

Episode 116

FS Thrive x John Stemmerman (Exos)^[JA1]

Ginevra Czech: Welcome back to FS Thrive, a podcast by FS Investments. I am Ginevra Czech, the Director of Client Value Add Programs here at FS Investments and I am super, super excited to be joined by John Stemmerman. He is Senior Vice President of Performance at Exos, but many of you might know him because he's one of our value add partners who delivers our sustainable high performance workshop at industry events—branch luncheons.

So we're really excited to be here today. Today, we're not talking about all of sustainable high performance. We're talking specifically about regulation and reflection, which I think given current events is something that is probably super relevant and timely for many listeners and for me. I don't know if I'm still a new parent—my baby's over a year now—but probably any parent, we can also understand that there's always a good time to regulate and reflect. And then of course it's year end. So, as we think about planning for our next year and then reflecting on the year that we've just had, a super timely topic. So before we dive into things, John, would love to have you introduce yourself in your own words. Just tell us what it is that you do and excited to get started.

John Stemmerman: Very excited to be here. Thank you for having us. And I'm going to try to—if anybody listened to Stefan's podcast—I'm going to try to emulate Stefan the best that I can because he's one of the people that I use as a role model around these types of things. And when you first said you might know him I thought, how would anybody know me and then you reminded me that I'm actually out supporting a lot of the events. So, that might be true.

I have been a coach for 20-plus years. In January, 19 of those will be with Exos, formerly known as Athletes Performance. And when I came to the organization, we had two facilities and we've grown significantly since then into a pretty extensive footprint around sport, which is our heritage of where we come from, into military—both special operations and conventional—and then into the corporate space. And especially with kind of a merger or acquisition of another group called MediFit... grew pretty heavily into the corporate space of which that's the biggest group we work with, of which financial institutions are a very huge part of it. But I came in mostly to work with youth athletes, to get our youth program together, long-term athlete developments, kind of the passion of our organization.

And then also worked with Major League Baseball, hockey, a lot of our military groups that would come in and depending on what time of year it was, worked with different groups, usually in their off-season as they prepared for the preseason and in-season transition. Progressed throughout the course of my years there and probably like any organization wore many hats at many times, often simultaneously, through different management roles. But my current role, Senior Vice President, the team that I work with and manage, we are responsible for basically developing and training predominantly our practitioners. So we have coaches, physical therapists, athletic trainers. I know we have a couple of those job profiles that support you and FS directly.

Registered dietitians, mental conditioning specialists, basically our onboarding for them are continuous improvement, which is a huge value that we are really passionate about, which is the continued development of knowledge and skills and then around our products. So that's our predominant...but a lot of my team and I also help support business and that's how I've come to know you and FS pretty well, and support a lot of the events that the Thrive program puts on.

Ginevra Czech: We love partnering with Exos and like you mentioned, Exos is a human performance company. So we're one of the corporate clients actually here at FS. We utilize Exos in both the...we have a gym—covering the physical component and then a cafeteria. So thinking about nutrition.

But when we talk about this idea of human performance. We're not just talking about physical training or mental toughness. It's that more holistic approach, which includes this idea of self-awareness and emotional intelligence. The ability to regulate both the body and the mind to really hit that peak performance over time. That idea of sustainable, durable, high performance.

John Stemmerman: That's right.

Ginevra Czech: So with that in mind, John, can you zoom out a little bit and give us the pillars, the sort of six main components of human performance that Exos has defined?

John Stemmerman: We're always evolving. And I think we're actually in a really good place, especially across all the different environments of a really nice way to think about the physical and the psychological components that make up human performance. If we go even one level up—and we'll talk a little bit about this—psychological drivers, performance, capacity, functional state, psychological drivers being what's important to you.

What is your purpose? What are the things that can get in your way? Performance capacity across both the psychological and the physical. There's a pretty big matrix of what makes up all those things, but we want to improve performance capacity for everybody we work with. And then functional state, which is usually how you're showing up in the moment.

And funnily enough, and we could probably talk about it later, if you're wearing any kind of aura ring or whoop strap, you can actually see directly what your functional state is real-time often, or kind of have an idea daily of what that's looking like. And then as we go from there, we build game plans.

So our top-level elevator pitch: We are a coaching company that gets you ready for the moments that matter by helping improve performance capacity and functional state. And that's different for everybody, but that includes training. My hope is everybody has some sort of physical practice that they do. Yoga, hike, paddleboard, workout at the gym, peloton, whatever it is, because that is going to be very important for health, longevity and play. So a lot of the buzzwords out there—health span, lifespan and then even a term, I don't know that we coined it, but playspan of when you, as a former lacrosse player, are in your 80s, you're going to be able to go do a hike with your kids and go play, pick a wall and do whatever you want to do at that point and be able to have those...

