THE ART OF FUNDRAISING 2026

The art of staying in touch

(without being weird about it)



Mallory Erickson
Founder & CEO, Practivated

YOUR SPEAKER

Hi, I’m Mallory.

I spend my days helping fundraisers feel ready for the conversations that matter, before they’re in them.

Founder & CEO	Practivated
Co-Founder	Fundraising.AI
Creator	Power Partners Formula™
Host & author	What the Fundraising

malloryerickson.com · @_malloryerickson on IG & LinkedIn



I became a fundraiser by accident.

THE IMPACT REPORT VS. THE TRUTH



WHAT EVERYONE SAW

The impact report: pretending everything was great.



BUT IN REALITY...

This is how I felt at the end of every day.

HOW FUNDRAISING ACTUALLY WORKS

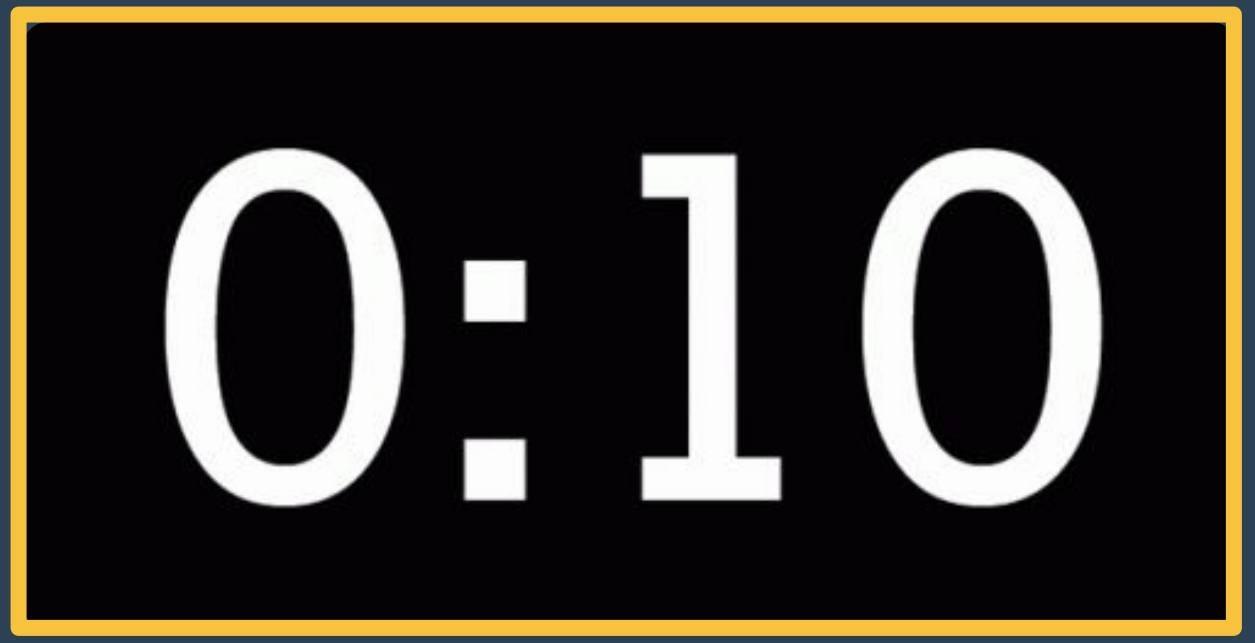
Donor behavior is a response.

WHERE IT STARTS: US

WHAT WE USUALLY MEASURE



Imagine that I say: in 10 seconds, I am going to pick one of you at random to come on here and you have 2 minutes to pitch giving to your org.


0:10

What just happened?

Did you feel your heart start to pound and your stomach tighten up?



Did you think ‘this is a great time for a bathroom break’?



Did you decide that you hated me and this was the worst keynote ever?

