



**BARDO
INCLUSIVE**

RESET | REFRAME | RETHINK

NEUROSCIENCE
PERFORMANCE
INCLUSION
TRUST

WHY BRIGHT BRAINS GO BLANK

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF PRESSURE,
PANIC, AND PERFORMANCE...

AND HOW TO REGAIN CONTROL



A practical guide with sections for teenagers, parents, and professionals to understand your brain, regulate pressure, and perform with confidence.



SCIENCE-BACKED | PEOPLE CENTRED | FUTURE FOCUSED

Building confident, inclusive minds and thriving futures.



Georgina Brown

APPLIED NEUROSCIENCE & INCLUSION STRATEGIST



COGNITIVE
NEUROSCIENCE



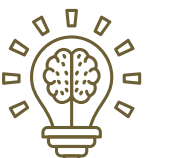
CULTURE
& INCLUSION



TRUST & HUMAN
CONNECTION



NATURE
& WELLBEING



EMOTIONAL
REGULATION



When Bright Brains Go Blank

The neuroscience of pressure, panic, and performance... and how to regain control.

Overview

A practical neuroscience guide for teenagers, parents, professionals, and leaders to understand how pressure affects the brain, why intelligent people suddenly “go blank,” and how to regulate stress, restore thinking, and perform with greater confidence and control.

01

Why Smart Brains Suddenly Stop Working

Most people assume going blank means:

- “I’m not capable.”
- “I’m failing.”
- “I’m weak under pressure.”

But neuroscience tells us something very different.

When pressure rises, the brain shifts resources away from:

- reasoning
- memory retrieval
- language
- creativity
- verbal fluency

...and toward survival systems.

**This is not incompetence.
It is biology.**

The brain’s primary job is not performance.

It is protection. To keep us alive.

That is why:

- public speaking suddenly feels terrifying
- your mind goes blank in meetings
- exams erase the information you revised for weeks
- “Can we have a chat?” creates panic before anything has even happened

Your brain is trying to keep you safe from perceived threat.



02

The Threat Brain vs The Thinking Brain

Under pressure, the brain rapidly scans:

“Am I safe?”

If the answer feels uncertain, the amygdala (threat detector) activates.

This increases:

- adrenaline
- cortisol
- heart rate
- hypervigilance

At the same time, activity reduces in parts of the prefrontal cortex responsible for:

- clear thinking
- decision-making
- working memory
- speech organisation

This is why people:

- forget words mid-presentation
- reread the same sentence repeatedly
- panic during interviews
- freeze during difficult conversations

**The brain is not broken.
It is overloaded.**

Key research:

- LeDoux (threat processing)
- Sapolsky (stress biology)
- Arnsten (stress and prefrontal cortex impairment)



03

Why “Can We Talk?” Feels Like a Threat

Humans are social survival creatures.

The brain interprets:

- rejection
- criticism
- embarrassment
- uncertainty
- exclusion

...as a potential danger.

So phrases like:

- “We need to talk.”
- “Can I give you some feedback?”
- “Can you stay behind after class?”
- “Could we jump on a quick call?”

can trigger the same neural systems involved in **physical threat**. Psychological and emotional pain is perceived by the brain as intense as physical pain.

The brain begins predicting:

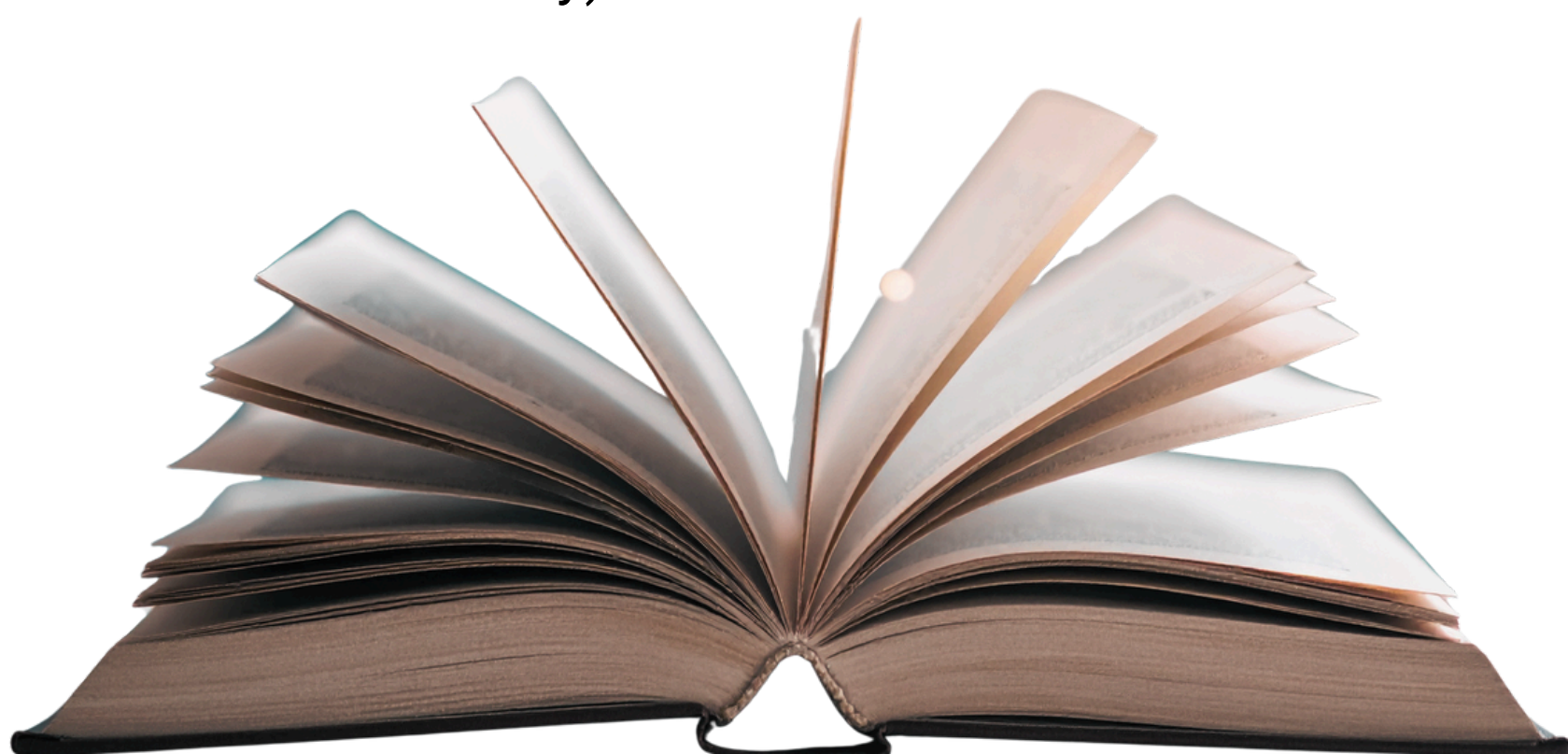
- failure
- shame
- punishment
- abandonment

Usually, long before reality exists.

This is predictive processing:

the brain creates a story before evidence arrives.

(Friston, Predictive Brain Theory)



04

Why Public Speaking Terrifies Otherwise Intelligent People

Public speaking activates several powerful brain fears simultaneously:

- social judgement
- uncertainty
- status threat
- rejection risk
- loss of control

The brain interprets:

“Many eyes on me = possible danger.”

This explains:

- shaking hands
- dry mouth
- racing thoughts
- blank mind
- fast speech
- feeling detached from your body

Importantly:

confidence is not the absence of activation.

High performers still experience stress activation.

They simply learn how to **regulate it faster.**



05

Teenagers, Pressure, and the Developing Brain

Teenage brains are still developing critical regulation systems.

The emotional and reward systems mature earlier than the prefrontal cortex.

This means teenagers often experience:

- stronger emotional intensity
- heightened social sensitivity
- increased fear of embarrassment
- more catastrophic thinking under pressure

This is not “dramatic behaviour.”

It is developmental neuroscience.

Exams, friendship groups, sport, social media, and performance pressure all place a heavy load on the developing nervous system.

Which means:

teenagers often need co-regulation before they can self-regulate.

(Siegel; Blakemore adolescent brain research)

Co-regulation is when a calm, safe person helps another nervous system settle and feel safe again. It is also called double bodying and can be helpful for those experiencing ADHD.



06

Why High Achievers Often Struggle The Most

High performers are often:

- highly self-monitoring
- perfectionistic
- threat-aware
- identity-driven
- deeply motivated to avoid failure

Their brains become trained to constantly scan for:

- mistakes
- criticism
- disappointment
- loss of status

This creates chronic nervous system activation.

Ironically:

the more people care about performing well, the more likely the brain is to overload under pressure.

This is why:

- senior leaders freeze in presentations
- top students panic in exams
- intelligent professionals avoid difficult conversations

The issue is rarely capability.

It is nervous system regulation.