Ginevra Czech: I thought you were to say I'd be 80 years old still playing lacrosse, which, who knows...

John Stemmerman: Maybe, you never know, it's possible. So my hope and our organization's hope is you have some sort of movement practice, whatever that is. Sleep, and I believe Stefan did sleep on our last....

Ginevra Czech: ...mm hmm.

John Stemmerman: ...podcast. So sleep, and then it'll have an important component into...when we talk about reflection and regulation, because recovery is going to be a key piece, and one of the biggest levers to pull on in regards to your recovery is your sleep. So, you know, there's a lot of things that go into that fueling. Around your nutrition, hydration, kind of what you're eating and really having the mindset around eating for performance, not just eating to eat.

And again, that is a very personal...culturally significant to certain groups that have different things. So, fueling is a very important part, also going to be very important in regards to regulation, because if you're under-fueled, under-hydrated, you're not going to be able to show up as your best self.

Daily movement, which is kind of the sidekick to training. Daily movement could be...I was at a financial institution yesterday with the team and we did a presentation and in the organization, everybody moved to standing desks. And it was a standard set by the organization and when I asked why...people are feeling better, they're moving around, a little bit more productive and those are all the things. Park at the far end of the parking lot so you can actually get some extra steps in and take the stairs, don't take the escalator, etc.

And down to somebody might be having pain from something, they visited with a physical therapist, they have their home exercise program, making sure that they do that. So just this kind of idea of quality movement throughout the course of the day and quantity of movement, because it's going to help from a cognitive standpoint, a physical standpoint, a posture standpoint, a pain standpoint and all those things.

Then it'll get to the primary point of our conversation today, which is reflection and regulation. Reflection being proactively, real time, retroactively, understanding how you're feeling, how you want to show up, what's important to you, and using that and an understanding of that to be able to utilize regulation to help get you to where you want to be so that you can show up in that direction.

And we've always done that. A lot of what I might talk about are some of the kind of frameworks that we're going to get into. So we have two experts, Dr. Sarah Sarkis and Dr. Chris Virtue, who are part of our team. Dr. Sarah Sarkis is our lead on psychology. Dr. Bertram's our lead on neuroscience. They've really helped us over the last few years—package into a framework that can then be given to any of our practitioners. So they at least can start to understand that because you inherently do it as a coach, but it's really nice to have a framework that you can work through to understand and get better across all those things.

Ginevra Czech: All right. So that was a lot of information. But it sounds like training, sleep, fueling, daily movement, regulation, reflection. That's the foundation. All of that ties back into those main components of your drivers, which is, I guess, emotional, intelligence, self-awareness, motivation, performance, capacity. That's the stuff that it looks like you guys are looking to tweak a little bit. Training, fueling, sleep and then that almost equals functional state. So when we think about why any of this is important, obviously in the context of an athlete, it's showing up ready on game day to be able to perform at your peak.

We just had the Olympics this summer. You're thinking about how obviously all of these different factors are going to be promoting or fueling their athletic performance. But for us, as the corporate athletes, the word we always use, this is really what's going to help us show up and have our best professional performance. But the thing that I love about this is it really does also affect your personal performance. And obviously we've already talked, there's a lot of things going on in the world, in the media, in our lives, and work is a part of that. So I want to talk about reflection and regulation and you defined it a little bit. What is reflection? What is regulation? Why do we care? And maybe just high level.

John Stemmerman: Let's start with reflection because they are a dynamic duo because they are very much interrelated and they can be skills that you could work on independently. You may have somebody who's really good at reflection but they don't know how to regulate. Or you may have somebody that's really good at regulating but they may not know why or how or when to do that. But it's important to be, if we put it as four big buckets...self-awareness is one of the key ones and if we look at a matrix going across. For self-awareness, we can basically be better at our self-management on things. We could be better in our social awareness. So you talked about emotional intelligence or an emotional quotient of, if I know myself, then I can know how to interact with other people and change that based off of what I'm trying to achieve.

So you, with your young child, are going to act differently than with your husband. Then you're going to act differently with a coworker versus somebody who's senior than you and being able to change your

approach depending on what that is. So self-awareness...and we'll talk about some strategies around that because that's where you really get the rubber to the road on things.

The relationship management around that, self-management and social awareness. So that's kind of the top big categories of things. If we kind of focus on self-awareness, that's kind of where it's really important of this kind of emotional self-awareness. And if you put a definition to it—a conscious knowledge of one's own character, feelings, sensations and desires. Many people, funnily enough, and everybody could be getting better at that. I could be getting better at that on a regular basis, and that is part of the process. It is something that is uniquely human, at least from what we can tell. We don't know any animals necessarily that are doing that.