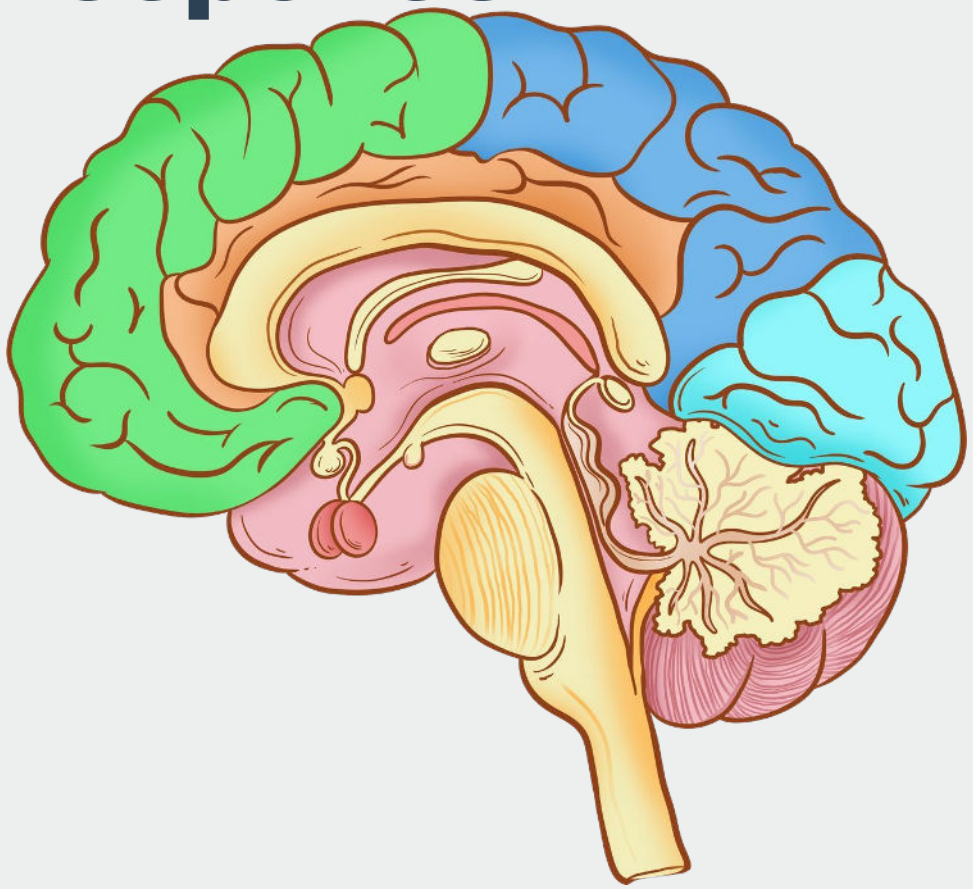


These responses are built-in protection systems designed to keep us safe.



BRAIN STRUCTURES

Three parts of the brain in a stress response



01 Prefrontal cortex (PFC)

Plans, reasons and chooses. It goes quieter under stress.

02 Anterior cingulate cortex (ACC)

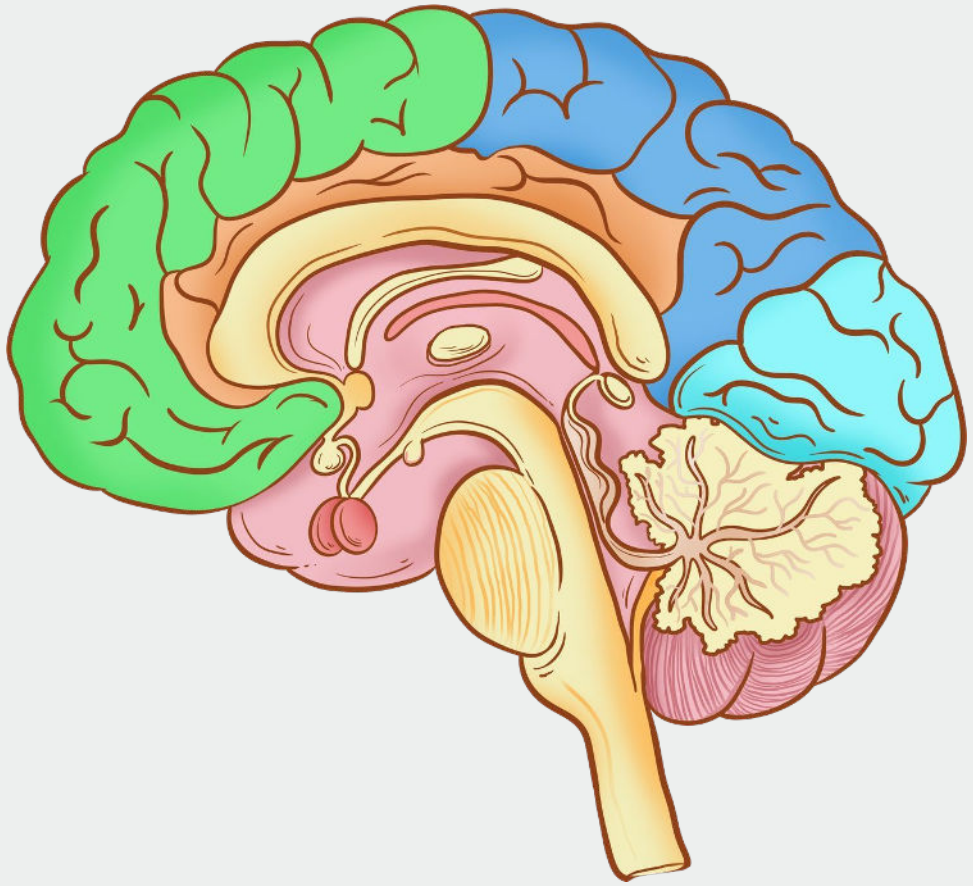
Notices conflict and mistakes, and flags that something feels off.

03 Amygdala

The alarm. It scans for threat and fires the stress response fast.

BRAIN STRUCTURES

The amygdala sounds the alarm



01 **Prefrontal cortex (PFC)**

Plans, reasons and chooses. It goes quieter under stress.

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03 **Amygdala**

The alarm. It scans for threat and fires the stress response fast.

Fear is old wiring meeting modern work



Fear is a primitive, fast-response mechanism meant to protect us from immediate threats.





Modern challenges, like fundraising, can trigger the same ancient response, leading to stress and burnout.

There was nothing ‘logically’

that should have made you afraid of talking about your org.

I didn’t say I would rate you. There was nothing at stake.

But your fear and stress were completely real.

(and valid)

YOUR BODY'S PROTECTION SYSTEM

Did you feel your heart start to pound and you tightened up?

