

## Study finds “love of the job” protects journalists’ mental resilience but alcohol and bad habits are holding them back

London, 18 May 2017: Neuroscientist and executive advisor [Dr Tara Swart](#) announced the results of her study into the mental resilience of journalists last night at a London Press Club event held at the Corinthia Hotel.

It shows that the highest functions of journalists’ brains were operating at a lower level than the average population, due to dehydration, self-medicating, and fuelling their brains with caffeine and high-sugar foods. However, the pressures of the job are not affecting journalists’ ability to endure and bounce back from adversity in the long term, due to a belief that their work has meaning and purpose.

A surprising result of the study was that journalists’ brains, compared to other groups, showed a lower level of executive functioning<sup>1</sup> – the ability of the brain to regulate emotions, suppress bias, switch between tasks, solve complex problems and think flexibly and creatively. This was driven by a number of factors, including high levels of alcohol<sup>2</sup>, sugar and caffeine consumption (41% of the journalists drank 18 or more units of alcohol a week - the recommended weekly allowance is 14); dehydration (less than 5% of journalists drank enough water, some none at all); and limited time given to mindfulness, which would allow individuals to take a break from busy mental thought.

Brain profile results combined with in-depth interviews conducted with participants indicated a high level of meaning and purpose attached by the journalists to their work, giving them an edge over other professions by helping them to cope with pressurised work and increasing their mental resilience. Similar studies in groups of bankers, traders, telecoms and sales executives<sup>3</sup> show that they are less able to cope with pressure than journalists are.

Launched in 2016 in association with the [London Press Club](#), the study sought to determine how journalists are able to survive and thrive under stress. Journalism is one of many industries under increasing amounts of pressure in the digital age. Low pay, constant deadlines and high levels of accountability all contribute to high reported stress levels.

Dr Swart recruited a group of 31 journalists from across the industry to carry out a series of tests. Many applicants asked to do the study because they felt stressed. Participants were required to take a blood test, wear a heart rate variability monitor, answer a brain profile questionnaire and record their eating and drinking habits.

Dr Swart said: *“It’s been great to see the role that meaning and purpose plays in achieving mental resilience. There is more that journalists can do to achieve peak performance - implementing a few really simple changes to help their brains perform even better. I hope this study serves as useful tool to journalists, but also to anyone who wants to understand how neuroscience can show us how to join up brain and body health, and through that become more mentally resilient.”*

Doug Wills, Chair of the London Press Club, said: *“It is encouraging to hear that journalists have the brain power to cope with the pressures that the job exposes them to. This study has been useful in helping us to understand how the integrity and purpose with which journalists imbue their work can help them to rise to the challenge.”*

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### Notes to Editors

<sup>1</sup>Executive functioning is the highest level of cognitive function; the key areas involved in it are the frontal lobes and the prefrontal cortex. It is crucial to peak performance because it allows us to regulate our emotions, switch between tasks, solve complex problems, think flexibly and creatively, and suppress unconscious biases. Fuelling, hydrating and oxygenating the brain, sufficient good quality sleep, and practising some form of mindfulness, all enhance executive functioning.

The impact of failing to create the right conditions for the brain can have stark results, including on the ability to make unbiased decisions; for example a study into judges showed them granting more parole close to recent meal and break times and making more racist decisions the further away they got from having eaten (Danziger et al, *Extraneous factors in judicial decisions*, PNAS 2011).

Inability to regulate emotions, for example controlling feelings of anger or irritation, can also be impacted by poor executive functioning and can cause people to feel stressed (or portray feelings of stress) over and above their actual physical symptoms of stress.

<sup>2</sup>Alcohol is a depressant and neurotoxin - when alcohol is consumed the liver must work harder to remove the neurotoxins from the body. When this occurs during sleep, at a time when the body should be in recovery, this causes a stress reaction. Alcohol also contributes to dehydration; as little as a 1-3% change in hydration levels can result in lower physical, visuomotor, psychomotor and cognitive performance. Dehydration can also significantly impair short term memory capability.

<sup>3</sup> The study was based on a programme called Leading Sustainable Performance designed by Dr Tara Swart which she ordinarily runs with leadership teams in banks and large corporates. The results from the journalist study were compared with the programmes Dr Swart has run on bankers, telecoms executives and sales teams. Similar studies into brain health and performance have been run by [Cambridge University](#) on Traders, and [University of California-San Diego](#) on Marines.

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To download a copy of the results report (available from 8.30am, 18<sup>th</sup> May), please go to [www.taraswart.com](http://www.taraswart.com)

### About Tara Swart

Dr Tara Swart is a neuroscientist, leadership coach, award-winning author and a medical doctor. She works with leaders all over the world to help them achieve mental resilience and peak brain performance, improving their ability to manage stress, regulate emotions and retain information.

Tara is the only top-tier leadership coach with both a PhD in neuroscience and former medical career as a psychiatrist. Educated at Oxford University and King's College London, her role as Senior Lecturer at MIT ensures that she remains at the forefront of the latest developments in her sector.



**TARA SWART**  
— NEUROSCIENCE ♦ LEADERSHIP —

Tara's clients include FTSE100, Fortune 500 and Magic Circle firms, as well as UHNWI entrepreneurs. She specialises in sectors that face unusual levels of stress or change.

Tara is the Neuroscientist in Residence at the Corinthia Hotel London.

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### **About the London Press Club**

The London Press Club can trace its origins back to 28 October 1882 when George Augustus Sala, a prominent journalist, illustrator and cartoonist of his day, presided over the inaugural dinner at Anderton's Hotel, Fleet Street.

The Club provides opportunities for journalists and others interested in the media to meet and learn of new developments, debate the latest issues and explore our collective past as communicators.

[www.londonpressclub.co.uk](http://www.londonpressclub.co.uk)