Being able to observe your ego, in a very judging way, so that you can think, why am I acting this way. And then also there's certain states around that, that are very indicative of those things. But if you talk to Dr. Sarkis, who runs her own practice, many people show up at her doorstep and they say, I want to be better at X and whatever that is. I want to be better at leadership. I want to be better at being a better parent, I want to be a better coworker, I want to be a better teammate.

Usually what she'll say is that is all going to come back to changing yourself so that you can—starting with to be able to move forward into being better with those individuals. We talked about—before we jumped on—there's different predictive indexes that can actually help you understand yourself better because it's very hard without those tools to understand it. And there's lots of great tools. We don't need to get in all those things. But if you can get that, you start to get an understanding of your emotional intelligence, then that kind of gives you a framework that leads into the soft skills of things. Because you have to be able to work on yourself to understand yourself, to be able to have better relationships, better influence, those types of things with others.

Ginevra Czech: If we think about developing self-awareness, that can help us be better leaders that can help us with decision-making, which obviously is going to influence performance. So what are different types of reflection? How can we start to think about...?

John Stemmerman: We'll put it into three main categories. We'll start at the beginning. So, proactive. Being able to...ahead of an event or as an exercise, we do this kind of idea of a values exploration to help people uncover their why is a good way to think about it. I'll often use different examples, and maybe I'll jump to a couple of those here in a second. But a values exploration helps you figure out what's important to you. What are the things that are challenging for you? What are the things that you find or admire in others?

Some great questions that we will ask in values exploration. What gives you the most energy? Because if we can understand that, then those are tools you can put into your pocket or use as facilitating certain things. Who inspires you and why? And I can even go into in a moment who I usually go to, just to give a little bit of an example.

When you're showing up as your best self, what does that look like? And that can change. You mentioned the transition. The personal life and the professional life are very intertwined. I think the challenge a lot of people have is when they're at work, they're thinking about home, and when they're at home, they're thinking about work. If you can get focused and really get detailed there, you can create some separation and show up as a more present human in each one of those, and hopefully show up as your best self on those things.

If we go through those or just some example questions, that helps you unlock what might be very important to you, which is usually the things that come through our family, discipline, challenging myself. And usually you can start to take those back into something that's even more important to that. So an

example I'll often use: Combine athlete. I don't very often work with our Combine in my history, but Combine program. So NFL college football players coming in to get ready for the NFL.

They spent eight to 12 weeks with us getting ready for the biggest tryout of their life, and Combine athlete shows up. One of the main things, if you don't know about football, but The Combine is the big day. Forty-yard dash is the marquee event for that. And so, the athlete shows up and says to his coach, I really need to run a faster 40. And it's okay, we got you on that. We're going to totally take care of that. But why is that important to you? Well, hopefully it's going to help me bump up my performance and get me higher up in the draft.

That's what we're here for. That's the whole purpose of this. With that, usually comes more money on things. So the higher up in the draft you go, the more financially lucrative it is for a player. So every spot, somebody moves up in the draft, there's potentially more money on the table for them. And it's well, I just want to make more money. We know that, but as you dive deeper, and sometimes this is in a short-term conversation, sometimes it's in a longer-term conversation.

At the end of the day, he wants to buy his mother a house because as he was growing up, they were homeless for a period of time living out of their car. So the why for him to run a faster 40 is not, I just want to run a faster 40 and show out and be known as the fastest 40 person. I want to take care of my family because in my childhood, we had a very challenging moment that I want to go back and take care of her because she took care of me at that point.

That's pretty deep to get with an athlete or anybody, a corporate athlete, anybody. But that's what we're trying to uncover or help people start to uncover around those things so that can be their anchor around that. So that would be an example of a proactive reflection practice to figure out what is important to you. What are your motivators? What are your drivers? What might be your barrier? So you understand how to get around those things. That would be proactive.

Ginevra Czech: I mean to pause there for a second, that's something that is even relevant for any of our listeners who are financial advisors. One for themselves to think about, because a lot of them have their own businesses and are somewhat entrepreneurial. Why do you wake up every single day and run your business?

It's not just to make money and pay the bills. There's probably something deeper there. On the days where it's tough or challenging, really try and get back to thinking about why it is that you do the things you do. And then again, for financial advisors who have clients, these are questions that you can probably ask your client that can help you build a better financial plan or really connect better with your clients.