FREEZE

FLIGHT

FIGHT

YOUR BODY'S PROTECTION SYSTEM

Did you think 'this is a great time for a bathroom break'?

FREEZE

FLIGHT

FIGHT

YOUR BODY'S PROTECTION SYSTEM

Did you decide that you hated me and this was the worst keynote ever?

FREEZE

FLIGHT

FIGHT

WHY WAS THAT SO STRESSFUL?

What the moment triggered, and what it does to us

WHAT HAPPENED		WHAT IT DOES
Uncertainty & ghosting	→	Anxiety
Rejection	→	Stress activation
Pressure to meet targets	→	Chronic stress
Overwork	→	Burnout
Power dynamics	→	Cognitive strain

And guess what?

All of those things happen every day in fundraising.

YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Our nervous system impacts our ability to connect and take action

STUCK IN STRESS



Anxiety and stress activation

Chronic stress and burnout

CROWDS OUT

WHAT WE LOSE ACCESS TO

Capacity for connection, compassion and closeness

Feelings of trust, empathy and social recognition

Innovation, collaboration, flexibility, resilience

HOW FUNDRAISING ACTUALLY WORKS

Donor behavior is a response.

WHERE IT STARTS: US

WHAT WE USUALLY MEASURE



But what actually creates connection?

01

You can be more fully yourself, and so can the other person.

02

Both of you are willing to be vulnerable.

03

You trust that self-disclosures will not be used against you.

04

You can be honest with each other.

05

You deal with conflict productively.

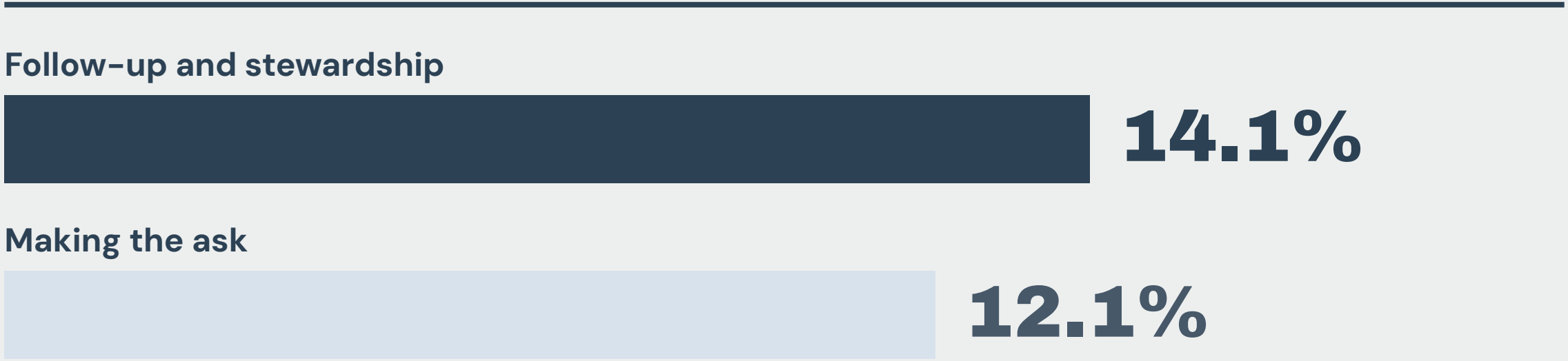
06

Both of you are committed to each other's growth and development.

From Connect, David Bradford PhD and Carole Robin PhD

305 FUNDRAISERS SURVEYED

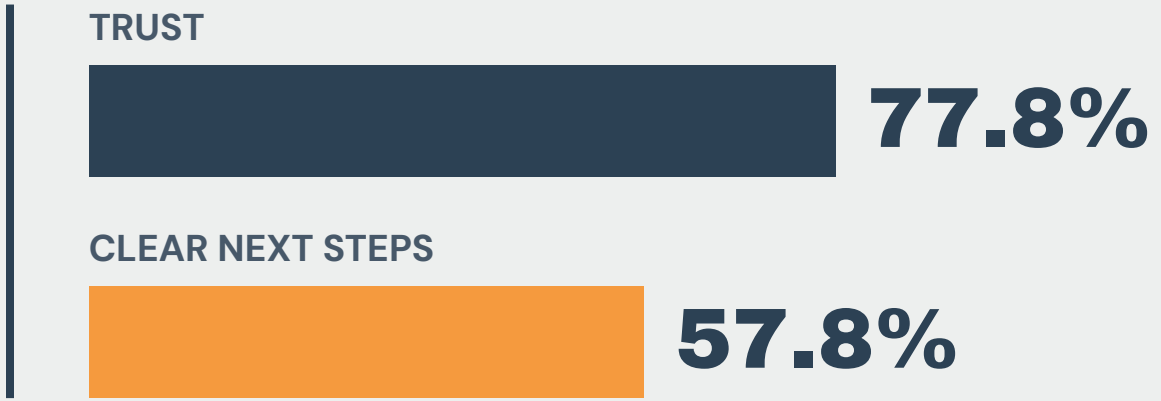
Follow-up and stewardship ranked #1 in fundraisers' pain points.



Source: Practivated, The State of Donor Conversations (April 2026)

Maximum warmth.

Minimum movement.



Source: Practivated, The State of Donor Conversations (April 2026)

2026 BENCHMARK STUDY

The State of Donor Conversations

If you want to dive deeper into this data, the full report is here.



