic physiological and psychological responses kick in: heart rate rises, thoughts narrow, emotion intensifies.

Regulation

A deliberate intervention is applied — breath control, reframing, attention shifting — to redirect the stress response.

Recovery

Return to a functional, focused performance state. The loop is complete, and each repetition builds the skill.

The Performance Loop is not about eliminating stress. It is about **shortening the distance between Reaction and Recovery.**

Regulation Strategies — The Toolkit

Three categories of intervention that work at different points in the Performance Loop. These are not tricks — they are **learnable, repeatable skills**.

Physiological

- Slow, controlled breathing — **extended exhale** activates the parasympathetic system within 60–90 seconds
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Cold water on wrists

Cognitive

- Reframing — *"this feeling is energy, not danger"*
- Instructional self-talk — *"focus on the next step, not the outcome"*
- Attention anchoring — bring focus back to the task in front of you

Behavioural

- Brief physical movement to discharge adrenaline
- Structured pre-performance routines that signal "safe to perform"
- Strategic pausing before responding

Is Stress Helpful or Harmful?

The honest answer is: **it depends.** Stress is not inherently destructive — in many cases it is the fuel that drives elite performance. The outcome is determined by three variables:

1

Intensity

Low-to-moderate stress **enhances focus and motivation**. High intensity overwhelms the system and impairs thinking. The optimal zone exists — and it's different for everyone.

2

Duration

Brief stress followed by recovery is **healthy and adaptive**. Chronic, sustained stress without recovery leads to burnout, cognitive decline, and emotional depletion.

3

Management

The same level of stress, **managed well, produces growth**. Unmanaged, it produces breakdown. Management is the variable you can most directly train and control.

INDIVIDUAL WORK — 5 MINUTES

Know Your Stress Profile — Part 1

Before you can regulate stress, you must know how your stress **behaves**. This task begins the process of building self-awareness as a performance skill. Answer three questions in writing:

01

Personal Stress Triggers

What situations, environments, or moments reliably activate your stress response? Time pressure? Social evaluation? Unexpected changes? Performance in public?

02

Physical Signs

Where do you feel stress in your body? Elevated heart rate, shallow breathing, jaw or shoulder tension, sweating, hollow stomach?

03

Mental Patterns

What thoughts arise under pressure? Catastrophising, self-doubt, comparison to others, replaying mistakes — or going completely blank?

Write honestly. This is personal data — not a test of how well you perform under stress. Precision now creates the conditions for real change.

PAIR WORK — 4 MINUTES

Upgrading Your Language — Part 2

Precision in self-description is a performance skill. **Vague language keeps you stuck; specific language creates the conditions for change.**

Weak Response

"I get stressed in exams."

Too broad to act on — it labels the experience without mapping it, leaving **no entry point for intervention**.

Strong Response

"I notice increased heart rate and negative self-talk before my performance drops."

Specific, sequenced, and actionable — it identifies the signal, the thought pattern, and the timing, giving a **clear moment to intervene**.

Task: Take one of your triggers from Part 1 and rewrite it using the Strong Response format. Share with your partner and refine together.

FACILITATED SHARE-BACK — 5 MINUTES

Class Debrief — Stress Profiles

Invite 3–4 students to share one insight from their stress profile — a trigger, a physical signal, or a mental pattern they hadn't previously named.

How Many People Share the Same Triggers?

Notice the patterns in the room. Shared triggers reveal how much of the stress experience is universal — and therefore workable.

How Different Are the Physical Signals?

Signals vary significantly between individuals — one person's racing heart is another person's frozen stillness. There is no single "correct" stress profile.

What Has Never Been Named Before?

For many students, this is the first time they have articulated their stress pattern with precision. That precision itself is powerful.

Reinforce: Naming your stress pattern precisely is itself a regulation act — it activates the prefrontal cortex and begins to interrupt the automatic stress cascade.

WHOLE-CLASS PRACTICE — 3 MINUTES

Live Regulation Practice — Breathing Exercise

Guided physiological regulation using **extended-exhale breathing**. Instructor leads the whole class through the sequence:

1

Breathe In

Inhale slowly for **4 counts**

2

Hold

Pause for **1 count**

3

Breathe Out

Exhale slowly for **6–8 counts**

4

Repeat

Complete **4–5 cycles**

After Practice — Ask the Class

What changed? Heart rate? Attention? Sense of control? Have students name what they notice.