I think that's a really fun easy...I don't know if it's fun. Sometimes it could be difficult or painful, but it really a great, easy, proactive reflection. Again, probably not that easy. So I know there's a couple of other types of reflection, real time and retroactive.

John Stemmerman: Yeah, so real time, that could be a lot of things. If you do a meditation practice, that's a real good way to understand real-time awareness because that is part of the practice. Any kind of stillness practice, it doesn't have to be a meditation, and even down to process-oriented. And when we get to the back end of these three, I'll maybe run you through what I was just reflecting on from yesterday's event as a good feedback loop of how these are connected to each other.

Real-time awareness really comes down to there's three states or three things that we can kind of check in on. Our cognitive: What are we currently thinking? Am I really concerned about this because I don't feel like I'm prepared enough? Am I concerned about this because I want to show up as the best teammate for somebody?

What are the cognitive things going on around that? And is it taking you in a particular direction? And can you redirect that in a more positive direction if you need to? The emotional things. Am I scared? Am I nervous? Am I excited? Sometimes there's a blend of those things. And usually the third one around that is what is my body doing in relation to those emotions. So the interior receptive. Sweating. My tummy is a little bit upset. I'm really nervous. I'm tapping my fingers a lot. I have a lot of energy. All of those things.

Between the cognitive, the thoughts, the emotions that are tied to that usually, and then how is your body feeling? That's a real good way to kind of capture real-time awareness. Because if you can identify those things, you can feel yourself going in a direction that you might be able to put a space in between how you are feeling, what you normally would react to and put a strategy or a moment or a pause there to maybe have a better outcome of a conversation.

An example would be you get home and then all of a sudden, you get into traffic, you get home late, dinner was on the table, the kids. Having one of those nights where it's just a little bit more challenging and something comes up where you may have a conversation with your significant other and it's a challenging topic, finances or whatever. One route is really angry, frustrated, I'm going to snap at my significant other. The other one is all of those stacked together. If I'm aware that I'm stressed, I feel what's happening, I can feel my blood pressure rising, I can maybe feel the sweat, taking a beat, taking a big breath, reframing what you're going to say and going at it in a better way, so that is a more constructive conversation with your significant other. That'll probably be a good example of real time.

Ginevra Czech: I think that's definitely something I can relate to. I sometimes think, my poor dog, he's the one who gets the brunt of it. He's...the baby's throwing his food. I'm like, get out of here. And the dog's just trying to help keep the floors clean, but all right.

John Stemmerman: Yeah, that's the side benefit of having a dog, so that's real-time awareness. And then if we kind of wrap that up and then maybe I'll do a quick real-world example of that. This is kind of retroactive. Values exploration we talked about, a good way to actually do proactive is journaling. In the morning, setting it up, whether daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, however you want to think about it on things.

Another great way on the retroactive side is journaling or an after action report, or after action review. Being able to say, okay, this is how I tried to show up. This is how I did show up. This is what went well. This is what did not go well. This is what I can do better next time. Being able to take a moment and sometimes it's best done immediately after. Sometimes after a little bit of thought process on things. If I do just a real-world example of this, I do a lot of presentations for the Thrive Program. It's the same presentation often, so I could do that out of my pocket, easy, without any slides. I could take that and just run it. At an event yesterday, financial institute, we had a couple teammates there. We were presenting to about a hundred leaders in the organization. By request, I was asked to go do this presentation as a secondary presenter.

Had the presentation on my desk for a week-and-a-half, I didn't build it but just reading through it. So I was doing my best. I want to show up because I was asked by one of my dear close associates. Can you go do this event? So yes, I want to show up on behalf of Exos. So I'm doing my best due diligence, daily going through it, doing practice runs, but it's not in front of an audience.

There's a lot of things I don't know are going to be true. Is it going to have the speaker notes on the presentation or not? Doing my best preparation because I wanted to show up for that. Get to the day of the event, all the way up to the presentation, reviewing notes and all that kind of stuff and getting my read on the room. Even then, I don't know that anybody loves public speaking, getting good at it. I could feel myself getting a bit antsy. I can feel myself getting a bit stressed. I can feel myself getting a bit nervous on things. As I kind of go into that, some of the events I've done have been big events.

I can look back on one of those events, 500 people in the room. I showed up at that event, it went well, here's kind of how I felt. How can I put myself in a mindset that's similar to that and have the confidence to be able to walk into that presentation effectively. Went through the presentation, all went well. I would score myself as a C on doing that one, and maybe I'm harder on myself on those things. There were definitely things that I could have done better. Most of the time it's just reps on those things, but then being able to reflect back on, okay, listen, maybe I could have set up another call where I could have run this live set by set.