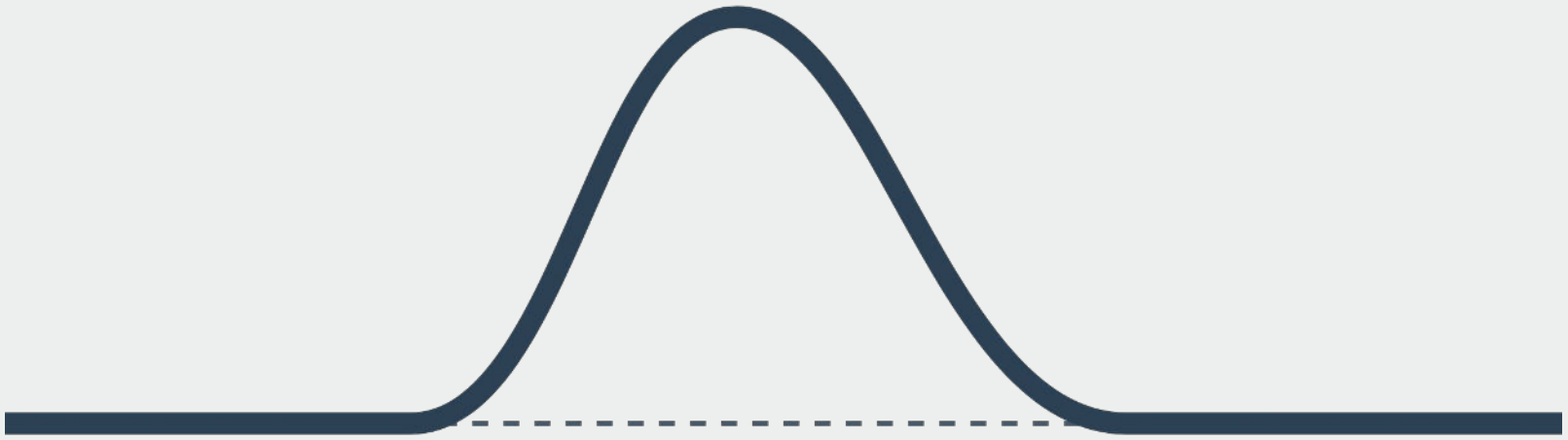
practivated.com/aof

THE ART OF STAYING IN TOUCH · MALLORY ERICKSON

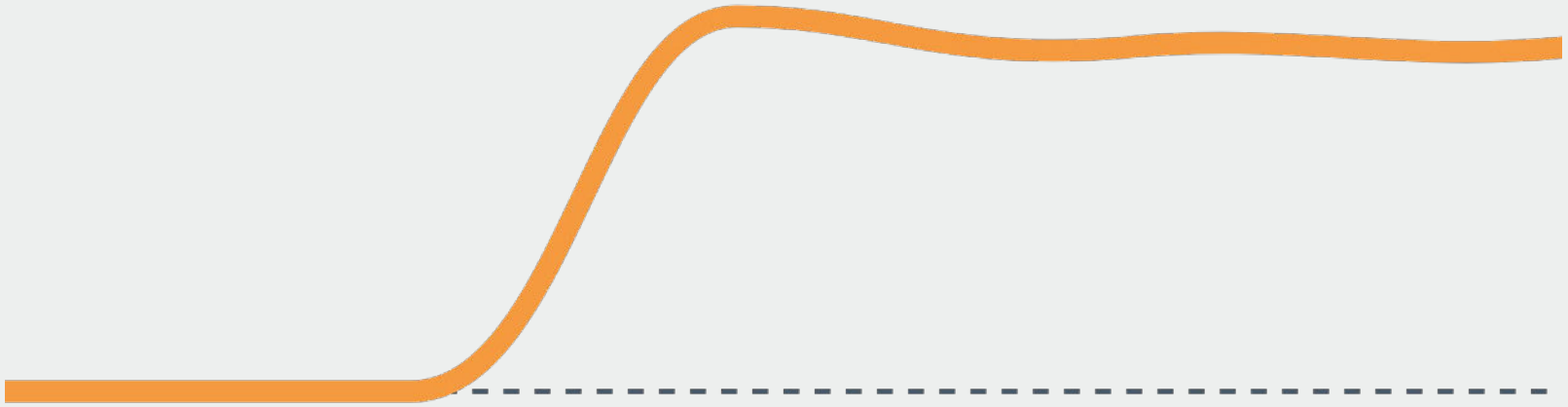
01

Recognize when stress is present.

Stress isn’t ‘bad’.