The Mechanism

Extended exhale stimulates the vagus nerve, activating the parasympathetic nervous system — the biological "rest and recover" mode. Deployable in **60 seconds** before any high-stakes moment.

This is not relaxation. This is **deliberate physiological regulation** — a learnable, repeatable skill.

From Awareness to System — The Transition

Self-awareness without a system is incomplete. Knowing your triggers and signals is **step one.** Step two is building a repeatable, personal response — a regulation system you can deploy automatically when pressure arrives.

Step 1: Awareness

You know your triggers, your physical signals, and your mental patterns. You can name them with precision.

Step 2: System

You build a repeatable, personal response — a regulation sequence grounded in your own data, not generic advice.

Step 3: Automation

With repeated practice, the regulation system becomes available **under real pressure** — not just in reflection after the fact.

The Performance Regulation Manual is that system. It is built from **your own data** — and over time, it becomes one of the most valuable performance tools you own.

ARTEFACT BUILD

Artefact 8 — Performance Regulation Manual

Your first entry in a living document you will build across the Sustainable Excellence Track. It begins with self-knowledge. Four sections to complete:

01

Triggers

List the specific situations, contexts, or cues that reliably activate your stress response in academic or performance settings.

02

Physical Signals

Document the bodily sensations that indicate stress is rising — your personal physiological **early warning system**.

03

Mental Signals

Record the thought patterns and emotional shifts that emerge: self-doubt, narrowing focus, catastrophising, or avoidance urges.

04

Current Responses

Honestly describe what you currently do when stress arrives — helpful or unhelpful. This is your **baseline for growth**.

Students begin writing — **5 minutes in class.** Remainder to be completed before the next session.

REFLECTION

When Do You Perform Best Under Pressure?

> Think back to a moment where pressure actually *helped* you. What was different about that situation — your mindset, your preparation, your environment, the stakes involved?

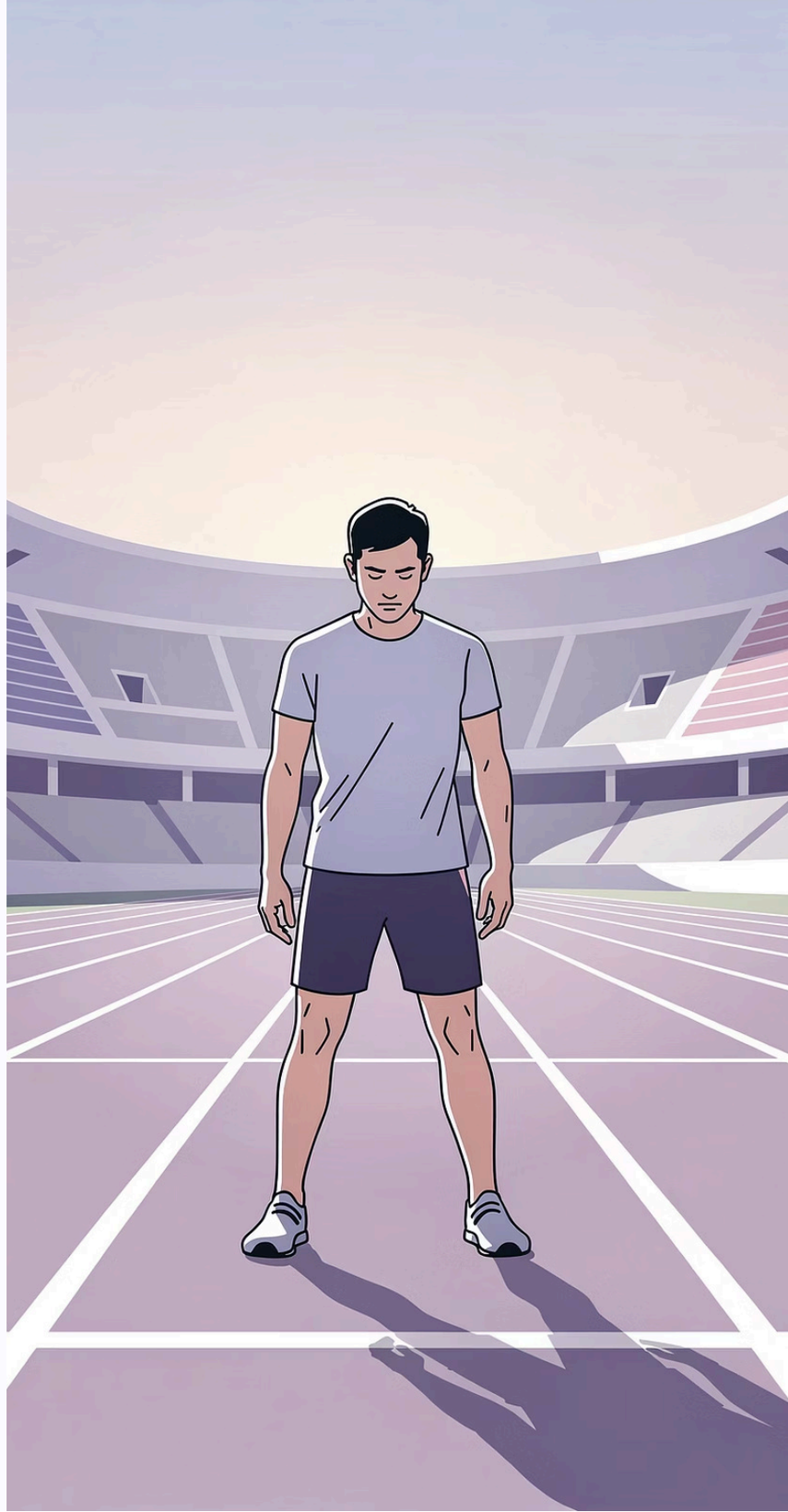
→ What Made It Different?