Did I really do poorly as a C? Maybe, maybe not, not taking that as like a negative. Oh my gosh, I did horrible. I can't do a presentation, but now I know, okay, this is how I wanted to show up. This is how it did show up. This is how it went. What can I do better next time? And then basically pull that back into a feedback loop into the next one to be able to say, okay. Just stacking myself up and getting things prepared so I can show up better for that particular one. So that's really how you can take proactive real-time retroactive and continue to use that as a development tool to improve yourself on a skill or as just showing up as a...

Ginevra Czech: It's interesting. So we're talking about reflection, but we could even think about using this as a preparation technique or almost a strategy to propel us forward, I guess is how I'm thinking about it. Because like you, about a week or two ago, I was a moderator for an event and I was super nervous for it. And exactly like you said, I spent time preparing, and I'm a big believer in the positive affirmations, positive self-talk on the front end. I do my power stances, but I was still pretty nervous. Someone actually told me right before I went on, if you put pressure on a wall, dig your forearms into the wall, I guess there's some sort of somatic practice there.

And it can shed the nerves. It worked. Then I did the presentation. I actually felt somewhat regulated and ready. I wasn't super, super nervous. I did some centering breaths, all of that, like that real-time analysis. Afterwards, of course I reflected on how I did. And it's really interesting because I thought of that more as a performance type of execution and not something that was specific to reflection. But now that you've said it out loud, it really does make a ton of sense.

John Stemmerman: You're starting to...if you pick a picture of Venn diagram, you have reflection on one side, and then you have the regulation on the other side, because there's not this clear, distinct line between the two of them. Really in practice, because most of what you said was the blend of reflection practices and then the regulation side.

Power stances, forms on the wall creating tension, which has a new one. And that's actually one probably now to test out and feel by just creating that load in the system, which probably pulls some stress throughout that piece. So those are the perfect blend of reflection and regulation. That is why it's kind of what we would call the power couple, because they are very much intertwined, especially on how you want to show up for an event or as a parent or as a leader or as a worker, whatever it is. So that's really kind of that overlap between the two

Ginevra Czech: So probably a good time to make that pivot into some of the more specifics around regulation. I think we've touched on a little bit, but tell us about what is regulation and then why is it so important for people, especially when you're dealing with high stress or pressure on a daily basis?

John Stemmerman: Let's just put a definition on it. The ability to manage our reactions and behaviors in response to our feelings and/or the things happening around us. The one thing I'm telling my wife pretty regularly around these kind of times, too, is you control the controllable. So you can control what you can control on things. Doesn't mean you're still not going to have these kind of responses that you want to be able to understand and be able to kind of manipulate. So probably everybody on the call knows about fight or flight. Rest and digest. Those are the two bookends or the two ends of the spectrum in regard to your nervous system.



Your autonomic nervous system comprised of the sympathetic nervous system, which is the fight or flight. And then the parasympathetic nervous system, which is your rest and digest. And usually we want to have balance. We want that to be cycling through and they have particular purposes for things.

An example of an ancestral reason for the sympathetic nervous system is, wherever out in the jungle or the savanna or wherever it is and a tiger is over in the bushes. And basically what happens when you see the tiger, stress response kicks in, adrenaline kicks into the system, cortisol kicks into the system, you get heightened awareness, you get very focused in on a particular thing. In this case, the lion. Because you want to know what's the lion doing. Does it see me? Where's it going? Where do I need to go to get away from it if it's going to come after me.

Pull that fast forward into today, our lines, outside of the real lines, are social media, our phones. Because when you are directly staring into a device, it is the same physiological mechanisms as when you're staring at the lion in the savanna. So there, we'll talk about kind of strategies around that, but that drives sympathetic tone in the system, which is basically fireflies. Just imagine you're looking at a lion or you're imagining a lion is going to get you all day long because you're staring at your devices.

The event I was at yesterday, and I think you might be very similar, you probably have two phones, or I guess you may have two phones. You have your personal phone, you may have a work phone. But basically at the event yesterday, I said: How many people have two phones? Everybody held up their two phones in the air.

And so you double on that. That's the sympathetic nervous system body's natural response to stress on things. Basically, that lion, I get away from it, I'm going through the rest of my day, that sympathetic nervous system tone would come down naturally. Because now I don't have this thing that I have to focus on.

So the other side of that is the parasympathetic nervous system. A lot of people may have heard the vagal nerve, which is kind of like the great wanderer of the body. It's tied into most of the organs in the system. Vagal nerve stimulation, and that could be kind of that pressure on the elbows that you talked about, drives up pressure onto the vagus nerve, which basically is a calming mechanism. So parasympathetic is all right, I'm sitting around, I'm having my meals, I'm putting attention, my body's putting attention and energy into digestion, not into worrying about the lion, those things. So they're a balance and they're basically cycling up and down throughout the course of the day, depending on what's happening.