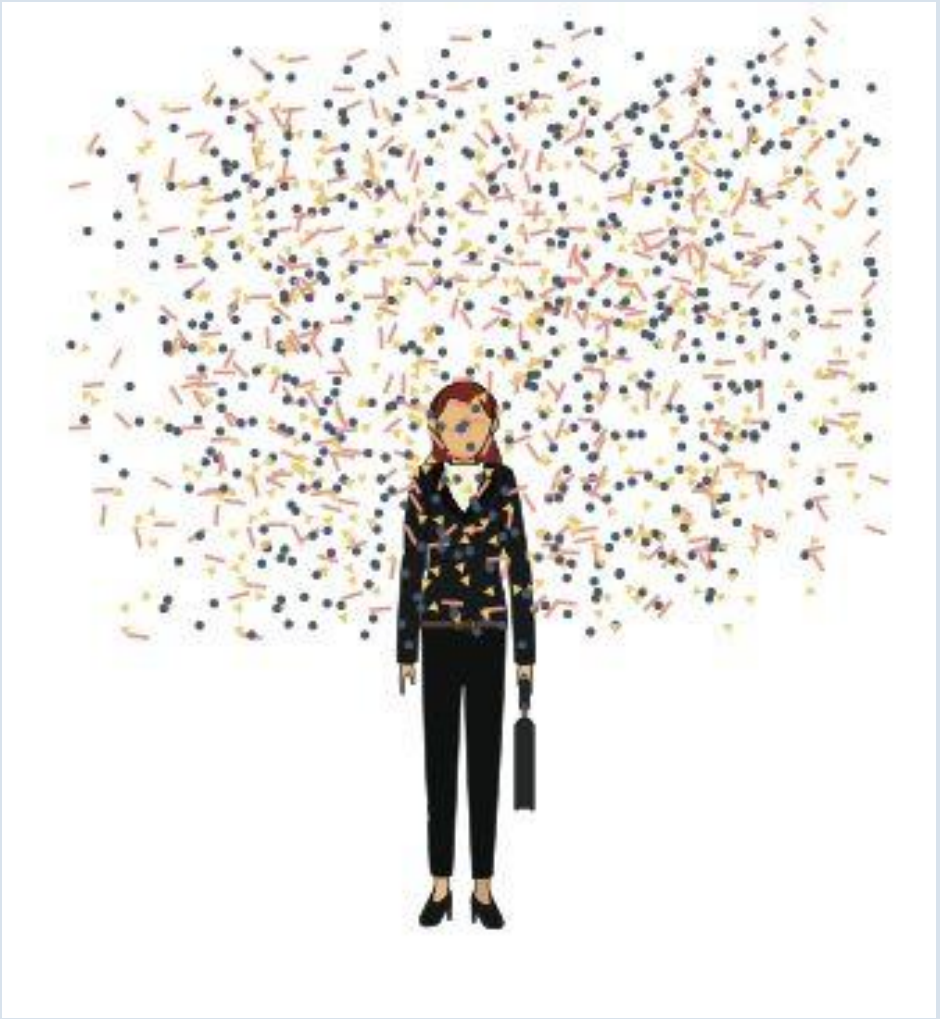


But here's what happens when the stress response doesn't end...

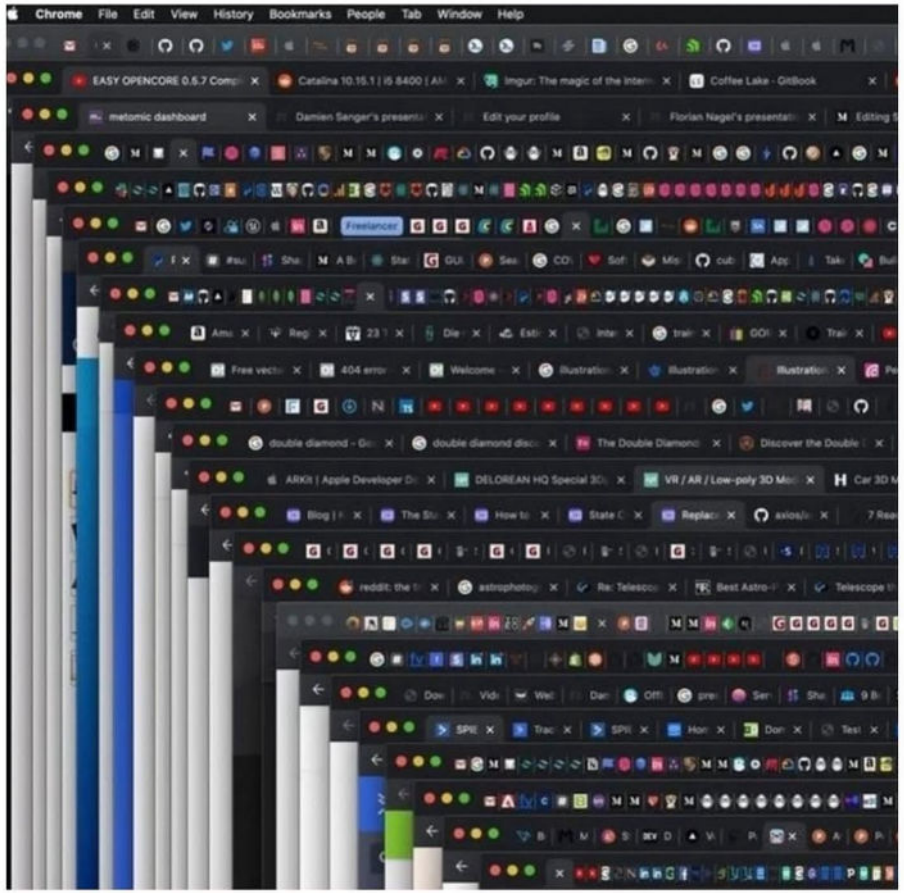


2026 FUNDRAISING

This is what it feels like.