Was it the level of preparation? A supportive environment? A clear sense of purpose? Lower stakes that allowed your system to stay open rather than shut down?

→ What Can You Deliberately Replicate?

If those conditions helped once, they can be created again. Understanding what unlocked your best performance is the beginning of a regulation strategy.

Write one sentence that captures what "performing well under pressure" looks and feels like for you specifically. Bring this to your Artefact 8.



Key Takeaways — What You Now Know

Stress is not the enemy — unmanaged stress is.

The framing shift from "stress is bad" to "stress is neutral" changes what you can do with it.

The stress response follows a predictable sequence.

Trigger → Physiology → Thought → Behaviour → Outcome. Knowing the sequence reveals where to intervene.

Cortisol and adrenaline impair working memory.

Blanking is a retrieval failure caused by stress physiology — not evidence of a knowledge gap.

High performers regulate; low performers spiral.

Both responses are trainable. The divergence is a skill gap, not a fixed trait.

The Performance Loop shortens the distance between Reaction and Recovery.

Self-awareness is the first act of regulation — naming your stress pattern interrupts it.

EXTENSION TASK

Track One Stressful Moment This Week

Use the **Performance Loop** as your lens on one real stress moment this week. Record the following:

1

The Trigger

What was the specific situation, environment, or moment that activated your stress response?

2

Your Reaction

What was your physiological response — heart rate, breathing, tension? What mental patterns emerged?

3

Your Regulation

Did you regulate — and if so, how? What did you do to intervene between Reaction and Recovery?

4

Your Recovery

How quickly did you return to a functional, focused state? What helped or hindered that return?

Bring your observations back as raw material for **Artefact 8.** Real data from your own experience is the most powerful evidence you can use.

SESSION CLOSE

What's Next

> Next session, we move from understanding the stress response to actively training it.

Regulation Under Pressure

You will practise regulation strategies under **simulated pressure** — building the skill so it is available when it counts.

Pre-Performance Routines

You will develop a **personal pre-performance routine** — a repeatable sequence that primes your system for peak output.

Stress Inoculation

You will begin **stress-inoculation techniques** used by elite performers to build tolerance and resilience over time.

⚠ **Complete Artefact 8 before the next class.** Your stress profile is the foundation everything else builds on.