That's basically what we're trying to regulate is the sympathetic or parasympathetic, depending on what you're trying to do, because sympathetic is not bad. We need it, we want it, we just don't want to be there all day. Or constantly. We want to be there when we need to be there to show up, not because only fighting a lion, but I'm getting ready to go on stage.

Your sympathetic nervous system gets dropped, gets pushed up because of the stress. You can harness that stuff and actually use it, but imagine if you were doing back-to-back-to-back presentations and you knocked it and you have the last one of the day, it's three o'clock, you're tired, you want to show up, that one's got the most important people showing up to it.

You can use strategies to actually push up your sympathetic nervous system so you have a bit more energy to show up as a more energetic presenter during that as well. That's kind of what we're balancing, is the sympathetic nervous system depending on how we want to show up. Focus in the mind, energy in the body, and that kind of tension and kind of jitters is that energy driving through the body just a lot of times related to the hormones.

Ginevra Czech: I know the terms that we use with the presentation on sustainable high performance is idea of upregulation, which is increasing that energy and then downregulation when you're trying to, to calm down. I think you touched on a little bit, but when would I want to use those strategies and what are maybe a couple of quick techniques that I could use for both?

John Stemmerman: Let's start with downregulation on things. If you are feeling anxious, if you are feeling stressed, if you are feeling angry, if you are feeling like you just are going to pop off on somebody. You're getting ready to go into a challenging conversation. If you're, you said, basically closing the books, financial, there's usually performance reviews going along with that. Or there might be staffing changes or whatever it is. And the end of the year is often very stressful because of performance reviews and those tough, challenging conversations with either the people on your team, your peers, or you're getting your performance review on things.

So, downregulation would be, I want to pull myself down. I can feel myself in an agitated state. Either in the moment—so I'm getting ready to go into this tough conversation—or I'm getting ready to go up on this presentation that I'm really nervous about. I can feel all these things happening. What can I do to bring myself down? There's a few things. Breath is going to be one of the things that we normally go to, and I think it's becoming much more relevant and accessible and most people are doing some—or I hope most people are doing some—sort of breath work, probably around their kind of meditative or stillness work, but kind of a general principle around that. And it's basically around this vagal nerve that I already talked about. The longer the exhale in relation to the inhale is going to be an ancestral physiological trigger to your vagal nerve that everything is safe. Everything is calm. You can be relaxed and we can bring down or activate your parasympathetic nervous system.

That's the lever we're pulling on—the vagal nerve to get your parasympathetic nervous system more involved in how your body's feeling. So from a breathwork standpoint, a lot of times we'll go to a 4-7-8 as an easy one or a 6-7-8. But as long as the exhale is longer in duration than the inhale, that's usually the kind of general principle that we can get into.

Another one, and I already alluded to this, is using your vision. I already talked about staring at screens all day. That directly is a sympathetic stimulus to your body. Every couple hours or every hour would probably even be better. Or as you're getting ready, maybe we go in that challenging conversation.

What's awesome is if you have a panoramic view of some sort out of your window at home or at your office, you can go out and look out over a huge view and soften your gaze. Because that is also a stimulus to your body saying, okay, everything's calm. You don't need to worry about the lion out there in the bush.

Panoramic vision is great. If you don't have access to that, say you're in a super dense city and you look out the window and it's just more buildings. Just closing your eyes is phenomenal and basically softening your gaze. It's an almost automatic response. Movement is a great one.

Some that may have novelty. Balance. Those types of things to create something where you're not thinking so hard about some of those things. Getting outside would probably be another one of those things. So let's just say one of the best ways to do it, get outside, work on some breath work, open up your vision.

That's a great stack of things to help calm your system down. Even on a stressful day at work, I'm getting ready to go in the house and see my significant other and my family. I just want to calm down, take a moment, take a couple breaths, close your eyes, or look at whatever view might be available to you and be outside. And that's a great, great recipe for bringing your system down.

Ginevra Czech: That's awesome. I think those are a couple of really easy, low-hanging fruit strategies for that downregulation, for when people are feeling stressed or overtired. I know one time we had you at a conference and it had been back-to-back-to-back 20-minute presentations, really cool, fun, engaging content. But you got on stage and you said, okay, everyone, close your eyes and take a deep breath. And you could literally feel the tension in the room, sort of, disappearing. I mean, even I'm just taking a deep breath, thinking back to the moment. It definitely works. What about upregulation though? I'm mentally fatigued. I'm unmotivated.