Real life image of inside a mom's brain

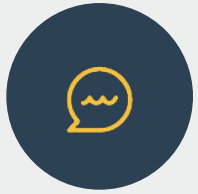


Fear and stress impact everything we do (and don’t do).

And fear can be really tricky...

COMPASSION STRATEGY LOYALTY

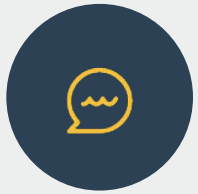
Fear can sound like compassion:



“They are really too busy to come to this event right now.”

COMPASSION | **STRATEGY** | LOYALTY

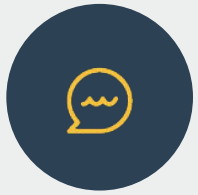
Fear can sound strategic:



"We should wait until this is further along before making this ask."

COMPASSION STRATEGY LOYALTY

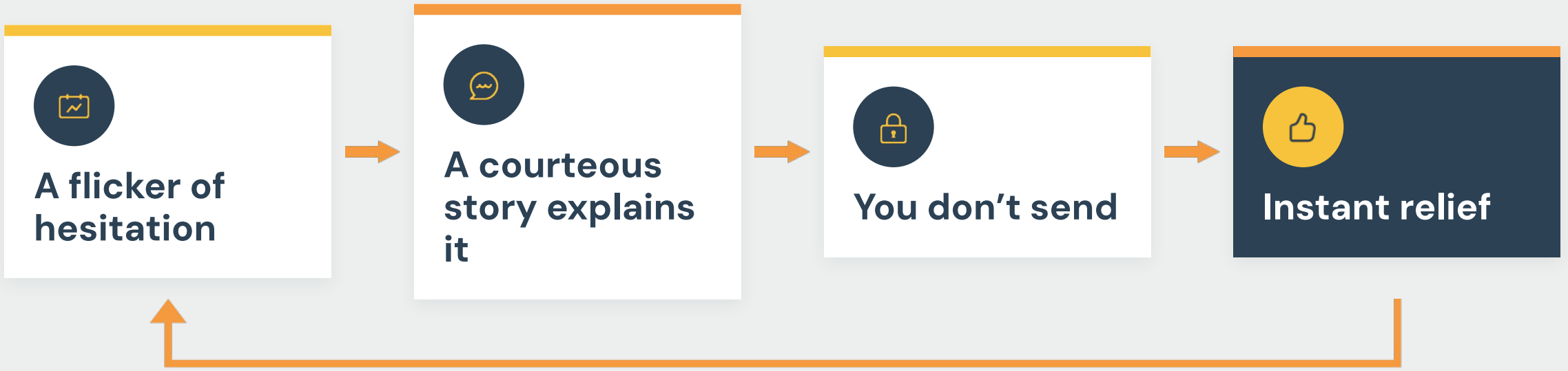
Fear can sound like loyalty:



“We shouldn’t reach out again, they JUST gave.”

THE AVOIDANCE LOOP

Avoidance pays you back immediately. The relationship pays for it later.



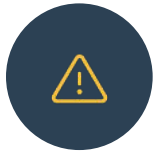
RELIEF REWARDS THE AVOIDANCE, SO NEXT TIME WAITING FEELS EVEN MORE RIGHT

If your goal is to foster connection...

Fear feels reasonable in the moment, but it's pulling us away from connection.

IF YOUR GOAL IS TO FOSTER CONNECTION

Here's what it will ask of you



You'll need to risk discomfort.

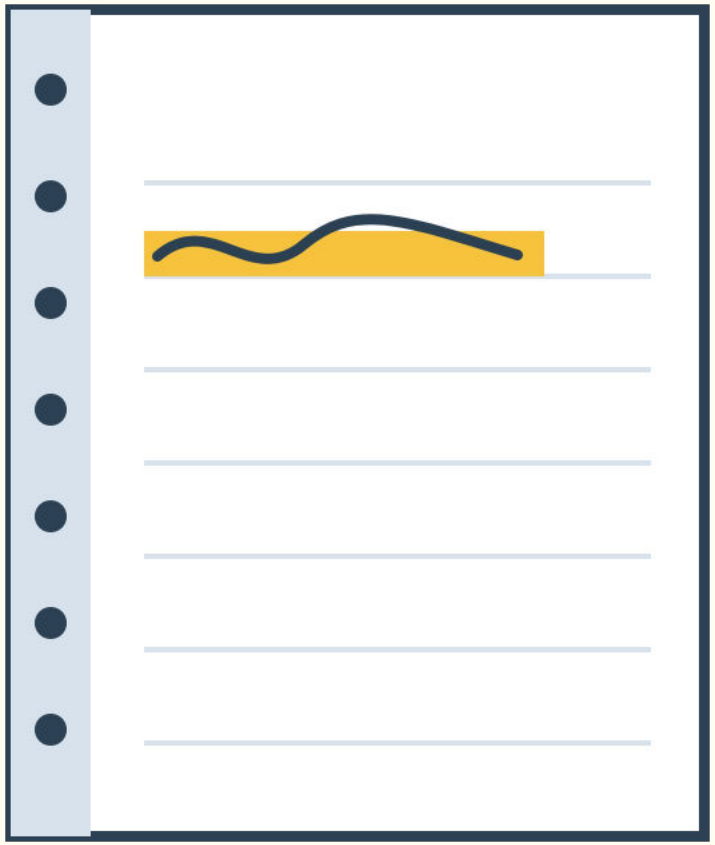


You'll need to find the right ways to connect with your people (and you might not get it right the first time).