07

Practical Reset Tools

(That Actually Work)

1. Name the Brain State

Instead of:

- “I’m failing”

Try:

- “My threat system is activated.”

Naming reduces amygdala activation.

(Lieberman affect-labelling research)

2. Slow the Body First

The thinking brain follows the nervous system.

Use:

- longer exhales
- slower speech
- feet grounded
- relaxed jaw
- unclenching hands

The brain reads body state as safety data.

3. Reduce Prediction Catastrophes

Ask:

- “What evidence do I actually have right now?”

This interrupts threat storytelling.



07

Practical Reset Tools (con)

(That Actually Work)

4. Externalise Working Memory

“Under pressure, memory bandwidth drops.

Use:

- notes
- prompts
- bullet points
- visual anchors

This is performance strategy, not weakness.

5. Practice Safe Exposure

Confidence is built through:

- **repetition**
- **familiarity**
- **survivable discomfort**

The brain learns safety through **experience**, not positive thinking or willpower.

“*You don't force confidence; you build it through safe repetition until fear no longer leads the response.*”



07

Practical Reset Tools (con)

QUICK TOOLS FOR WHEN YOUR BRAIN GOES BLANK

How to get thinking back online

When the brain senses pressure, conflict, judgement, or uncertainty, it shifts into survival mode. Blood flow and energy move away from the thinking brain and toward protection systems.

That is why intelligent people suddenly:

- Forget what they wanted to say
- Blank in interviews or presentations
- Lose words mid-sentence
- Panic when put on the spot

**The problem is usually not intelligence.
It is a nervous system state.**

1. Message & 3 Points

Don't memorise scripts. Memorise:

- Your core message
- Three supporting points

Your brain recalls structure far better than perfect wording.

2. Memory Palace

Attach ideas to familiar places:

- Front door = Introduction
- Kitchen = Main point
- Living room = Example

The brain remembers locations and imagery more easily under stress.

3. Sentence Bridges

When your brain stalls, use phrases that buy thinking time:

- "The key point is..."
- "What matters here is..."
- "There are three parts to this..."

These reduce panic while helping memory catch up.

07

Practical Reset Tools (con)

QUICK TOOLS FOR WHEN YOUR BRAIN GOES BLANK

4. Regulate Before You Perform

A stressed brain struggles to recall information.

Before difficult conversations, interviews, exams, or presentations:

- Slow your breathing
- Pause before answering
- Relax your jaw and shoulders
- Slow your speaking pace

Calm brains think more clearly.

5. Practice Retrieval - Not Just Review

Reading notes repeatedly creates familiarity, not recall.

Instead:

- Speak answers aloud
- Practise without notes
- Rehearse under mild pressure

The brain strengthens memory through retrieval.

Remember

Blanking under pressure is a survival response – not a sign that you are incapable, weak, or unintelligent.

**Your brain is trying to protect you.
The goal is to help it feel safe enough
to think again.**

These are just a few of the techniques and tools that BARDO can help you to put into practice, so you can perform without going blank.



08

Helping Other People Regulate

Parents, teachers, managers, and leaders often accidentally increase threat activation.

Example:

- vague feedback requests
- public criticism
- last-minute changes
- unclear expectations
- emotionally loaded communication

Small shifts create huge differences.

Instead of:

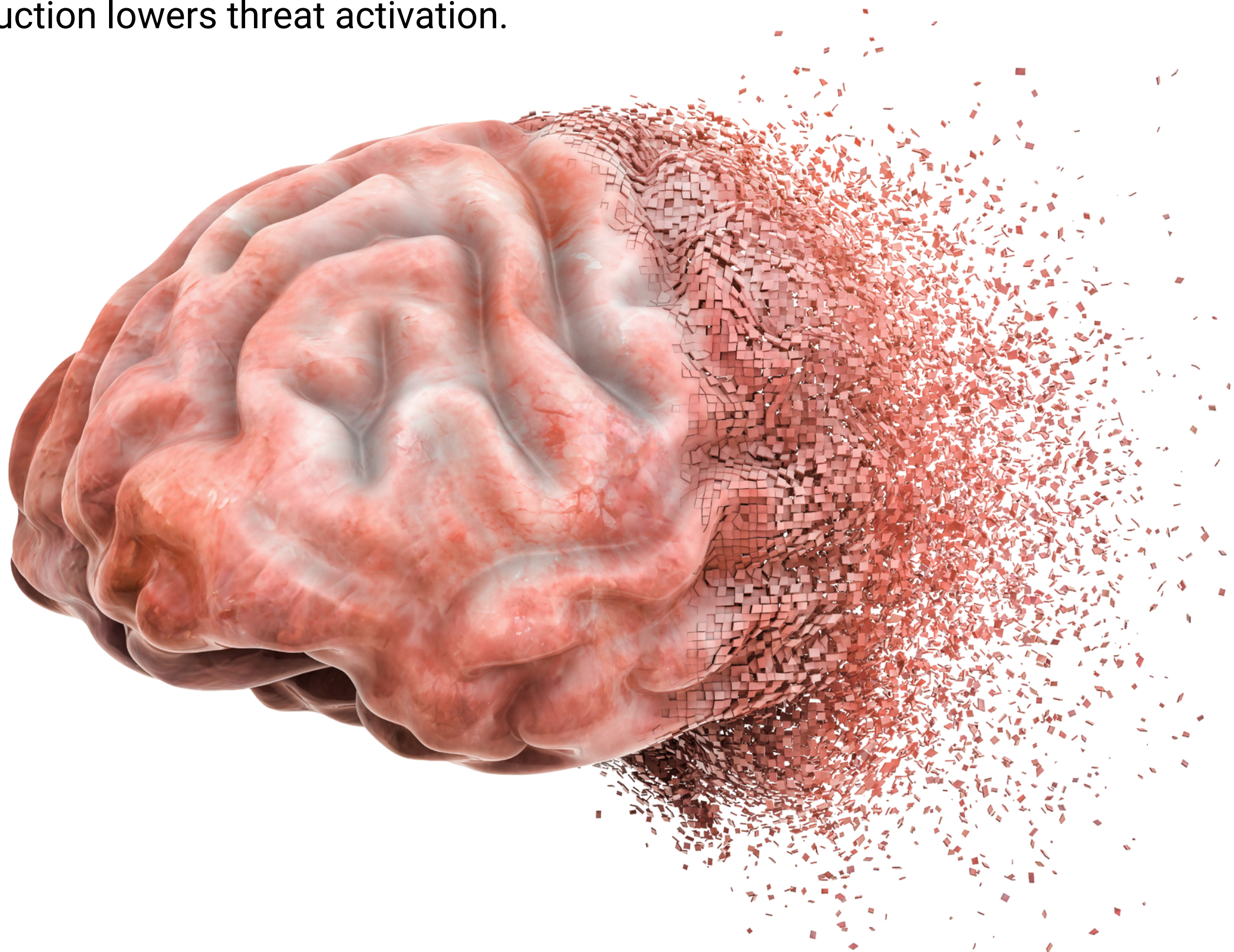
- “We need to talk.”

Try:

- “Nothing bad – just want to discuss tomorrow’s plans.” (and smile)

Clarity reduces uncertainty.

Uncertainty reduction lowers threat activation.



09

Performance is a Nervous System Skill

The best performers are not fearless.

They are:

- regulated
- adaptable
- practiced under pressure
- able to recover quickly from activation

Performance is not about “being calm.”

It is about:

staying functional while activated.

This is trainable.

Through neuroplasticity, the brain can learn:

- safety
- confidence
- recovery
- tolerance for uncertainty
- reduced panic response



10

The Shift

Going blank does not mean:

- you are weak
- incapable
- unintelligent
- failing

It means your brain believes something important is at risk.

The goal is not removing pressure from life.

The goal is teaching the brain:

“I can experience pressure without losing myself.”

Because bright brains do not go blank from lack of intelligence.

They go blank from overload.

And overloaded brains can learn regulation, recovery, and control.



Want to explore the evidence cited in this guide?

Here is a quick reference to the key research mentioned:

Research foundations referenced (indicative)

- LeDoux, J. – Threat and fear circuitry
- Sapolsky, R. – Stress physiology
- Arnsten, A. – Stress and prefrontal cortex function
- Kahneman, D. – Cognitive processing systems
- Friston, K. – Predictive processing theory
- Siegel, D. – Interpersonal neurobiology
- Blakemore, S-J. – Adolescent brain development
- Lieberman, M. – Affect labelling and emotional regulation
- Porges, S. – Polyvagal theory
- Dweck, C. – Growth mindset and performance psychology



Closing Note

This guide is a starting point.

BARDO Inclusive works with schools, universities, leaders, organisations, and individuals to build neuroscience-informed approaches to confidence, communication, pressure regulation, performance, and inclusion.

Because sustainable performance is not just about knowledge.

It is about the state of the brain accessing it.

**Get in touch for an informal chat...
Let me know what you think.**



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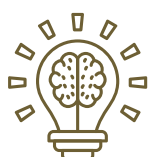
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