John Stemmerman: Just as a thread to pull through, most people are going to tell you about coffee or some sort of drink that they're going to get as a driver. Coffee is great. Caffeine, depending on who you are, there's various genetic things. There's various cultural things. There's various things that are...you're either going to enjoy coffee or not enjoy coffee or caffeine. Let's just say caffeine. It doesn't even have to be coffee on things, but just realizing for the majority or a lot of people, caffeine later in the day is going to have some sort of impact into your sleep, and will maybe have an opportunity to get into recovery a little bit just quickly. The more you impact your sleep—the more negatively impacts your sleep—the more on edge you're probably going to be the following day, which has a direct connection to your regulation capabilities on things.

So the big disruptors around sleep, caffeine, alcohol, stress. That's an easy way to think about it as far as disruptors. So any blend of those later in the day are going to impact your sleep, which is going to impact how you show up the following day. One of my favorite things to do, basically in a presentation, let's just say it's the afternoon, and everybody's dragging a little bit, but there's usually coffee around, everybody's in the room.

Hey, I'm John. I'm from Exos. We're going to talk about this. Everybody stand up, find a partner, play rock, paper, scissors. Sounds silly, but basically, introducing yourself to a new partner, there's some novelty in that. Nobody expected they were going to be playing rock, paper, scissors. And basically, you get to introduce yourself to a new person.

Just imagine 50 or 60 people in a room, all playing rock, paper, scissors, seeing who the winner is. The same thing you said as far as the energy level coming down, you could immediately feel the energy level go up in the room. So, I'll put that into a bucket of play or novelty on things. Now, people are going to say, I'm not going to walk into a staff meeting or a meeting, team meeting and do rock, paper, scissors. You can find something else similar to that, because that drives basically attention and focus, which is what we're trying to get to. And then breathwork-wise, anything where you actually have a sharper exhale than the inhale.

It's the inverse. A power breath where you're breathing out really aggressively is basically going to tell your body, okay, we got to get ready to do something because you're getting into this kind of hyperventilatory breath pattern. Which is usually what will happen normally when I see the lion in the bush, is my breath is going to kick up because now I need to have faster gas exchange, and I need to be ready to move potentially, so I got to get my body going, not calm, I need to get it going.

And I need to be ready to do something potentially very quickly or very aggressively. So the inverse for breath work is sharper exhales. The other thing that can do that is longer breath holds. Because what ends up with longer breath holds is you start to drop some adrenaline in the system because the body starts to sense maybe something's wrong because you're not breathing.

It starts to kick adrenaline into the system. That's a couple quick simple things around that... is novelty, play, a challenge or something risky. And again, that it's, you need to be careful with that. People who procrastinate a lot—they do their best work because the risk is now there, which gives them focus and a lot of attention on it. But that's a couple of things, and I probably threw too many out there, so circle around the one that you...

Ginevra Czech: Definitely a couple of good takeaways there. It's funny. I think about the ice breakers. A lot of times it's kind of like an icebreaker. A lot of times people will do the highs and lows and a fun fact...I definitely see also a presentation technique. How often do they say, well, in a good presentation, you have to have audience engagement. It's probably just an easy way to upregulate the crowd from zoning out and falling asleep.

John Stemmerman: It's very easy for somebody to grab their phone and just start scrolling through their phone versus you may be called upon to do something and you probably should be paying attention on things for sure.

Ginevra Czech: I think a couple of good takeaways there for getting people motivated when they need to fight the lion in their professional, personal life. You did touch on recovery is a really important component of regulation. So maybe just a couple of quick seconds or a couple of quick takeaways on how we need to be thinking about sleep or hydration or mental rest in optimizing our regulation.

John Stemmerman: I've had two travel days. My recovery generally is pretty low right now. My sleep scores down on things. My heart rate variability is down and I can talk about heart rate variability really quickly in case people are looking at that, but they don't quite understand what that is. And over the last two days, because of my travel and my schedule and sleeping in different hotel rooms and not getting as much sleep. A great example that we'll talk about, and you as a new parent, a lot of people could attest to this, you're probably going to run into this a little bit more in the future as your child starts to go off to play dates or sleepovers and stuff like that.

But the nights that your kid or someone's kid does not sleep well, and the way that they react or acts the following day is a good indicator, funnily enough, on some of that stuff. So your emotional processing capabilities are diminished because you're not rested. There's the sleep phases. Deep sleep and REM sleep are the two big regenerative ones on things.