You'll need to lean into honesty and curiosity instead of assumption.

Think of one person you've been meaning to reach out to, is it possible you haven't because of fear?



WHAT THE FUNDRAISING

Go deeper on the podcast



Britt Frank



Ethan Kross

Two conversations on getting unstuck and the voice in your head.

malloryerickson.com/podcast

02

Use somatic tools to regulate your nervous system.

TOO ACTIVATED?

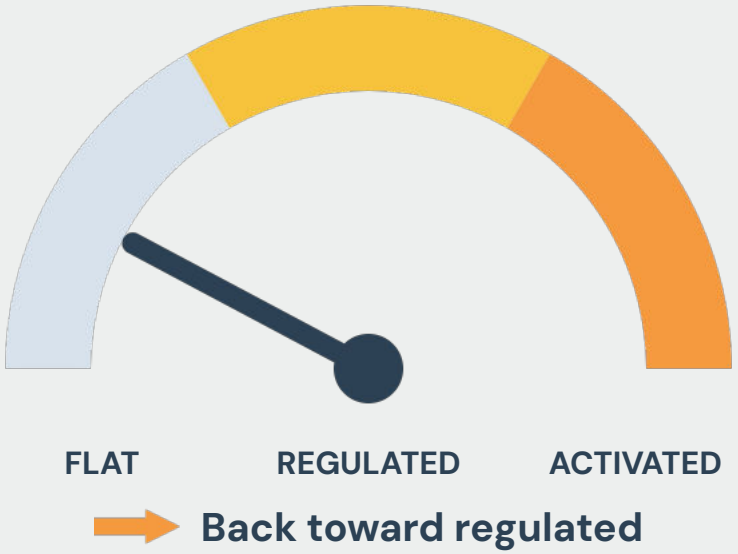
Help your body end a stress cycle



- Bilateral tapping
- Breathwork: 4–7–8 or box breathing
- The 5–4–3–2–1 grounding exercise

TOO FLAT?

Upregulation: bring your energy up



- Upbeat music
- Going for a walk or run
- Jumping on a trampoline

03

Operational transparency builds trust.

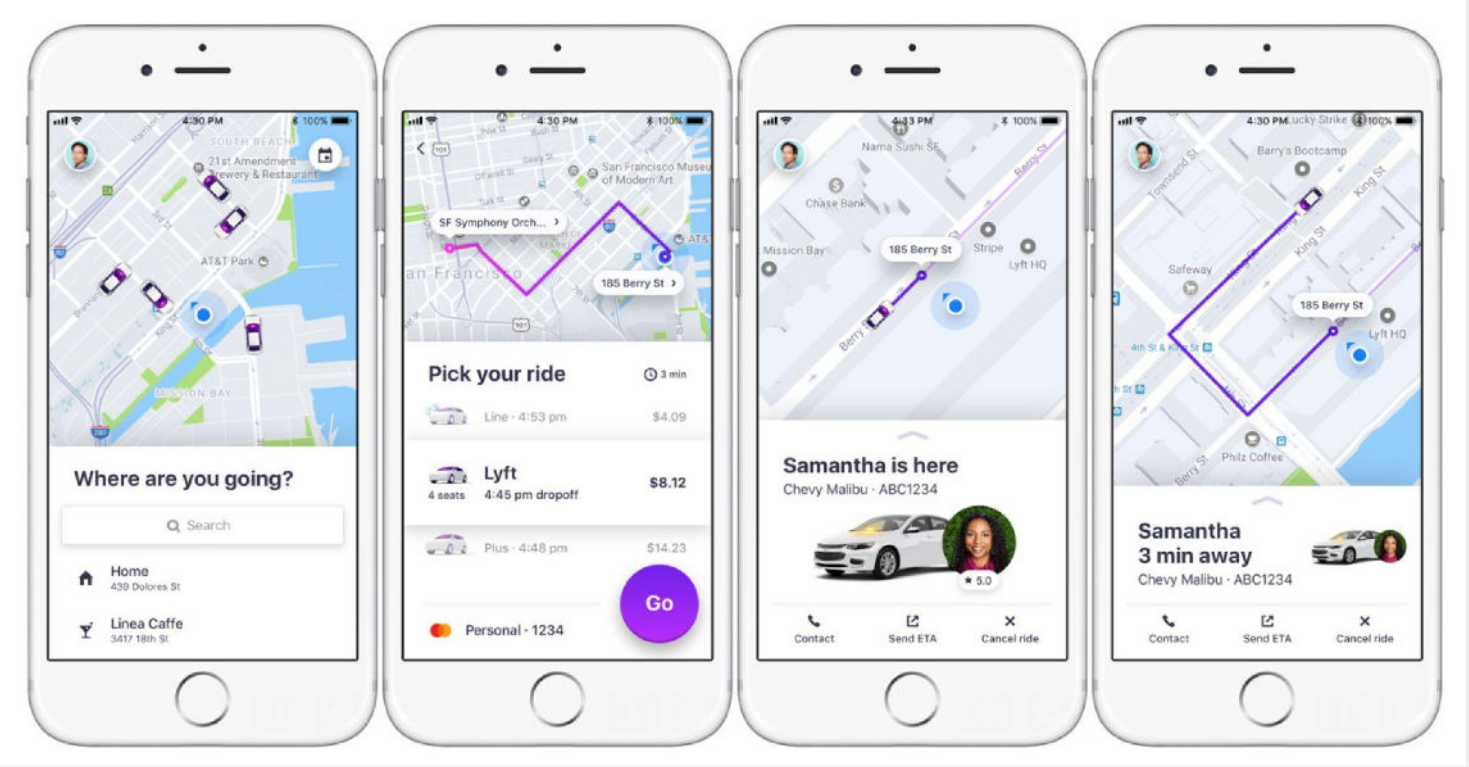
Connection

cannot just be something that we think about as a strategy.