We need to make sure we're getting enough of those two sleep brainwave patterns to recover, to have our emotional capabilities or emotional response capabilities be in a place where we can actually reflect and regulate on things. But if anybody...I see a lot of people now wearing the aura rings. We use aura rings. We use whoop straps. We use a lot of different devices depending on the environment. But HRV is a good one. That kind of goes directly to functional state. Functional state, or HRV, is a direct measure of your nervous system. The lower the number on HRV, the more sympathetic you are. So, remember sympathetic is your fight or flight.

My HRV today was 56 on things. My normal is around 85 to 90. It is very individual. So, there's no set number that anybody needs to be at. It's the trends and it kind of changes. My body, my system is in a more sympathetic tone today, based off of travel, not a lot of great sleep, those types of things.

The HRV is the distance between heartbeats and we want more variability between heartbeat one and two, and heartbeat two and three, and heartbeat three and four. The more variability between each one of those heart rates, the more parasympathetic you are. The higher the number or the more difference in time between those, the better.

But that's a direct relation of something you could look at even in the morning. Proactively be oh, my recovery is not great today. My HRV is down. I may be in a bit of a position where I'm going to be a bit more reactive to things. So how do I set myself up of, can I write down in my journal?

Hey, take a beat, take a pause before you react, set your goals for the day. And then when you get that hard conversation or that thing in traffic or that challenge or whatever it is, being able to realize, okay, I've set myself up. I know I'm a little bit more stressed today. Taking a pause, taking a big breath, closing

your eyes, whatever it is in the moment. To set yourself up for the best response and then giving yourself a pat on the back at the end of the day. Being okay, I saw the information, I was able to put some things in practice. I actually did it, which is great. And that's how you change behavior over the long term versus just, I checked the box today of, I looked at my HRV and now I'm looking at it.

Ginevra Czech: We've covered a lot of information. I think there's a couple of major takeaways. Obviously, reflection is super important, specifically when we're thinking about developing some self-awareness and then using that self-awareness to be a better leader, to be a better client, to be a better parent, colleague, whatever it might be that's going to help you with improving your decision-making or fostering trust with relationships.

Regulation is the next component. You can use regulation to really propel your performance. Focus, energy, the way you respond to things emotionally, and then using some of those techniques we talked about. Breathwork, mindfulness, movement. That's really going to be how you can maintain high performance, even when you're dealing with stress.

And then the two of them together. I think you shared a couple of action items. If there's a couple of ideas for our listeners, I think try and do a reflection exercise. John, you talked about a journal like journaling either proactively or reactively. Regulating so...

John Stemmerman: ...retroactively. Basically, at the beginning and the end. Retroactively.

Ginevra Czech: There we go that's the word.

John Stemmerman: Yeah.

Ginevra Czech: A regulation challenge. So maybe daily breath work could be an idea. And then recovery is a big part of the conversation. Prioritizing sleep, not reaching for the caffeine, maybe trying some breath work instead, but caffeine, alcohol, trying to limit them before bedtime. Anything else that you would want to make sure we touch on with these ideas of regulation and reflection?

John Stemmerman: I think it's an untapped area for people to really dive into. Even myself, being a 20-year-plus coach, I don't want to say it's new, but the knowledge and focus and expectation now for incorporating those things is now higher, which I think is a great thing. And also don't be afraid to try the things that are challenging, i.e., a great way to work on some of this stuff, and we do this quite frequently.

I wish we could do it at the events we do for Thrive—but it would be tough—is cold water immersion or something that's a challenge and using that as an opportunity. Because that is a direct stimulus to your system that you could use to practice different techniques, breath work or visualization or whatever it is. Finding some things that you find challenging or different that you may not normally do and using those as opportunities to practice a reflection or regulation practice as you especially get more in tune or more comfortable doing those things. Find something cool or fun that might fit those things.

Ginevra Czech: Cool. I know. I mean, you even talked about, novel. Novelty was a theme that I feel like you touched on a lot. So trying things that are a little bit different because that does force your body and your mind and your, I guess, emotional state to have to react. And then you can build. I think resilience is another thing that we talk a lot about with Exos.

John Stemmerman: That's right.



Ginevra Czech: Well, this was great. The timing is really good. We're coming off of an election. We're moving into the end of the year where people are going to start to be having performance conversations. So I hope people really try and think about, be reflective, think about how they're reacting and responding to different stressful emotions, try and use some of the strategies around regulating. And if you're interested in learning more, we've got tons of content available through our partnership with Exos.

You can visit us at fsinvestments.com/thrive. We'd love to have John partner on a workshop. We also have access to some virtual coaching. Tons of different ways to get exposure to Exos and this content. John, thanks so much for joining. It's been a lot of fun.

John Stemmerman: Thank you so much. Always great to see you, and I'll see you next time.