It needs to be something that is felt.

Transparency doesn’t mean that you have to have it all figured out.

Operational transparency builds trust.



Watching the car come to you makes the wait feel shorter and the service feel more trustworthy.

04

Quick authentic touch point.

You don’t have to write something

big

to stay in touch.

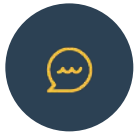
Forward it with one line.



Something you already sent everyone

Newsletter, impact story, short video, event recap

+



One line about them

"This made me think of you, because of what you said about [their thing]."

=



A personal touch

05

Practice the moments that matter most.

When we hide or avoid things,

we actually increase our fear and paralysis around them.

In order to show up differently, you need to build muscle memory around connection-powered fundraising.

That is where practice comes in.

We expect that we are going to **feel ready** without practice.

But community and conversations are dynamic.

Practivated

Scenario

Quit simulation

CALL DURATION
00:00

SCENARIO
Cold Call

GOAL
- Qualify for Deeper Engagement

SESSION LEVEL
Easy

More scenario details



Hold on, we're starting the simulation

Hello? I'm sorry, who is this?

LeBron James still practices.

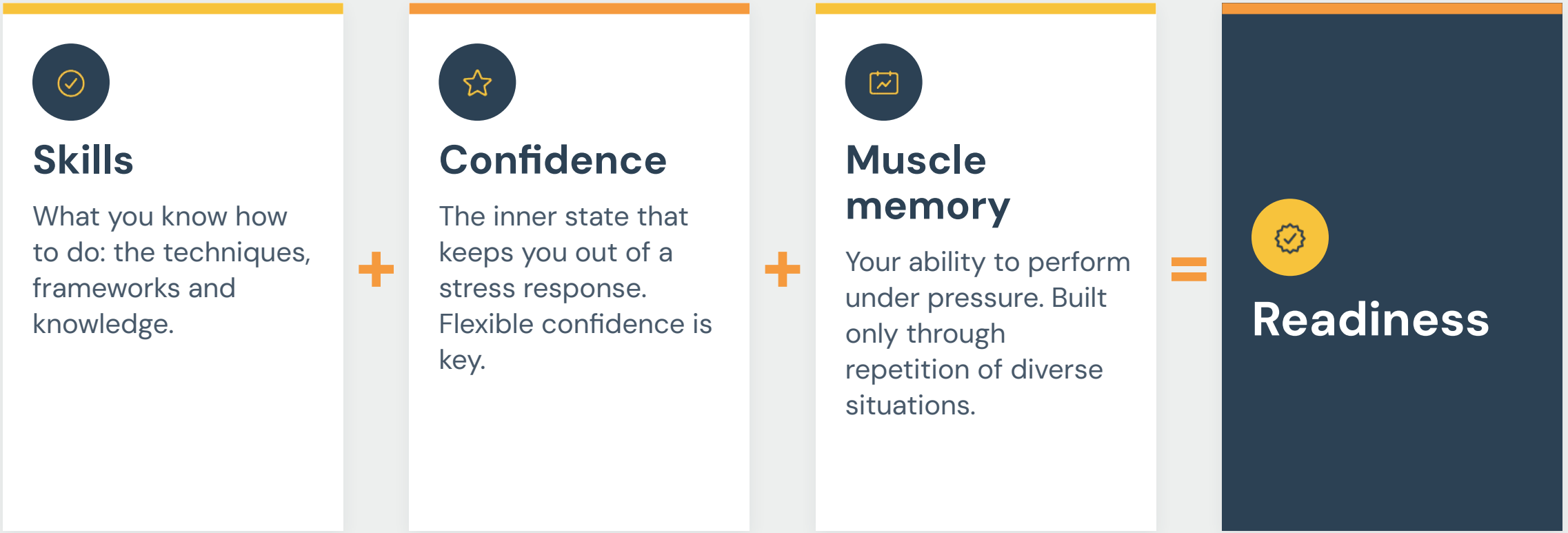


Simone Biles still practices.



THE READINESS GAP

Transferable skills don’t translate in the moment



Preparation is not about perfection.

It’s about regulation.

Practice means you want to be confident, clear, and connected in your craft.

CONFIDENT CLEAR CONNECTED

If you aren’t practicing ahead of time...

then you’re practicing in the moments that matter most.

Good fundraising is the work.

It’s all connected.

We are all connected.

Feel better.

Do better.

Raise more.

THANK YOU

Keep taking care of the person doing the reaching out.

FREE MINI-COURSE · ABOUT 30 MINUTES

Fundraiser Stress Management

malloryerickson.com/stress-management-course



Go send

the one line.